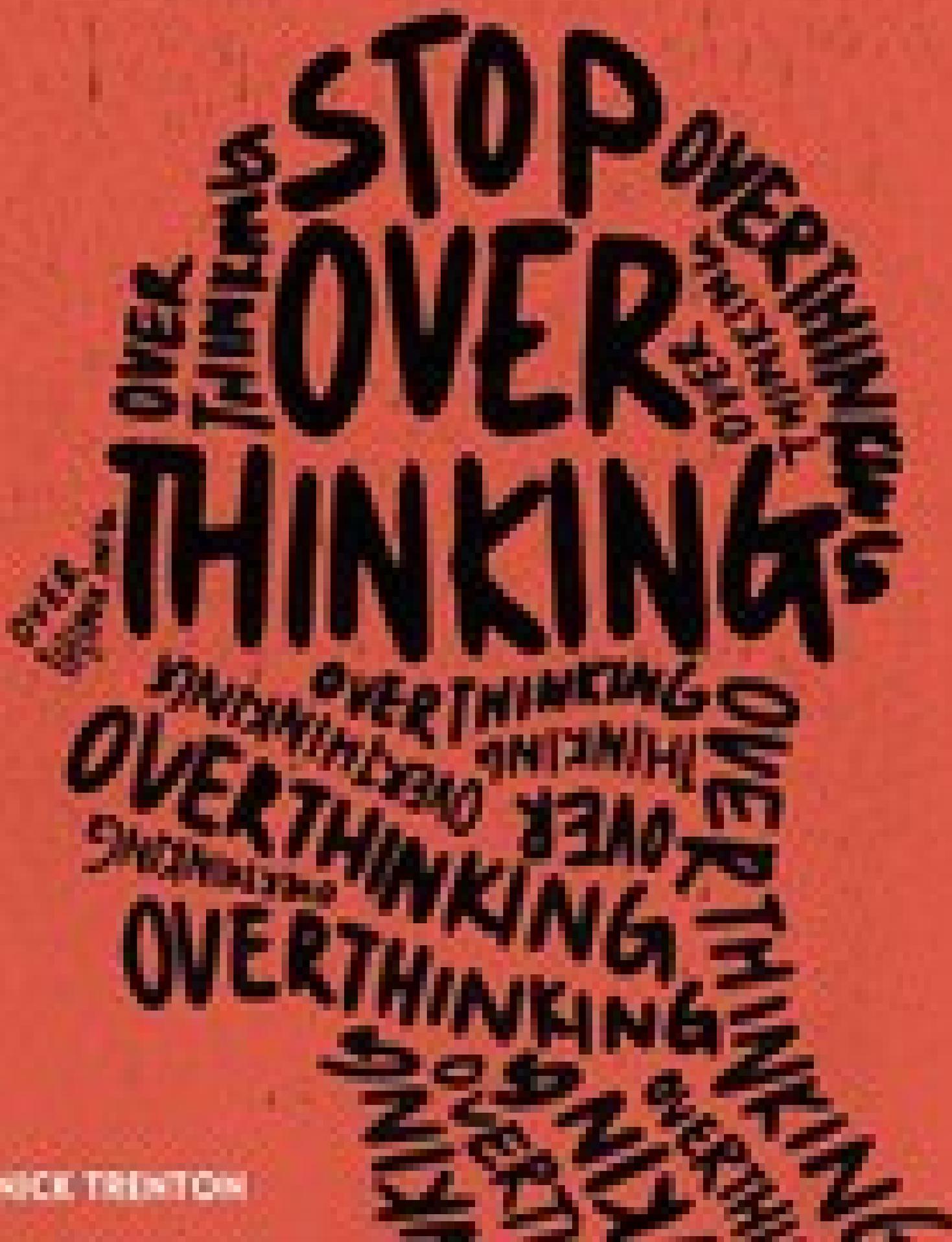


STOP OVERTHINKING: 15 TECHNIQUES TO HELP YOU
LEAVE YOUR NEGATIVE SPINALS, CIRCULATE YOUR
MIND, AND MOVE ON TO THE NEXT



