When Your Brain Won't Clock Out

How Professional Women Can Stop Overthinking and Lead with More Clarity

Free Excerpt

Hilary Dwyer
HD Counseling
hd-counseling.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hilary Dwyer

HD Counseling | South Carolina

I'm a licensed professional counselor associate in South Carolina specializing in professional anxiety. For years, I've worked with high-achieving women who are outwardly capable and successful, but privately wrestle with overthinking, self-doubt, and the exhaustion of trying to control every outcome.

I've seen this pattern rob too many exceptional leaders of their clarity, energy, and joy. My work with TEAM-CBT and targeted cognitive strategies helps women reframe the mental habits that keep them stuck, reclaiming the steady confidence their roles demand.

If Any of This Sounds Familiar

High-achieving professional women who:

- Excel publicly but privately wrestle with worry, perfectionism, or mental rehearsal
- Mistake overthinking for responsibility or thoroughness
- Yearn to lead with presence rather than preoccupation

Your standards got you here. You can keep them without paying for them with your peace.

What This Guide Gives You

Precision tools to interrupt overthinking's three core patterns: **worrying** (future-focused what-if loops), **rumination** (past-focused self-criticism), and **overanalyzing decisions** (endless analysis without action). Along with them, seven evidence-based strategies for changing those patterns.

What Becomes Possible

- **Mental spaciousness:** less chatter, more room to think
- **Decisive clarity:** acting without exhaustive certainty
- **Authentic presence:** leading fully, with less distraction
- **Enduring calm:** trading depletion for poised resilience

You can care just as deeply and spend that care more wisely.

Contents

What's inside the full book

	About the Author
Part One	Understanding Overthinking
Part Two	The Three Primary Patterns
Part Three	What Fuels Overthinking
Part Four	Seven Evidence-Based Strategies
Closing	Your Next Step

PART ONE

Understanding Overthinking

You can be accomplished, capable, and deeply committed to the people who depend on you and still feel like your mind never fully shuts off. For many professional women, overthinking shows up as responsibility, diligence, and the pressure to get everything right.

At first, that mental overwork can look like a strength. You are anticipating problems, thinking ahead, and trying to protect your work, your team, and your peace of mind. But over time, that same pattern can leave you exhausted, second-guessing yourself, and far less present than you want to be.

What Overthinking Is

Overthinking is an anxiety response in which the mind repeatedly analyzes situations, decisions, or past events far beyond what is needed for problem-solving. It often shows up as looping analysis, replaying scenarios, and mentally rehearsing risks to gain certainty, prevent mistakes, or control outcomes. For women in leadership roles, this pattern is easy to miss because it is often mistaken for diligence or high standards, even as it drains mental energy and slows decision-making.

There are three primary patterns of overthinking that tend to show up in leaders: worrying, rumination, and overanalyzing decisions. They share one important feature: difficulty disengaging from a thought, even when the analysis is no longer helpful. Worry and overanalyzing decisions are future-focused and common in generalized anxiety, while rumination is focused on the past and closely linked with self-criticism and low mood.

How to Recognize Overthinking

A practical way to recognize overthinking is to ask whether your thinking is connected to action. When thinking is productive, it leads to a clear next step: defining the problem, choosing a plan, taking a concrete action. Overthinking, in contrast, involves high mental effort with no resolution. The mind continues to spin through "what if" scenarios, but there is no clear movement forward.

In leadership, this often looks like repeatedly revisiting the same decision, reworking materials that are already adequate, or seeking more information or reassurance without feeling any more confident. Externally, it can resemble thoroughness and high standards. Internally, it feels exhausting and unsatisfying.

Why Overthinking Is Costly

Overthinking is emotionally expensive and undermines the very leadership it is trying to protect. It creates the illusion of doing something about uncertainty, but it typically increases anxiety, self-doubt, and decision fatigue rather than reducing them. It also pulls attention away from the present moment, your relationships, and the priorities that actually move things forward.

Over time, overthinking becomes self-reinforcing. When feared outcomes do not occur, the brain may mistakenly credit the overthinking itself, strengthening the habit. The nervous system learns that constant mental checking, rehearsing, and planning are required for safety or success, which makes it even harder to stop.

PART TWO

The Three Primary Patterns

Worrying

> *The presentation is two days away. She has prepared thoroughly, her slides are solid, and her team is ready. She is lying awake tonight imagining the questions she might not be able to answer.*

Distinguish between a worry and worrying.

A worry is an anxious thought or image about something that might happen in the future. It tends to emerge automatically and focuses on negative possibilities. These thoughts are predictions, not facts, even though they often feel compelling and urgent. Think of a worry as a "worry invitation." We have no control over the worries that pop up, but we do have autonomy when it comes to how we manage them.

Worrying is the process of actively engaging with these thoughts beyond the point of usefulness. Smart, analytical people are used to focusing attention and energy on problems in order to solve them. This is useful and allows us to master skills and finish projects. But worrying is different from problem-solving or planning. Worrying is our brain's attempt to manage uncertainty by mentally preparing for every possible (usually negative) outcome. The fear centers in our brain respond to imagined outcomes much as they do to real ones. So, although this is an attempt to prepare us, it activates the threat system in our brain and body, leading to the experience of anxiety.

For leaders, worrying may be experienced as being responsible or thorough, but it often leads to:

- Jumping quickly from a small risk to the worst-case scenario.
- Treating predictions as established facts, so the body reacts as if the feared event is already happening.
- Repeatedly weighing scenarios and seeking additional data in an attempt to feel completely certain.
- Reluctance to delegate, rewriting others' work, and needing every email, presentation, or decision to be flawless.

The challenge with worrying is that the brain uses the threat system to try to solve a problem, even though that system is not designed for effective problem-solving. It can alert you to danger, but it cannot calmly evaluate every possible scenario or produce peace of mind.

CONTINUE READING

When Your Brain Won't Clock Out

The full book continues with the other two patterns, rumination and overanalyzing decisions, then explores what fuels overthinking and seven evidence-based strategies for changing it.

The Ebook + Companion Workbook

- **The ebook:** all three patterns, what fuels them, and seven evidence-based strategies, with real-world scenes from professional life
- **The Companion Workbook:** guided prompts that walk you through each strategy and help you apply it to your own patterns

hd-counseling.com/resources

Work with me

My counseling work is designed specifically for high-achieving women navigating anxiety, stress, and leadership pressure. Counseling is available to women in South Carolina, and every first conversation is a complimentary consultation.

hd-counseling.com

Hilary Dwyer | HD Counseling