

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JON ACUFF



soundtracks

The Surprising Solution to **Overthinking**

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Jon Acuff, Soundtracks

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“Jon, I think you might be
overthinking this.”

—Jenny Acuff

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Introduction

I waited thirteen years to share this secret.

I apologize for taking so long, but it seemed too good to be true.

I kept thinking the other shoe was going to drop. The secret seemed so simple and so obvious that at first I thought I was wrong.

Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe it worked for me because my situation was unique. Maybe everything that happened was an accident, and if I tried to teach someone else how to do it, it wouldn't help. Maybe if I shared it, people would think I was weird. The neon-green shoes are certainly unusual. The coin is a bit of a surprise. The Post-it notes are a thing. Better to keep it to myself.

So I did.

This secret moved me to Nashville.

It helped me hit the *New York Times* bestseller list.

It sent me to Portugal and Greece and even many parts of Canada that I can't tell you about because it would melt your face right off.

For thirteen years I kept this secret in my back pocket, using it to transform my career, my relationships, my health, and every other part of my life.

Eventually though, I got curious. Was I the only one this secret could help? I launched a survey with my researcher, Mike Peasley, PhD, and asked ten thousand people if they struggle with the thing I figured out. More than 99.5 percent of them said yes.

Okay, okay, so I'm not the only one.

I still wasn't ready to share the whole secret, so I cut off a sliver and tested that with thousands of people from around the world. Mike Peasley, PhD, analyzed the results, and we were both shocked at what happened. I mean genuinely surprised, not BuzzFeed "You'll be shocked at what this celebrity's feet look like" surprised.

I'm also going to use Mike Peasley, PhD's full name, including his doctorate, every time I mention him because at times in this book you'll be tempted to think, "This writing is so delightful, there's no way it can also be scientific." But it is. Ask Mike Peasley, PhD. He was there.

After thirteen years I'm finally ready. If you'll lean in close, I'll tell you what the secret is:

I discovered how to turn overthinking from a super problem into a superpower.

1. I Think I Can Do This

Overthinking is when what you think gets in the way of what you want.

It's one of the most expensive things in the world because it wastes time, creativity, and productivity. It's an epidemic of inaction, a tsunami of stuckness, and thirteen years ago it was dominating me.

I was the king of someday, high on thought, low on motion about a litany of things I'd do eventually.

"Quit overthinking so much," coworkers would beg.

"It's all in your head," my wife would implore.

"Get out of your own way," schoolchildren would yell as I stumbled through the streets like a heavy-brained monster.

Did I want to have 1,345 thoughts about whether there would be adequate parking at the new restaurant we were going to? Did I want to donate an afternoon of brain space to reviewing something dumb I said to a friend three months ago in the grocery store? Did I want to put off asking for a

raise for one more month, overthinking the myriad ways it could go wrong?

Of course not, but what could I do? Thoughts are something you have, not something you hone. We can't control them, right? That's why whenever we talk about thinking, we describe it as something outside of us that operates on its own agenda:

"I got lost in my thoughts."

"My thoughts got away from me."

"She got carried away by her thoughts."

Even if we are very deliberate in other areas of our lives, we tend to treat our thought life as something we have no control over. For example, a simple trick to ensure you go to the gym in the morning is to lay out your workout clothes the night before. Picking them ahead of time helps you achieve the result you want.

**Overthinking
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you want.**

Have you ever heard someone say that about thoughts? "Make sure you pick the five thoughts you want to have playing in the background of your head in that meeting tomorrow." Has a coworker ever said, "I heard some gossip about our new manager, but I

don't want that to color our relationship, so I'm going to leave my three judgmental thoughts at home so I can get to know her without any bias"?

No one has ever said anything like that to me. If we don't control our thoughts, then I guess our thoughts control us. No wonder I spent decades overthinking every little decision,

never fully pulling the trigger on the things I really wanted to accomplish.

One afternoon, out of the clear blue, I got an email from a marketing coordinator in Oklahoma. He'd been reading my blog and asked me a question I never saw coming:

“Can you speak at our conference?”

The answer should have been, “No.” I'd never been paid to speak before. I'd never written a speech with main ideas and transitions. I'd never worked with an event planner. I'd never been to Oklahoma, though I assumed it was very dusty.

