

Overthinking and the psychology of peak performance

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As a manager in a leading MNC, you're worried. Tomorrow is a high-stakes client presentation that could clinch a major project; every slide is reviewed, every objection anticipated, and the pitch rehearsed to perfection. Now it is time to relax but instead you feel nervous and underconfident: What if the client spots a gap? Or worse, challenge the assumptions? What if we lose this deal?

Or perhaps you are switching jobs. The interview tomorrow feels make-or-break. You have prepared relentlessly, and bring years of experience. Yet anxiety floods in: What if I mess up? What if stronger candidates apply? What happens to my family if I don't get this?

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Overthinking is the mind's tendency to inflate situations and their consequences far beyond their true importance in the larger arc of life. Managing people and organisations begins with managing ourselves – and that includes managing overthinking.

Overthinking has been increasingly recognized as a major contributor to stress and underperformance in high-stakes situations. Even seasoned professionals are vulnerable. University of Chicago psychologist Sian Beilock has studied “choking” moments in sports, including golfer Greg Norman's choke at the 1996 US Masters, after brilliant performance on the first three days. In her book *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*, she writes: “In a nutshell, paralysis by analysis occurs when people try to control every aspect of what they are doing in an attempt to ensure success, only to disrupt what was once a fluid, flawless performance.”

That is where overthinking begins: over-effort, over-control, and eventually, paralysis.

So, why do we overthink? Often from a fixation on outcomes rather than the activity itself. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.24) uses the term *bahulā ayāsam* for action performed with excessive effort -- physical, mental or both--driven by the belief that outcomes depend entirely on personal effort and therefore feels entitled to the results. Another well-known verse (2.47), however, invites a different stance: recognising the larger frame-

work within which our actions unfold and the many factors beyond our effort that shape outcomes. This acknowledgement leads one to mentally detach from the fruits of action (*mā phaleṣu kadācana*) and the belief that we are wholly responsible for the outcomes (*mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr*), while continuing to perform our duties with enthusiasm and diligence (*mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmanī*).

This shift in perspective can dramatically ease high-pressure stress. But how does one practise it? The answer is surprisingly simple: consciously redirect attention from the immediate pressure to something you love to do. Sian Beilock's research shows that even a simple trick such as singing or whistling prior to or during a critical moment can ease stress and help us perform more smoothly. Or better still, meditation can help quieten the turbulent mind and restore steadiness. Such positive distraction reconnects us with the larger picture and loosens the grip of the momentary anxiety. We are still in the thick of action but no longer obsessed with outcomes: letting go of the invisible mental strings that crave for success and fear failure, we experience joy. In this state of mind, we act more naturally, simply because we're internally relishing the act itself, instead of merely using it as a means to the end.

One may wonder, is it then better not to set goals or be ambitious? Not really. On the contrary, a goal-less endeavour lacks the motivation required to act. Setting and pursuing goals is essential, but being overwhelmed by them isn't.

It is wiser to absorb our consciousness in the immediate task at hand and let the goal recede to the background, remaining in view, but not consuming us. The *Gītā* (18.23) explains that such regulated action performed without attachment, love or hatred, and without desire for fruitive results is in the mode of goodness, leading to true clarity, contentment and peace.

So the next time your mind spirals into overthinking, pause, reflect on the timeless words of the *Gītā* and reconnect to the larger picture of your life. And remember: overthinking about overthinking is still overthinking.

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