Nick Trenton

Stop Overthinking

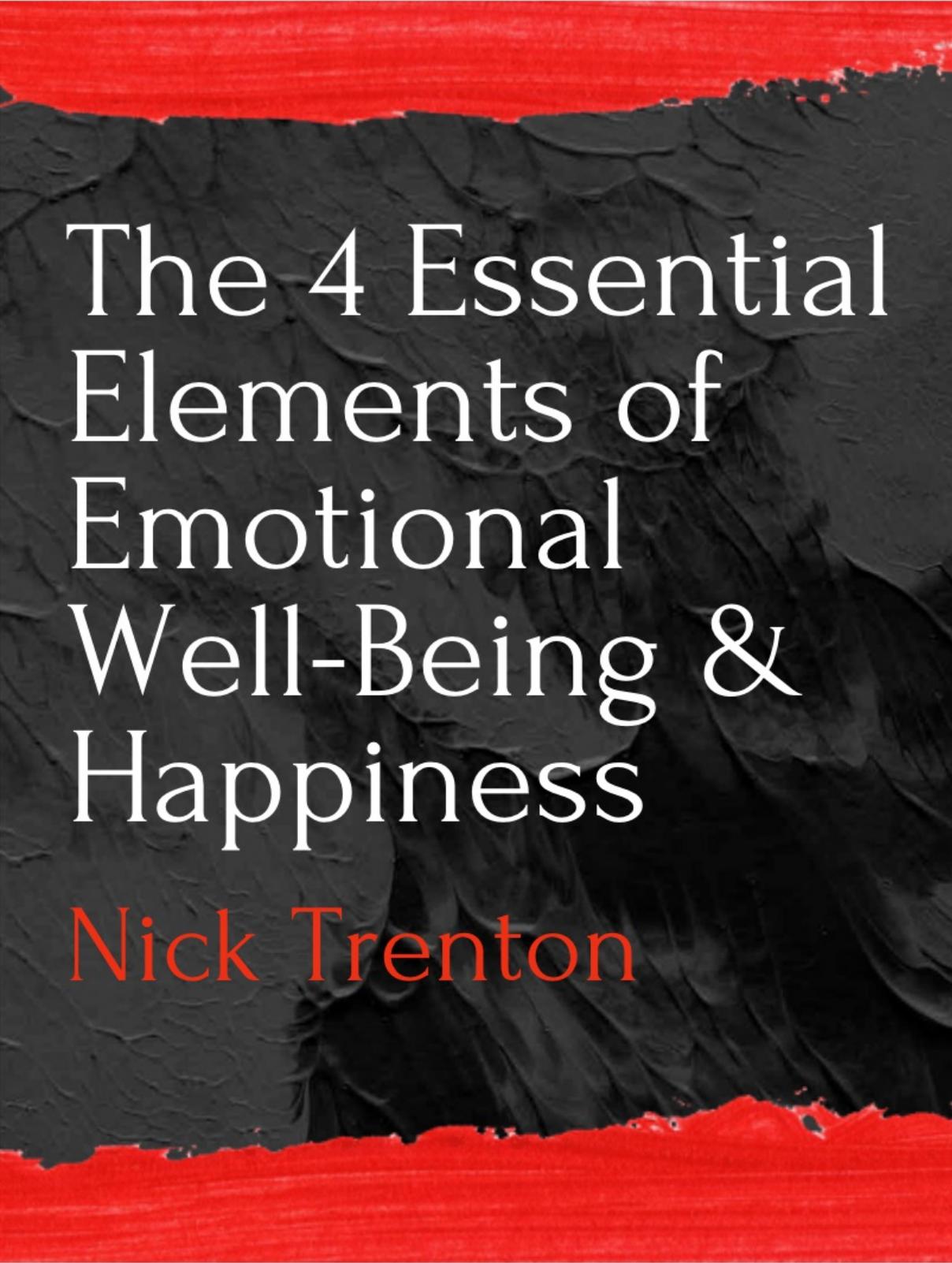
23 Techniques to Relieve Stress, Stop Negative Spirals, Declutter Your Mind, and Focus on the Present