At the time, I had a ten-year history of making small, incremental changes in my career as a corporate copywriter who never spoke publicly.

If you looked for evidence that I was a public speaker, there was none.

The only thing I had was a new thought: *I think I can do this.*

I chose one small thought, which led to one small yes, which led to a completely different life.

Long before a single speech, long before I wrote a book that the NFL Players Association teaches players, long before I opened for Dolly Parton at the Ryman, I changed the way I thought about what I was capable of, and that changed everything.

That day I took the first step toward learning something amazing: you can control your thoughts.

You can turn overthinking into action. You can use all that reclaimed time, creativity, and productivity to create the life you want.

And it starts with recognizing your thoughts for what they really are—a personal soundtrack for your life.

The Soundtracks That Are Secretly Shaping Your Life

If I hear “Sweet Child O’ Mine” by Guns N’ Roses, I can smell the newsprint from the pages of *Thrasher* magazine. I can see myself sitting on the floor at 2 Edgewood Drive in Hudson, Massachusetts, cutting out photos of skateboarders for my bulletin board. That’s when you really knew you were Sk8 or Die, when you maintained a suburban scrapbook of California skaters.

If I hear “It Takes Two” by Rob Base and DJ EZ Rock, I am instantly transported to Dave Bruce’s basement. We are memorizing the lyrics as fast as we can, shouting them back and forth to each other and wishing we were rich enough to own Z. Cavaricci pants. I’m not internationally known, but I’m known to rock the microphone.

If I hear “Mr. Jones” by Counting Crows, I can see myself in the Framingham Mall parking lot trying to get my date to listen to the lyrics. I’m in my mom’s blue minivan with faux wood paneling, and it’s bothering me that Heather isn’t as moved by Adam Duritz as I am. It wasn’t easy to rewind tapes. It was a very imprecise art, and the longer she talked over the song, the harder it was for me to find the part I wanted her to really connect with.

Those songs are from bands that will probably never share a stage. I can’t see Counting Crows doing a collab with Guns N’ Roses. But what they all have in common is that they each hit me at the sweet spot when soundtracks are formed.

The *New York Times* did a study to figure out when a song has the greatest shot at getting added to your permanent

soundtrack, that list of songs that will always impact you. The title of the article that followed was “The Songs That Bind,” and it’s a fitting description of what a soundtrack does. Using data from Spotify, economist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz found that “the most important period for men in forming their adult tastes were the ages 13 to 16.” For women, it skews a little earlier, with the ages 11 to 14 being most important.¹

Just reading my list of three examples probably called to mind a specific song and memory for you.

The playlist you unknowingly curate during your life makes for an interesting dinner party conversation, but music is only one small part of a much bigger story. Your thoughts are the internal soundtracks you listen to even more than your favorite song.

Over the years, you’ve built a soundtrack about your career. You have a soundtrack for all your relationships. You have a soundtrack you believe about your hopes, dreams, goals, and every other aspect of your life.

If you listen to any thought long enough, it becomes a part of your personal playlist.

Soundtracks made of music have the ability to completely transform a moment. Restaurants know this. Movies know this. Gyms know this.

No offense to Slash, but soundtracks made of thoughts are even more powerful. They’re much bigger than just background music. As retired Navy SEAL David Goggins says, “The most important conversations you’ll ever have are the ones you’ll have with yourself. You wake up with them, you walk around with them, you go to bed with them and

If you **listen**
to any thought
long enough,
it becomes a part
of your **personal**
playlist.



JON ACUFF

#soundtracks 

eventually you learn to act on them. Whether they be good or bad.”²

If the soundtracks you listen to are positive, your thoughts can be your best friend, propelling you on new adventures with creativity and hope. If your day is spent overthinking broken soundtracks, your thoughts can be your worst foe, holding you back from ever taking action on all the things you want in life.

Decades before Bluetooth and Sirius XM, my college roommate Stu had a car with a broken radio that would only play one station—Disney Radio. That’s not a problem if you’re a parent, because any Peppa Pig in a storm will do, but it’s a little creepy if you’re cruising around campus blasting Hannah Montana.

