

How to Stop Overthinking Your Relationship



Ruminating about your relationship isn't a healthy way to solve any problems—and it may be a way to avoid your real feelings.

BY ALICIA MUÑOZ | NOVEMBER 8, 2022

Have you ever had thoughts like these in your relationship?



When your partner comes home late, you think, *They're neglecting me. Work is more important than I am.* If your partner doesn't initiate lovemaking, you think, *We're on our way to a sexless marriage. I knew this would happen.* If your partner is distracted at the dinner table, you think, *They're bored. They have nothing to say to me. I can't believe it's come to this.* If they forget to ask a follow-up question after a doctor's visit, you think, *They're selfish and insensitive. I'm alone in this relationship.*

Thoughts like these can arise when you feel threatened in your relationship, and then similar thoughts may follow. Reflexive, negative thoughts fueled by anxiety multiply. They may even become thought-pinwheels, spinning into what psychologists call rumination. Your ruminative thoughts distort your perceptions of your mate. Over time, as the distortions build into stories about the other person, you stop opening up, relating directly, and sharing yourself. You lose touch with the adventure of love.

In my therapy practice, I've seen overthinking erode love between people whenever it operates unseen and unchallenged. My vantage point isn't solely professional either. As a former chronic ruminator, I've suffered the destructive effects of overthinking firsthand, including a painful divorce in my late 20s.

Now, over two decades later, I know differently. Happy love stories are created, not stumbled upon. Not only have I lived the changes that come with undoing rumination in the relationship my husband and I have developed over the last 17 years, but I've also helped hundreds of couples foster deeper intimacy and safer, more fulfilling connections by doing this work. My new book *Stop Overthinking Your Relationship* shares these strategies to help couples nurture love, trust, and satisfaction.

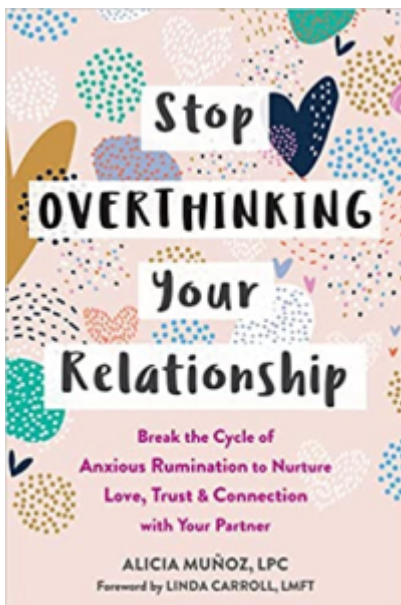
Five kinds of relationship rumination

In romantic relationships, overthinking gradually—day after day, month after month—can turn into a bad cognitive habit. It shortens our bandwidth for awareness, empathy, curiosity, and whatever is happening in our own hearts.

Like a snowball rolling downhill and gathering momentum, ruminative thoughts turn in a seemingly endless loop around the same painful themes. I've identified five distinct rumination cycles based on my work with clients:

Blame. *This is my fault. I'm such an idiot. How could I let this happen? It's unacceptable, intolerable, horrible, awful. My partner is selfish. They're wrong. They should pay for this. They should apologize. Don't they realize how much pain they're causing me?*

The blame cycle revolves around painful past events. You're sure you've been unfairly treated, taken advantage of, and misunderstood. You had good intentions, and your partner misinterpreted what you said or did. You planned a special trip, and your partner ruined it with their irritability. You recall the past selectively. Events confirming your own (or your partner's) flaws are magnified.



This essay is adapted from *Stop Overthinking Your Relationship: Break the Cycle of Anxious Rumination to Nurture Love, Trust, and Connection with Your Partner* (New Harbinger Publications, 2022, 200 pages).

Control. *I know best. I'm rational. I'm in touch with my emotions. My views should hold sway. I'm more genuine. I'm kinder, wiser, healthier, superior, younger, older. Because I'm the extravert, I'm more suited to organize our social life. I'm the one who keeps us healthy, safe, and happy. I'm the one who knows how to handle this.*

Control thoughts orbit a desired future outcome and the best way to achieve it. Your partner must sit down at the table immediately. They must talk to someone—a therapist, parent, boss, or realtor—ASAP. It's time for an emergency meeting with your attorney because you know what the next step is. You're curious about consensual nonmonogamy, and so they should be, too. It's time to go to Hawaii. You're done with long-distance relationships.

