

Why We Overthink Differently: Unraveling the Psychology of Personality and Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

Overthinking is often expressed through worry, repetitive thoughts, or rumination. It takes different forms based on one's personality. This paper examines how the Big Five personality dimensions (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) relate to specific styles of overthinking. Using a conceptual and literature-based framework, it explores how these traits influence patterns such as philosophical reflection, perfectionist tendencies, people-pleasing thoughts, and anxious brooding. While certain thinking styles may promote problem-solving or self-awareness, others can lead to emotional strain and difficulty making decisions. The article advocates for a personality-informed perspective on overthinking and introduces coping strategies that align with each trait. This approach promotes individualized emotional regulation and supports better psychological well-being.

Keywords: Overthinking, Big Five Personality Traits, Rumination, Cognitive Patterns, Individual Differences

Overthinking is often manifested as ongoing rumination or persistent worry. It fits within the broader category of repetitive thought, which refers to the frequent and sustained focus on oneself and personal issues. While repetitive thinking can sometimes serve helpful purposes such as organizing thoughts or managing emotions, it is emphasized that when this process becomes abstract and overly evaluative, it may lead to heightened emotional distress and impair one's ability to make decisions. In such cases, overthinking typically appears in the form of fixating on past mistakes or worrying excessively about uncertain future outcomes. These patterns are strongly linked to conditions like anxiety and depression and are shaped by factors such as personality traits, emotional sensitivity, and habitual thinking styles (Watkins, 2008).

Personality generally refers to the stable patterns in an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. One of the most widely accepted frameworks for understanding these patterns is the Five-Factor Model (FFM), commonly known as the Big Five. This model outlines five core and distinct personality traits: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 2010). Recognized globally, the Big Five provide a culturally validated and scientifically grounded approach for explaining enduring differences between individuals (Nighute & K, 2014).

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Overthinking styles vary across individuals based on their personality traits. This paper aims to understand and explore the interrelation between these two aspects and unravel how personality traits shape one's thinking patterns and also present trait-based coping strategies to overcome them.

Integration of Personality Traits & Overthinking Styles and Their Coping Strategies

1. Openness to Experience- Openness reflects an individual's willingness to engage with novel experiences and ideas. People who score high on this trait often display creativity, imagination, and intellectual curiosity. They are generally eager to explore new activities and concepts. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of openness may prefer familiarity, structure, and routine, showing less interest in change or innovation (Dimitriou & Galanakis, 2022).

- ***Overthinking Style-*** This trait is commonly linked with reflective rumination, a form of repetitive thinking that tends to be more analytical and purposeful rather than emotionally distressing (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Such individuals may explore abstract ideas or revisit past experiences in search of insight, rather than being trapped in negative emotional cycles.

While this pattern of thinking is generally adaptive, it can still become mentally exhausting if not managed, particularly among those who are highly imaginative or emotionally receptive (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999).

- ***Coping Strategies-*** Grounding Techniques: Help bring wandering or abstract thoughts back to the immediate, tangible present.

Creative Expression: Channels deep, reflective thinking into purposeful and expressive activities.

2. Conscientiousness- This is a personality trait that reflects a person's typical ways of responding across different circumstances. More broadly, it refers to the consistent patterns in a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that align with various life situations. Individuals who score high in conscientiousness tend to be well-organized, detail-oriented, and attentive to responsibilities. In contrast, those with lower levels of this trait often struggle with structure, may be disorganized, and frequently leave tasks unfinished or ignore obligations (Dimitriou & Galanakis, 2022).

- ***Overthinking Style-*** This pattern of thought can develop into excessive preparation, persistent self-evaluation, and perfection-driven mental loops. Research indicates that individuals scoring high on either conscientiousness or neuroticism are more likely to engage in repetitive thinking, particularly when they fear failure or believe they haven't met personal standards (Hui et al., 2024).

Such overthinking often involves constant reviewing, meticulous planning, and mentally re-running situations to confirm they meet one's internal expectations, frequently resulting in mental fatigue (Hui et al., 2024).

- ***Coping Strategies-*** Flexible Goal-Setting: Encourages progress-oriented thinking, reducing stress linked to unrealistic standards.

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Cognitive Defusion: Aids in separating from harsh internal narratives, easing mental rigidity and self-judgment.

