Escape Your Head: How Overthinking Is Hurting Your Business

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In light of recent world events, it's hard not to find yourself chronically overthinking. We worry about our health and our loved ones' health, just like we worry about our businesses and what the future holds. We can easily slide down the slippery slope of trying to deliberate ourselves into a better situation.

But according to clinical psychologist Helen Odessky, that couldn't be more counterproductive. As she told the Headspace blog:

"So often people confuse overthinking with problem-solving. But what ends up happening is we just sort of go in a loop," says Odessky. "We're not really solving a problem."

Psychologists say it's a vicious cycle: The more you worry about something, the more you train your brain to think about it – and the more you activate the amygdala, the brain's worry center. Overthinking isn't just ineffective, either. It's bad for your business and left unchecked, it only gets worse. Here are some ways that overthinking hurts entrepreneurs in particular.

1. It threatens effective leadership

There’s no denying that running a business requires a great deal of thought, especially for crucial decisions. It’s tough to find great people who perfectly fit our culture at JotForm, so I spend a lot of time thinking about each potential hire. But overthinking every little decision can needlessly slow your productivity. And more than that, it can also affect how your team perceives you.

Research from Stanford Business School found that over-deliberating, especially over simple decisions, can cause others to negatively evaluate you. The researchers were careful to note that the same went for the other side of the spectrum, too. As they explained:

> *“In general, people seem to be less drawn to and less open to being influenced by individuals who overthink small decisions or ‘underthink’ big ones.”*

As anyone who has agonized over a straightforward decision can confirm, rehashing something in your mind over and over can destroy your confidence, which hurts your esteem in the eyes of your team.

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2. It dampens our creativity

Mulling over a problem might seem like the best way to solve it, but researchers from the U.K. have found that we’re actually better at creative problem solving when we allow certain parts of our brains to rest.

Why?

Because obsessing over a solution can lead to what experts call “thought paralysis” – when overactivity in the prefrontal cortex interferes with creativity. Psychology Today draws a striking parallel to when athletes overthink their performance and end up choking.

> *“[O]veractivity in the prefrontal cortex can interfere with memory processes necessary for implicit recognition memory required to perform fluidly and cause people to choke. It turns out, the same brain structures and functions that cause athletes to choke, also appear to inhibit creativity.”*

It makes sense: How can you do out-of-the-box thinking if your mind is totally occupied? When your brain becomes a hive of swirling thoughts, creativity can’t break through.

3. It makes us unhappy

Scientists believe that human beings are the only animals who ruminate on thoughts outside of their present reality. And while some introspection can be beneficial, too much can do more harm than good.

According to Harvard psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert, we spend half our time – about 47% of waking hours – lost in thought about something outside of our immediate surroundings. Unfortunately, this tendency isn’t great for our overall happiness. Killingsworth and Gilbert write:

> *“A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.”*

That’s why, they explain, so many philosophical and religious traditions put emphasis on living in the present.

While happiness isn’t a prerequisite for running a business,

it undoubtedly helps. A growing body of research has found that happier people set more ambitious goals, persist at challenging tasks for longer, view themselves and others more favorably, and believe they will succeed.

Success might not make you happy, but happiness will make you more successful.

In order to help you nip overthinking in the bud, here are a few strategies for clearing out your cognitive cobwebs. Telling yourself to not think about a pink elephant is the worst way to stop thinking about the pink elephant. Instead, try one of the following hacks for luring your brain out of a mental loop.

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1. Commit your thoughts to paper

Many of our obsessive thoughts come from a place of genuine concern. The problem is that there's not always something we can do about it in the moment and overthinking won't solve the problem.

Grab a pen and commit your concerns to paper. As the *New York Times* explains: "Expressive writing is one way to reflect without ruminating."

Giving yourself space to freely pour out those emotions can be cathartic, allowing you to return to work with a clearer mind.

2. Busy your brain elsewhere

When your repetitive thoughts aren't useful, challenge your brain to some gymnastics.

The *New York Times* recommends engaging in "mentally absorbing

activities, like listening to your favorite playlist while doing burpees; working on a crossword puzzle; or grounding yourself by noticing three sights, three sounds and three sensations in your environment, again and again.”

Forcing your brain to do some exercise, be it a brain teaser or a challenging workout, can quiet an overactive mind.

3. Make an appointment to obsess later

Ruminating can throw off an entire day’s work. That’s why clinical psychologist Catherine Pittman recommends setting time aside later to think about it in more depth. Oftentimes, when the time finally arrives, you’re no longer as concerned.

At the very least, you preventing your brain from getting in the way of valuable time at the office or collaborating with your team.

4. Embrace some daydreaming

Some of my best ideas for my business have come after spending a couple of weeks picking olives on my family’s farm in Turkey. I zone out. I daydream. I return to work refreshed and inspired.

According to Psychology Today, “If you tend to ruminate and are hyper-analytical all the time, current research shows that you might want to ‘unclamp’ your executive function throughout the day and let your mind wander more.”

Even if you can’t escape for an olive harvest, schedule time for unclamping your mind each day, even if it’s a quick coffee break or a lunch walk.

Any daydreaming can inspire creativity and calm a busy mind.

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