HOW NOT TO OVERTHINK AND OVEREAT DURING THE HOLIDAYS

by Cynthia Morgan
photos by Brad Klopman

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Oh, the holidays! Thanksgiving family get-togethers full of food (and stress); Christmas parties and New Year's Eve celebrations with more food (and more stress). If you dread this time of year because your normal January-October moderation and mental state completely derails, I've got some tips for you, although they may not be exactly what you think. *Actually, they are about exactly what you think.*

Most people try not to overeat during the holidays, and if you're one of them, you may be looking to stop overeating in the wrong place—on your plate—rather than where the real problem resides—in your mind.

I'm not a dietician; I'm a hypnotherapist, so my main concern is what you're *thinking*, not what you're *eating*. (Though I am also a long-time animal rights activist, so my hope is that whatever you're eating, it's plant-based!)

I've helped many clients stop overeating by guiding them to the underlying issue. Stress is the number one reason people overeat, *but what's underneath stress?* Often, it's overthinking. We can probably all agree that there are some people who could stand to "think" a little more, but

there's also a segment of the population that could do with less thinking. If you're a vegan, you'd be classified as a thinker. Most likely, you've thought your way to veganism. No one can truly label a vegan a mindless thinker or a mindless eater. Even if you're an overeater as a vegan, you're still mindful on some level.

But there's a difference between mindfulness and overthinking. Mindfulness is conscious awareness. It is deliberate and effectual because it helps you to become present in your experiences, which leads to a healthy outcome. Overthinking is incessant and often ineffective—like spinning your wheels 100 mph and getting nowhere. The shadow side of overthinking can be darkly negative. If taken to extremes, it can lead to full-blown panic attacks and addiction in an attempt to hush the incessant noise. Overthinking can take a serious toll on the quality of your life, affecting your mental and physical health. Research shows that ruminating leads to depression and anxiety. *Why?* Because you're trying to control what is often uncontrollable. *And that's super stressful.*

One of the ways we attempt to allay the anxiety of overthinking is by eating. This doesn't mean that all

overthinkers overeat, but eating can be an anxiety neutralizer. Eating is actually prescribed to people who feel anxious. Eating can temporarily pacify anxiety by grounding you in your body and distracting your mind. But there is a fine line. In excess, it becomes overeating.

We all overthink at some point. Worry and overthinking go hand-in-hand—and we've all experienced worry. But when we're mentally healthy, we're able to recognize when we have tipped the scales from concern to deleterious overthinking—and from there we can make a different choice. Therein lies the key. We have choice. Viktor E. Frankl, the famous Holocaust survivor and author of the spiritual classic *Man's Search for Meaning*, wrote, "A human being is a deciding being." Luckily, we have a mechanism called decision-making. It's the most powerful tool we have because, in the end, our life experience is the sum of our decisions.

Normal worries are usually circumstantial and short-lived. We might worry about an upcoming presentation and relax when it's over. By contrast, overthinkers get stuck in their thoughts indefinitely without being able to see the big picture. Overthinking is debilitating. It can stop you from moving forward in your life and from connecting with others; but worst of all, it blocks you from your highest self where your true answers and peace reside. It's almost guaranteed that your chattering mind doesn't have the answer to what you're ruminating. The solution lies in the quietness of your mind. In quietness, all things are resolved.

When hypnotherapy clients first come to me, they often say, "I don't think I'll be able to do this because my mind never shuts off. It's always racing." Similarly, we can't expect to run a marathon if we've never run a mile. Like learning anything, relaxing the mind takes practice. But it can be done. If you want to run a marathon, you can. You just need to make different choices. If you want more peace, a joyful holiday season, free of overeating, you can have all of that too, but it requires making the choice. It's a simple plan, but not easy to execute. To guide you through the frenzy of the holiday season, here are 10 tips to slow you down and avoid overthinking (and overeating).

1.   **Stop taking things personally**

Remind yourself that, more often than not, situations and other people's responses have nothing to do with you. This is especially important when gathered around friends and family who know us well—and know just how to trigger us. Take a moment before reacting. Imagine a protective shield around you—any negativity bounces off and away from you.

The spiritual path based on the book *A Course in Miracles* tells us that there are only two thoughts in the mind: love and fear. What isn't love is fear. Negativity is more about the sender than the receiver. If you can see that someone who is hurtful is coming from fear, then you are more apt to stay in your peace. Ask yourself what it is that they are afraid of. Once you see their fear, you can understand them better. As a result, your self-esteem isn't jeopardized and you remain mentally strong.