Stop Overthinking:

23 Techniques to Relieve Stress, Stop Negative Spirals, Declutter Your Mind, and Focus on the Present

by Nick Trenton

www.NickTrenton.com



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Chapter 1. Overthinking Isn't About Overthinking

Imagine a young man, James. James is kind, intelligent and self-aware—perhaps a little *too* self-aware. James is always worried about something, and today he's worried about a little health niggle that's caught his attention. He researches online, and gets steadily more alarmed at the possibilities. Then he stops and checks himself: "I'm probably overthinking things," he thinks.

So he stops stressing about his health...and starts stressing about his thoughts about his health. Maybe what he really needs is some therapy. But what kind? His thoughts run away with him and soon he is inwardly debating his options for counseling, arguing with himself, putting himself on trial, defending himself, questioning himself, ruminating on endless memories, guesses, fears. He stops and checks himself. He wonders, "Is this what it's like to have anxiety? Is this a panic attack? Or maybe I have schizophrenia and don't even know it yet." He thinks that nobody else agonizes over nothing like he does, right? In fact, the moment he has that thought, his head is filled with seemingly millions of examples of all the times people have criticized him.

He then puts a magnifying lens on all his flaws, and starts turning each of them over in his mind, wondering why he is the way he is, tortured by the fact that he can't seem to just "let it go." After an hour of this, he realizes with despair that he is no closer to making a decision about his health issue, and instantly feels depressed, sinking into a storm of negative self-talk where he tells himself over and over again that this always happens, that he never sorts himself out, that he's too neurotic...

Phew! It's hard to see how all of this torment and mental anguish started

with nothing more than James noticing he had a weird-looking mole on his shoulder!

We all live in a highly strung, overstimulated, highly cerebral world. Overthinking puts our ordinary cognitive instincts in overdrive. Excessive thinking occurs when our thought processes are out of control, causing us distress. Endless analysis of life and of self is usually unwanted, unstoppable, and self-defeating. Ordinarily, our brains help us solve problems and understand things more clearly—but overthinking does the opposite.

Whether you call it worry, anxiety, stress, rumination or even obsession, the quality that characterizes overthinking is that it feels awful, and it doesn't help us in any way. Classic overthinking often amplifies itself or goes round in circles forever, and thoughts seem intrusive.

Overthinking is excessively harmful mental activity, whether that activity is analyzing, judging, monitoring, evaluating, controlling, or worrying—or all of them, as in James's case!

You'll know that overthinking is a problem for you if:

- You are often conscious of your own thoughts moment to moment
- You engage in meta-thought, i.e. you think about your thoughts
- You try hard to control or steer your thoughts
- You are distressed by or dislike spontaneous thoughts and often feel that some thoughts are unwelcome
- Thinking for you often feels like a struggle between competing impulses
- You frequently question, doubt, analyze or judge your thoughts
- In crises, you often turn to yourself and your thoughts as a source of the problem
- You are focused on understanding your thoughts and digging into the inner workings of your mind
- You have trouble making decisions and often doubt the choices you

do make

- There are many things you're worried and concerned about
- You recognize yourself engaging in negative thoughts patterns, over and over
- Sometimes, you feel like you can't help returning to a thought numerous times, even when it's in the past and nothing can be done anymore about it

You'll notice that some of the above are arguably good qualities—don't we all want to cultivate greater awareness and mindfulness? Isn't it good to question your knee-jerk reactions and ask yourself big questions so you can make better decisions? The gist of overthinking is in the name—it's when we think *over*, above and beyond what is beneficial for us.