My roommate didn’t have any control over that soundtrack, and most of the time that’s how we think about our thoughts too. We don’t think we can change them, so we tend to leave our soundtracks up to chance.

Unfortunately, when you don’t create, curate, and choose what soundtracks you’ll listen to, the music doesn’t stop. You just hear a bunch of songs you don’t like.

Your Brain Can Be a Real Jerk

Let’s start with something we all agree on: you and I have brains. They are capable of some amazing things, like logic, reason, and Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” That song has made her an estimated \$60 million in royalties.³ Don’t you dare tell me it’s not amazing.

One of the things our brains are capable of is overthinking. Think of it as the ability to have persistent, repetitive thoughts.

soundtracks

Overthinking is essentially when your brain spins on a thought or an idea for longer than you anticipated. Unfortunately, overthinking tends to lean toward the negative. Left to its own devices, it will naturally gravitate toward things you don't want to dwell on. I'll give you a few examples.

Have you ever had to work hard to remind yourself of something dumb you said a long time ago? Did you need a to-do list to overthink an embarrassing situation from the eighth grade, even though you're now in your thirties? Did you need a note on your calendar to make sure you'd spend the whole weekend thinking about why your boss called a meeting with you on Monday morning?

"I've got a wave of dread scheduled for this Saturday at 2 p.m.!" Is that what you did, or did those thoughts just show up unexpectedly, not at all connected to anything else you were doing at the time?

Those are called *broken soundtracks*, negative stories you tell yourself about yourself and your world. They play automatically without any invitation or effort from you. Fear does not take work. Doubt does not take work. Insecurity does not take work.

I know all about broken soundtracks like that because they cost me seven years of opportunity.

I started my first blog in 2001. I was sharing ridiculous, personal content online three years before Facebook existed, four years before YouTube, five years before Twitter, and sixteen years before TikTok. I wasn't a tech pioneer, because I didn't own enough hoodies, but I was way ahead of the curve. Record labels were reaching out, readers were finding the content organically,

and the faintest hints of momentum were sprouting. Things were moving along, but then I started overthinking everything.

“What if someone finds out I don’t really know what I’m doing?”

“Where is this even going?”

“What’s the point if I don’t have a perfect plan to grow it?”

Those three soundtracks and a thousand more knocked me off the internet for seven straight years. I didn’t start another blog until 2008. Who knows how much further I’d be if I’d spent those seven years growing my audience and content?

The most frustrating thing is that all those broken soundtracks showed up in my life completely uninvited.

Paul Rozin, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, studied this phenomenon when he realized that the English language doesn’t even have a word that means the opposite of trauma. Roy F. Baumeister, Rozin’s collaborator, explained why in his book *The Power of Bad: How the Negativity Effect Rules Us and How We Can Rule It*: “There is no opposite of trauma, because no single good event has such a lasting impact. You can consciously recall happy moments from your past, but the ones that suddenly pop into your head uninvited—the involuntary memories, as psychologists call them—tend to be unhappy.”⁴

Your brain builds on overthinking’s habit of negativity by doing three additional things:

1. Lying about your memories
2. Confusing fake trauma with real trauma
3. Believing what it already believes

soundtracks

We often think our memory is like a GoPro, just capturing things as they happen in real time for later review. Simple things, complex things, happy things, painful things—it's all just one long film of our life that we can access later. If only that were the case.

In his podcast *Revisionist History*, Malcolm Gladwell brings his world-renowned brand of insight to the topic of memory. In one episode, he does the unexpected and attempts to exonerate news reporter Brian Williams.

Williams was riding high as the host of *NBC Nightly News* when his whole career came tumbling down with a preposterous lie. On March 23, 2013, he told David Letterman that he had been on a Chinook helicopter that was fired on by enemy troops in Iraq ten years earlier. That seems like the kind of thing one would remember. For instance, I know right now, I haven't been on a helicopter that was attacked by a rocket-propelled grenade. You probably do too. But Williams thought he was. How could he possibly get something so big, so wrong?

Flashbulb Memories Make Us Blind to the Truth

In his podcast episode, Gladwell talked to memory experts who expressed empathy for Williams. They pointed to the considerable research around so-called flashbulb memories, dramatic experiences that create a vivid recollection in our heads.