2.   **Breathe**

Consciously focusing on the breath calms the mind. Inhale a slow deep breath through your nose for a count of five, hold for a count of five, and exhale through your mouth for another count of five, or whatever number feels comfortable. Do this a few times, but stop if you feel lightheaded. Conscious breathing can be particularly useful before eating or entering any stressful situation.

3.   **Set boundaries**

Life without boundaries creates miscommunication, conflict, and resentment. If a co-worker is pressuring you to go to the office Christmas party and you just don't have it in you, just say, "no" in a direct but kind way. Avoid putting yourself in unnecessarily stressful situations as much as possible. Create boundaries with social media and the news. *You don't need me to tell you that these outlets have a profound impact on your wellbeing.* Keep a sense of normalcy through the topsy-turvy schedule of the season by maintaining what's most beneficial to your sanity in your daily routine.

Healthy boundaries are a form of self-love. With boundaries you also create closure. It is one less thing to mull over in your mind. And, bonus—no more stuffing down resentment with gingerbread!

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4. Write your plans

Writing things out, journaling, creating to-do lists, or outlining future goals helps calm the mind by organizing thoughts, thus making it easier to prioritize tasks and get things accomplished. With the New Year around the corner, write down the top three things you achieved in the last year and your top three goals for the coming year. Get it out of your mind and onto paper (or electronic device).

5. Stay physically active

Maybe you've heard the saying, "A tired dog is a good dog." People aren't much different. When the body is tired, the mind relaxes. Our physical and mental health are closely tied. Make a point to get moving during the holidays. Even a simple walk around the block reduces stress hormones. Take a break from festivities and have some fun—go skiing, try a yoga class on YouTube, or take a stroll in nature.

6. Decode stress clues

We can decipher our state of mind by paying attention to how our body feels. Learn to decode your body. Bring your awareness into your body. *Are your shoulders strained? Is your stomach upset? Do you have a headache?* A tense body tenses the mind. A relaxed body signals the mind that all is well. If it's not easy for you to change your thoughts, change how your body feels. Shut your eyes and visualize the most peaceful place in the world for you. Imagine yourself there. Smell the pleasant smells. See the beautiful sights. Hear the wonderful sounds. Let yourself enjoy that relaxing scene for a few moments. Getting a massage, doing some stretching, or taking a warm bath or cool shower are other helpful ways to change your bodily experience.

7. Watch alcohol intake

Studies show that overthinkers are more susceptible to alcoholism. There is a tendency to believe that alcohol will quell annoying thoughts, but many overthinkers have a hard time stopping at one drink. Alcohol is a slippery slope into depression and obsessive, even suicidal, thoughts. During festive times, it's challenging to stay sober when everyone else is celebrating, but keeping mentally sane is the best gift you can give yourself. No one needs the added guilt the next day, which can also lead to overeating. Skip all that by skipping the spiked cider.

8. Use a counter-thought

Conscious mind repetition programs the deeper subconscious mind, which holds our automatic responses. What you say over and over plays a key role in your life experience. Whenever you notice yourself overthinking, have a counter-thought ready. Label the nuisance thought by saying in your mind, "This thought is meaningless. I can choose peace instead of this." Use this as your daily mantra. Even as you're overeating, say, "I can choose peace instead of this."

9. Get enough sleep

Most overthinkers are not good sleepers. Incessant thoughts cause tossing and turning, exacerbating the problem. Studies have also shown a link between inadequate sleep and overeating. Sleep deprivation leads to poor food choices, so it's worth the investment of time and effort to create a healthy bedtime routine.

Before bedtime, write down your to-do list or write something in your journal to clear your mind, and then practice a relaxing breathing technique for a moment. When it's time to turn off the light, affirm, "As I turn off the light, I turn off the day and give myself permission to sleep." After you shut your eyes, continuously repeat the word "sleep" in your mind. It's a simple self-hypnosis technique that works. Before long, you won't need to repeat any of these ideas because your subconscious will be programmed for a good night's sleep each time you turn off the light and your head hits the pillow.

10. Let go

Recognize your own limitations. You can only change what you have the power to change. But, never forget that what you can change—your mind—is the most powerful tool you have in life. If it helps, remind yourself of this popular excerpt from the Serenity Prayer by American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "God grant me the power to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

Stop fighting your overthinking and start embracing yourself fully and lovingly in this moment, exactly as you are. It's okay if you slip into overthinking or overeating. Use it as an opportunity to forgive yourself and make another choice. You'll soon be the yogi you were meant to be. You might even surprise yourself and make it through the holidays without the anxiety of overthinking or second helpings. A peaceful holiday season— *imagine that!*