3. Extraversion- Extraversion refers to the degree to which a person is sociable and outgoing. Those high in extraversion are often energetic, enthusiastic, and actively engaged in their surroundings. In professional settings, they tend to enjoy being the focal point in group interactions and can contribute significantly to team dynamics. In contrast, individuals who are more introverted typically exhibit lower levels of social engagement, prefer solitude, and are generally quieter in group environments (Dimitriou & Galanakis, 2022).

- **Overthinking Style-** Although extraverts are less prone to internal rumination compared to introverts, they may display an outward form of overthinking by consistently vocalizing concerns and seeking reassurance from others.

Findings from meta-analyses suggest that extraversion is inversely linked with brooding, indicating that it may serve as a buffer against inward-focused repetitive thinking (Barańczuk, 2018). Still, under emotional strain, extraverts might excessively express their anxieties in social contexts without necessarily arriving at solutions (Barańczuk, 2018).

- **Coping Strategies-** Assertiveness Training: Builds confidence in personal choices, minimizing dependence on external validation.

Reflective Journaling: Organizes excessive verbal thoughts into clear, intentional writing.

4. Agreeableness- Individuals high in agreeableness tend to exhibit traits such as trustworthiness, empathy, cooperation, and a strong moral compass. These qualities make them more likely to work well with others and contribute positively to group settings. Conversely, those low in agreeableness may struggle with collaboration and adapting to team-based environments, which can lead to reduced productivity and challenges within organizational settings (Dimitriou & Galanakis, 2022).

- **Overthinking Style-** Although generally less susceptible to harmful patterns of overthinking, highly agreeable individuals may engage in social-focused rumination, repeatedly analyzing whether they've upset others or fallen short in their relationships.

Research found that people high in agreeableness often suppress their own discomfort to maintain harmony, which may lead to cycles of guilt-driven thoughts during periods of emotional strain. While studies on emotion regulation suggest that agreeableness is typically associated with healthy self-regulation, interpersonal tensions can sometimes cause this strength to turn inward, fueling quiet and persistent overanalysis (Liu et al., 2022).

- **Coping Strategies-** Boundary-Setting Skills: Helps limit overthinking driven by a need to please others by reinforcing emotional limits.

Emotion-Focused Therapy: Encourages acknowledgment and expression of personal feelings rather than internalizing them.

5. Neuroticism- Neuroticism is often one of the most debated traits in personality psychology. This trait primarily relates to how effectively a person handles stress and responds emotionally to various life situations. (Dimitriou & Galanakis, 2022). People with high levels of neuroticism are more likely to experience intense emotions such as anxiety,

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sadness, shame, frustration, and fear. In contrast, those with low neuroticism typically remain composed, emotionally stable, and relaxed both professionally and personally (Nighute & K, 2014).

- **Overthinking Style-** People with elevated levels of neuroticism tend to experience stronger emotional responses such as worry, guilt, and self-criticism. These emotional tendencies often lead to unproductive thought patterns like persistent worry and brooding. In one study, it was found that individuals high in neuroticism demonstrated significantly more rumination, which contributed to greater symptoms of anxiety, particularly in those with lower emotional resilience (Liu et al., 2022).

Further evidence from a study involving Indian women revealed that rumination intensified the association between neuroticism and both anxiety and depression, suggesting that for individuals scoring high in neuroticism, overthinking acts as a mental vulnerability that reinforces psychological distress (Singh & Mishra, 2023).

- **Coping Strategies-** Cognitive Restructuring: Helps reframe distorted thinking patterns and interrupt cycles of negative thought.

Mindfulness Meditation: Enhances present-focused awareness, reducing emotional overreactions and anxious thinking.

To conclude, overthinking is a varied experience influenced by distinct personality traits that shape how people respond to emotions, ambiguity, and introspection. The Big Five framework serves as a useful tool for understanding these differences in cognitive style from the deep, thoughtful processing often found in individuals high in openness, to the worry-prone and emotionally reactive patterns linked with neuroticism. This article highlights the value of recognizing how personality contributes to different forms of overthinking, reinforcing the need for tailored support strategies. Gaining awareness of these tendencies enhances psychological understanding and opens the door to more effective, personalized coping techniques. Viewing overthinking through a personality-based perspective can ultimately help individuals better manage their thoughts and support their emotional well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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