Some flashbulb memories are shared by an entire country. William Hirst and a team of researchers did a ten-year study into the memories people have of 9/11. If I asked you right

now where you were when the towers fell, you'd probably be able to remember. I was unemployed at home in Arlington, Massachusetts, listening to the radio.

The problem is that as Hirst studied the memories of the participants over the years, he discovered something surprising: they changed. As time passed, the details of what they remembered morphed. And not just a little bit. Hirst found on average “a 60% decline in memory consistency. Meaning 60% of the answers changed over time.”⁵

The crazy thing is that even as the accuracy of our memories declines, our confidence in them doesn't. In 1986, on the day after the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion, Nicole Harsch and Ulric Neisser asked psychology students how they heard the tragic news. The students wrote down their answers. Nearly three years later, the researchers asked those same students that same question. More than 40 percent of the students answered the question differently the second time because their memories had changed.

The researchers pointed out to participants that the two memories they wrote down were different. They showed them the initial memories they themselves had written down. Confused participants admitted the handwriting was theirs but still wouldn't admit their memories were inaccurate. They said, “I agree it's my handwriting. I agree I must have written that. I don't know why I lied, because I clearly remember I was in the dorm even though this piece of paper says I was in the cafeteria.”⁶

One of the things that causes flashbulb memories is “the degree to which the memory of the event is rehearsed, i.e., how often are people likely to recall the event?”⁷

soundtracks

That's overthinking's favorite jam.

Can you imagine something you rehearse more than the negative soundtracks in your head? That's what overthinking does. It finds a negative soundtrack and then plays it over and over again. I've listened to "Sweet Child O' Mine" a thousand times. I've listened to "That friend didn't respond to your text message because they're mad" a hundred thousand times.

The memory doesn't have to be as tragic as 9/11 or the *Challenger* explosion. Have you ever been fired? Have you ever been dumped? Did a coworker ever yell at you in a meeting? Did you ever miss a flight because you overslept? Those might not seem like significant events compared to national tragedies, but that's when your brain leans into the second reason it's kind of a jerk: you have a hard time distinguishing real trauma from fake trauma.

Researchers at the University of Michigan Medical School found that when we experience a social rejection, our brain releases the same kind of opioids it releases during a physical trauma. Even when the participants knew ahead of time that the social rejection was fake and part of a study, the result was the same. Our brain hits the panic button and dumps opioids into our body to help us survive the perceived emotional pain.⁸

When faced with fake rejection, your body releases real chemicals.

As a parent, it's so tempting to tell your kids it's no big deal when they share something they're worried about. In the grand scheme of things, losing your favorite seat at the lunch table when you're a high school sophomore is insignificant. But a lot more is going on than just a cafeteria misunderstanding. That

sixteen-year-old daughter is awash in real opioids indicating real danger. It's very much a big deal.

So our memory lies, and our brain has a hard time telling the difference between real trauma and fake trauma. Those two challenges are daunting enough. Now comes the third member of the overthinking trifecta: confirmation bias.

Our brain likes to believe the things it already believes.

We're magnets for information and experiences that confirm the things we already think about ourselves and the world. If one of your soundtracks is that you're the most disorganized mom ever, then being three minutes late to the after-school pickup line will confirm that. Even if that morning you got both kids to school on time, worked a full-time job, planned dinner, and scheduled weekend carpooling for a soccer tournament, your brain will still convince you to ignore any new evidence that doesn't agree with your broken soundtrack.

The Power Is Yours

Now that you know your brain can be a real jerk, do you want to leave your thoughts to chance? Where would successful people be if they hadn't made a decision to choose new soundtracks to listen to? Think of all the opportunities and adventures you'll miss out on if broken soundtracks are in charge of your actions.

Broken soundtracks are one of the most persuasive forms of fear because every time you listen to one it gets easier to believe it the next time. Have you ever judged an idea as too dumb to even write down? That's a broken soundtrack. Have

soundtracks

you ever told yourself the same story I do about why someone didn't text back? That's a broken soundtrack. Has it ever felt like you have a pocket jury with you, cross-examining each new opportunity until you dare not chase it? That's a broken soundtrack.