Tension, mistrust, and inflexibility accompany the control cycle. Thoughts have a moralistic edge. You believe in externally defined truths—and you're the one who knows what they are. Your partner *should* and *must* fulfill your vision of the relationship. Possibilities and options are black-and-white. There's good or bad, right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy.

Doubt. *Can I be sure of my own perceptions? Maybe I'm imagining things. Did what I think took place really happen? Why is every other couple doing better than we are? Why did I choose my partner? Is there someone smarter, kinder, more attractive, or richer out there for me? Why did my partner choose me? Am I a fraud? Can I trust my own choices? My intuition has misled me in the past. What if I keep making poor choices?*

In this cycle, there's never enough certainty. There are never absolute guarantees. No evidence is ever ironclad enough to support your choices, decisions, or actions. Good times seem insubstantial and fleeting. Searching for evidence only reinforces doubts. Painful insecurity and self-judgment are the hallmarks of chronic doubt cycles. The more you overthink, the less you trust your own recollections and intuition.

Worry. *What will happen if he gets hurt on the job? What if we divorce and I don't see our children as much as I do now? What if they stop loving me? She might cancel our next date if she finds out I'm a type-1 diabetic. One of us might catch COVID and give it to my father. This could be the last time we're happy together as a couple.*

In this cycle, worst-case scenarios rule. Fear keeps this cycle going. You convince yourself you'll be safe as long as you prepare for the worst. Your mind does this by thinking of everything that could go wrong.

Self-pity. *Self-pity cycles are focused on oneself as a victim. Why me? There's nothing I can do. Life is unfair. I don't deserve this. How come bad things always happen to me? I've tried everything. My situation is hopeless. We don't stand a chance as a couple. Nothing makes a difference. The universe is against me. There's no solution. Nothing will ever change.*

Often, the unacknowledged expectation is that by embracing the role of a victim, you'll inspire your partner to rescue you. But when you make your partner responsible for your well-being or behave as though you're completely helpless when you're not, they end up feeling controlled.

All of us are capable of spinning all the rumination cycles, and it's not unusual to spin a hybrid of two or even three of them at once. But most of us have a dominant cycle: the one we spin most often. We may spin it so much that it colors our identity and

personality. You probably have a secondary cycle, too, that you spin when your dominant cycle fails to bring resolution, relief, or closure.

How to break the rumination cycle

While your thoughts may feel like truth, your rumination sometimes operates as a defense: a coping strategy used to distract you from your own vulnerability.

Let's say your girlfriend hasn't responded to a text you sent her six hours ago. You're upset, and you think, *What's she doing? Has she forgotten about me? Is she ghosting me on purpose? I thought she enjoyed our weekend as much as I did. Is she already tired of me?* As you talk to a friend, you focus on all the ways she has disappointed you.

But what if underneath the rumination, something else is going on: You miss her? Your overthinking about your girlfriend is a protection against heartache and longing, uncomfortable emotions you'd prefer not to feel.

To counter rumination, what you need to do—what we all need to do—is to pivot from *thinking* about moments that unsettle you to *being with* them.

This isn't something most of us have been explicitly taught how to do. When an event takes you off guard and you feel something emotionally or physically unnerving, do you consciously spend time *being with* your inner experience? If your answer is no, then you're a normal 21st-century human. Most people's first instinct is to try to *get rid of* unsettling experiences.

Being with yourself and your partner is a radical act. The following four steps can help guide you along the way.

1. See thoughts to become aware of rumination.

- Pause. Stop what you're doing for one minute.
- Direct your attention inward or relax into a full-bodied experience of awareness. Notice whatever mental or cognitive activity is taking place within you in the here and now.