Thinking is a marvelous gift. The ability to reflect, to analyze, and interrogate even our own thought processes is arguably the single most defining characteristic of humankind, and the cause for many of our successes. Thought is not an enemy. Our brain is an extraordinarily helpful tool, but when we *overthink*, we only undermine its power.

Causes for Mental Clutter and Agony

If the brain is such a wonderful thing and if thinking is so useful, then why is it so common and indeed so easy for people to get lost in overthinking? People over the ages (probably overthinkers) have proposed their theories: perhaps overthinking is a bad habit, or a personality trait, or a mental illness that can be medicated away. In fact, the reasons why a person overthinks can often become a favorite topic of obsession for those that overthink. “*Why why why* am I like this?”

If you've picked up this book, it's likely that you have been distressed by how your own brain seems to run away with you. But there *are* solutions,

and there are ways out of stress and ruination and into clearer, calmer waters. The first thing to note, however, is a big one: **the causes of overthinking are seldom the focus of overthinking.** What does this mean? In James's example, his overthinking has nothing to do with the scary-looking mole on his back. It has nothing to do with choosing the right psychologist or what that person said to him twenty-three years ago or whether he should feel guilty for being a bad person.

All of these thoughts are the *result* of overthinking. When we are trapped in rumination, it can seem like the thoughts are the problems. We tell ourselves “if I could just sort out this thing that’s bugging me, I could relax and everything would be fine.” But of course, even if that thing were resolved, another would quickly take its place. That’s because it was never the cause of the overthinking, but the result.

If we hope to successfully tackle overthinking, we need to take a step back rather than trying to work through the problem from inside our own rumination. And for the rest of this book, we’re going to work on the assumption that when we are talking about overthinking, we are talking about *anxiety*. People can overthink without having a formally diagnosed anxiety disorder. But in the chapters that follow, we’ll see anxiety as the root cause (the why) and overthinking as the effect (or the how). So then, where does anxiety come from?

Is it you?

Research into the causes of anxiety is ongoing. Competing theories suggest that it’s a matter of personality, or a question of a biological predisposition—something you inherited from your equally anxious parents. Anxiety is often found with other disorders, both mental (like depression) and physical (like irritable bowel syndrome). But it’s also been observed that certain groups—such as women—experience it more, and that elements like diet, stressful lifestyles, past trauma and even culture

have a part to play.

People are anxious about money, about work, about families and relationships, about growing older, or stressful life events. But again, are these things causes of anxiety and overthinking, or are they the result? After all, many people experience enormous financial or family pressure and don't feel anxious or overthink, and others feel anxious when, from the outside, there doesn't appear to be anything causing the emotion.

To try and make sense of the abundant research out there, we'll take the approach that all of these theories have their place, and that anxiety is *multifactorial*—i.e. it results from a mix of different causes, which themselves have interesting ways of interacting. The first main reason why you're anxious could be the nature part of the “nature vs. nurture” question. In other words, though it might not feel like it in the moment, a big cause of anxiety can come down to intrinsic factors within you as an individual.

Let's begin with a common explanation for anxiety: genetics. The truth is that no experts have been able to identify with absolute certainty a single cause for anxiety. Researchers have, however, discovered a genetic component. Purves et. al. argued in a 2019 *Molecular Psychiatry* paper that chromosome 9 carries genes associated with the development of anxiety. But having these genes does not definitively mean you'll develop anxiety.

The paper goes on to explain that anxiety disorders have a heritability rate of 26 percent—what this means is that 26 percent of the variability in whether people develop anxiety disorders or not is explained by genetics. I'm sure you'll agree this is quite a small contribution—what about the other 74 percent? This comes down to your environment, and things like your family history, past experiences, and current lifestyle. This kind of research can be difficult, because when you think about it, there are two ways to “inherit” anxiety from parents—one is genetically, but another is in the parenting we receive, our early formative experiences, and so on. In