The good news is that you're bigger than your brain. It's just one part of you, and it's under your control in the same way an arm or leg is. We know this because you and I have the great fortune of living in the age of neuroplasticity. Your parents' generation didn't know they could change the shape and function of their brains. Their parents' generation thought cigarettes were good for cyclists in the Tour de France because the nicotine opened the capillaries in their lungs. Maybe my kids' generation will be the ones who figure out how to make vegan queso not taste like organic sand. Every generation learns something new.

Neuroplasticity, which is the power to physically change our brains by changing our thoughts, means that the solution to overthinking isn't to stop thinking. Why would we ever get rid of such a powerful, efficient tool? Wouldn't it make more sense to just run our brains with different soundtracks instead of the broken ones? A plane can drop a bomb or food. A syringe can deliver poison or medicine. A stallion can start a stampede or win a race. The same is true of our thoughts.

If you can worry, you can wonder. If you can doubt, you can dominate. If you can spin, you can soar.

The same brain that told you for years that you couldn't write a book can be taught to tell you just the opposite. "You can write a book! You must write a book! It's time to do it!"

I should know. I published zero books the first thirty-three years of my life. I published seven over the next eleven years. How? I started listening to a new soundtrack.

I didn't just give myself a boost of encouragement in 2008 when I chose to believe I could become a professional public speaker. I started changing my soundtracks in ways that changed the shape of my brain. Not just one day but every day, which was all the easier because of neurogenesis. With neurogenesis, "every morning when you wake up, new baby nerve cells have been born while you were sleeping that are there at your disposal to be used in tearing down toxic thoughts and rebuilding healthy thoughts."

Your brain is waiting for you each day. It's waiting to be told what to think. It's waiting to see what kind of soundtracks you'll choose.

It's waiting to see if you really want to build a different life.

**If you can worry,
you can wonder.
If you can doubt,
you can dominate.
If you can spin,
you can soar.**

Changing Your Thoughts When Your Circumstances Change

It's one thing to choose a positive soundtrack and then use it to create something good. But what about the reverse? Can soundtracks help us escape from bad situations? What role do they play when life doesn't go the way you want? How can you use your thoughts to rebuild something that's fallen apart?

soundtracks

Colleen Barry faced these questions when she lost her job in Boston as a result of the dot-com bust in 2001. She had to take three jobs to cobble together what her previous salary as a documentary film researcher and distributor used to cover.

One of her jobs was to answer the phones as the receptionist in a small office for Gibson Sotheby's International Realty. "It was not the direction I wanted to go," she told me. "I was trying to move into a creative field, not make minimum wage answering phones." Overthinking could have gotten very loud in that moment and played any number of soundtracks.

Entitlement: "I shouldn't have to answer phones; this work is beneath me."

Regret: "My last job was so much better than these other three I have to work just to get by."

Fear: "What if the economy collapses again and I lose these jobs as well?"

Blame: "It's not my fault I lost my job. Life is so unfair."

Resignation: "This is how things will be forever."

Instead of listening to any of those broken soundtracks, Colleen decided to look at the situation with fresh eyes. "I discovered something: I was doing this job as much for me as I was doing it for them." She said, "If I wanted to grow, I had to make the path, because there was no clear path from just answering the phones. The company wasn't going to give me a path. If I wanted to find the path and enjoy the day, I had to change things."

Colleen's dreams had been knocked off course, but she decided to control the things she could control.

“Instead of being disappointed that my career took a step backward, I decided to make it my job to offer the best customer service I could.”

She made a choice. Instead of listening to a soundtrack that said, “I have a menial job,” she came up with her own soundtrack: “My job is to offer the best customer service.” A thousand other people in that situation would let the circumstances dictate their soundtracks, as evidenced by every sandwich some grumpy person has served me in airport food courts, but Colleen did just the opposite.

Once you've picked the right soundtrack, it gets easier to pick the right actions.

That's always how it goes. Your thoughts empower your actions, which in turn generate your results. “I leveraged a connection to get us a coffee machine and pods. I offered every visitor to the office an espresso or cappuccino,” Colleen said. The tired, stressed-out customers noticed a difference. After a long day of seeing expensive rental properties in a city where finding a place to live is a competitive sport, weary clients would return to the real estate office and be welcomed into Colleen's sanctuary.

