

WORKING WITH WORRY AND OVERTHINKING

Here are some tools to work with worry and overthinking in the moment:

LABEL YOUR THOUGHTS (Become an Observer)

One of the first steps that can be most helpful in working with thoughts is to practice becoming an observer. We can often think that we control our thoughts or feel we 'should' control our thoughts. In reality, the brain is more like a machine or computer that is constantly running- we don't really control what thoughts come up, instead what we control is what thoughts we pay attention to.

One of the first steps – *observing our thoughts*-can help us create a 'space' between our thoughts and ourselves. We are not our thoughts.

So, this is what it would look like:

Instead of: *"I'm such a failure."*

Say, *"I notice I'm having the thought that I'm a failure."*

THE S.T.O.P. TECHNIQUE

The STOP technique is a mindfulness-based tool that can help you defuse from your thoughts and emotions in the moment. When you notice that you are being caught in a stream of racing thoughts or a sequence of worries, mindfulness practices help you return to the present moment. Taking a brief pause can help you cool down your emotions and shift into a calmer state of mind. With practice, this way of responding can become a new habit.

Here are the steps:



Stop:

- Interrupt your thoughts with the command "STOP" and pause whatever you are doing.



Take a Breath:

- Notice your breathing for a second. Breathe in gently and slowly through your nose, allowing your belly to expand as you inhale, and exhale slowly through purse lips. To make this even more effective, try to make the exhale a bit longer than the inhale.



Observe:

- Try to become an observer of your thoughts, your emotions, and your physical sensations.
 - What thoughts do you notice?
 - What emotions are coming up for you?
 - What are you feeling in your body?
- Tune into these experiences and stay with whatever arises for a few moments; allow yourself to be curious about what you are experiencing.

Proceed:

- Consider how you'd like to respond in this situation.
 - What is one small thing you can focus on at this moment?
 - What would be a helpful response to this situation?
- Try to focus your response on one small step at a time.

THOUGHT CHALLENGING

How about questioning those troubling thoughts?

When a negative or worrisome thought arises, try playing detective.

- Ask yourself some questions:
- Am I assuming my thought is a fact?
- What evidence supports this thought? What evidence does NOT support this thought?
Am I fortune-telling by trying to predict the future?
Am I assuming something is true because it FEELS true?
- Am I jumping to the worst conclusion?
- How will I see this situation in 1 year? 5 years? (what's the bigger picture?)

THOUGHT DEFUSION

Anxiety and worry have a way of consuming our mind at times- it calls for our attention and we may feel stuck in a loop and unable to focus on anything else. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, this is called "cognitive fusion"- we start to feel that our thoughts and reality are the same. Cognitive defusion helps us shift from the content of our thoughts and loosen the hook of our thoughts.

Here are some strategies for defusion:



Clouds in the Sky

Imagine a bright blue sky with large, white, fluffy clouds passing by. Each time you label or observe a thought (e.g. "I notice I'm feeling upset about that work email again"), imagine placing that worry or thought onto a cloud and watch the cloud move across the sky. Remind yourself – *"thoughts are like clouds; they come and go and have no real substance."*



Click the "X" button

Thoughts can crowd our mind like having a dozen browser windows open on our computer screen. Imagine your thoughts as windows on your computer screen – if it is not helpful to you in this moment, click "X" and close the window.



File Your Thoughts Away

Visualize a drawer with folders with labels – these labels can be for different kinds of thinking (predicting/what ifs, catastrophizing, regretting, doubting, etc.) or for different topics (work, family, etc.). Notice the thought and imagine filing it into the corresponding folder. You can always come back to this later.

GROUNDING TECHNIQUE

Using our senses is a powerful way to bring our attention out of our thoughts and back to the present moment.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

-  **Name 5 things you can see** – look for small details around you; an object you've never noticed before, the way the light reflects in the room, a pattern on the ceiling.
-  **Name 4 things you can feel** – notice the sensation of your clothing on your body, the feeling the chair you are sitting on or the ground under your feet, is the air cool or warm on your skin? Pick up an object and study its weight and texture.
-  **Name 3 things you can hear** – tune your attention to the sounds that your mind has tuned out- sounds in your immediate environment (like the clock ticking or an appliance running, your own breath) and sounds outside (maybe cars or traffic, wind blowing in trees).
-  **Name 2 things you can smell** – try to notice any smells in the air around you or look for something nearby that has a scent.
-  **Name 1 thing you can taste** – It can be helpful to carry gum or candy for this. Take time to notice the flavours, where on your tongue do you taste it?