- Inquire. Ask, “Is what’s happening in my mind a thought (or a series of thoughts)?”
- Tune in. Is the answer to this question “yes,” “maybe,” or “no”? (If it’s “no,” you’re probably focused, in the flow of the task, or at peace. If it’s “maybe,” go through these steps again until you receive a clear answer.)

If your partner cancels dinner and your mind spins with thoughts like, *They’re trying to hurt me intentionally. I can’t trust them. Why would they do this to me? I’ll show them by going out alone tonight*, seeing these thoughts as thoughts interrupts the momentum of your blame cycle. You don’t automatically believe your thoughts are accurate representations of reality simply because you’re upset.

2. Label the mental habit or pattern. Once you see that you’re having a thought, label it by noting several aspects:

- The thought itself. If you realize you were anxiously envisioning yourself and your girlfriend bored and miserable 20 years from now in the same small apartment you live in now, the following words might capture these thoughts: *My girlfriend won’t ever travel with me and explore new places. Life is passing us by. We’ll end up old and unsatisfied.*
- Is it a fact or pseudofact—an opinion, judgment, assumption, or expectation you mistake as truth? Much of our rumination includes pseudofacts that aren’t necessarily true.
- The rumination cycle that your thought reflects—is it blame, worry, doubt, control, self-pity, or some combination?
- The trigger. A trigger can be an action your partner takes—or doesn’t take. Consider the long pause—an eternity!—when you say “I love you” and wait for them to say something. Or maybe you notice your partner wincing when you ask how you look in your bagel-print Hawaiian shirt. Or you smell alcohol on their breath when they kiss you goodnight and a few weeks ago they swore off drinking.

3. Open to what’s going on in the moment. Acting as a defense, rumination can block us off from our own sensations, emotions, and impulses. In order to open yourself up to what’s going on within you in the here and now, ask yourself these questions and notice what arises:

- “What sensations am I aware of in my body right now?” Then, stay tuned in to your body. Be patient and curious.
- “What’s here emotionally right now?” Tune in to any emotional undercurrents within you.
- “Can I notice my experience of this impulse in my body and choose to *be with it* rather than act on it? What’s this impulse telling me?” Tune in to impulses within you patiently and with curiosity, letting go of any outcome you’re hoping for or dreading.

Mindfulness practices can help as you try to orient yourself to the present.

4. Welcome vulnerability and the unknown. The final step is to welcome what’s arising. One way is by asking a question: “What’s under this?” This question communicates: I can take in what I’ve pushed out of my own awareness. I’m ready to recognize and accept what’s here.

It’s OK *not* to understand the way your body responds as you listen and wait. Maybe you’ll notice wisps of emotion. Or you might sense a surge of energy. There may be a twinge of discomfort or a rise in physical tension. Whatever it is, be with it while remaining grounded in your body, open, and tuned in. Sometimes, sustained, focused attention alone can amplify what your body is communicating and bring clarity.

You’ll always get an answer in some form. The absence of a response is also an answer. The answer you get doesn’t have to make rational sense. The answer may come over the course of a minute, a day, or a week. It may come piecemeal, in seemingly random insights.

Whatever arises, welcome it. Ultimately, this process allows us to increase our tolerance of uncomfortable emotions, sensations, and impulses and remain present to our own vulnerability rather than spinning imagined scenarios in our mind that distance us from what’s happening in our bodies and lives in the here and now. The better you know yourself and what’s going on for you beyond your overthinking, the better equipped you are to express your feelings and needs more authentically and directly, hear your partner’s responses and feedback, and set limits based on self-awareness rather than anxiety. Cultivating vulnerability and authenticity helps partners foster connection.

Breaking the cycle of anxious rumination doesn't happen by accident. It's not magic. It happens one thought, trigger, and day at a time, one choice at a time. You and your partner are built to grow together, welcoming yourselves and each other more fully as you are right now. You don't have to overthink it.

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About the Author



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Alicia Muñoz, LPC (she/her), is a certified couples therapist and author of four books, including *Stop Overthinking Your Relationship: Break the Cycle of Anxious Rumination to Nurture Love, Trust, and Connection With Your Partner* (New Harbinger Publications, 2022). Muñoz currently works as a senior writer at *Psychotherapy Networker*.