That's a nice story, isn't it? Colleen, answering phones politely and offering espressos to customers who weren't expecting such great customer service? The story doesn't end there though.

**Your thoughts
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Colleen became the CEO.

Please try not to step on the mic I just dropped.

It's true. Colleen changed her soundtrack, which changed her actions, which changed her life, and today she's the firm's CEO.

Did it happen overnight? Of course not. It took fifteen years. I don't care how amazing your coffee is, no one jumps from lobby barista to CEO in a week. It took me six years to become a full-time public speaker, though I think the New Anthem in chapter 8 will help you shave some time off your journey.

Colleen got an entry-level marketing position. Then she ended up running the marketing department. Next, she jumped to business coaching, all while writing fresh soundtracks that moved her forward. For example, she doesn't just see coworkers when she shows up on a Monday morning. "I imagine that everyone I work with is a business partner that I'm trying to help grow. I have 350 partners."

Was it always easy? Nope. She says that after the dot-com bust, everybody was pretty depressed. "We had all come from making lots of money in fancy offices that had ping-pong and pool tables. You had to make a decision: will I just try to collect unemployment, or will I do the work the way I really want to do it?"

Did Colleen ever get annoyed answering the phones? She did. "There were a couple of times when it was frustrating, and I would think, 'Really? This is what my life has come to? I was in Cannes a year ago, showing a film.'" She didn't keep listening to that broken soundtrack though.

“I have to be very cautious about taking a thing that I’m experiencing in the moment and then making it the permanent thing. Our brains do that. But it’s not the new normal, you’re just having a crappy day.”

You’re going to have a few of those moments. Everybody does.

Three months into believing I could be a professional public speaker, I attended an event and planned a meet-up for all the people who were reading my blog. I wasn’t speaking at the event because no one but me knew I was a public speaker yet, but the staff allowed me to use an empty room at the arena.

I printed out a thousand stickers and brought a dump truck’s worth of Skittles because I’d written a joke about them that I thought was funny. I waited in the room for readers to show up, expecting a massive crowd. In ninety minutes, do you know how many people came through those doors? Two. One was a friend named Mike Foster who happened to be at the event. The other was a father who walked in and said, “I don’t read your blog, but my daughter does. Call her.” He then handed me his phone, I had an awkward thirty-second conversation with his daughter, and then he left. I think he took a sticker.

If I listened to my broken soundtracks, that day was an abject failure. Only two people attended my event. If that same thing happened to me in my twenties, that embarrassment would have become one more reminder that overthinking played whenever I tried to do something brave. I would have quit that foolish dream like I quit my first blog, potentially sacrificing another seven years to being stuck.

soundtracks

But this time was different. I was controlling my soundtracks instead of letting them control me. Instead of giving up, I chose to play my new soundtrack at full blast: “YOU CAN BE A PUBLIC SPEAKER AND AUTHOR!”

Instead of feeling crushed that day, I recognized it for what it was: a chance to share an experience with other people—failure. I had my friend take a photo of me surrounded by a sea of empty chairs. That night I wrote about the experience, and it became one of my most popular blog posts ever.

Eleven years later, I stood onstage in front of eight thousand people and smiled about something no one else knew. I was in the very same arena I’d been in when my meet-up failed. I was about five hundred yards from the spot where I had to carry 999 stickers back to my car.

To be clear, I didn’t have a perfect plan that carried me from the failed meet-up to the keynote on the main stage. All I had was the soundtrack that told me it was possible.

Tapping Into the Power of Overthinking in Three Steps

My entire world started to change when I decided to choose what soundtracks I listen to.

The best part is that the process is a lot simpler than you’d expect. When I first started transforming my overthinking, I figured it would take approximately ninety-two different steps, fourteen techniques, and at least a few dozen acronyms. I was wrong.

There are three actions to change your thoughts from a super problem into a superpower:

1. Retire your broken soundtracks.
2. Replace them with new ones.
3. Repeat them until they're as automatic as the old ones.

Retire. Replace. Repeat.

That's it.

I don't know what your dream is; it's probably different from mine. But I do know one thing: overthinking is getting in the way.

It's time to do something about that.