

INTRODUCTION

Addicted to Thinking

It was a magnificent spring morning, and I was walking in the park near my home. Well...that's not really true. I was walking, yes, but not exactly *in* the park. I was oblivious to the colorful flowers blooming, the warm sunshine, the smell of cut grass. I was missing all of it, having disappeared inside my own head, into my personal prison—thinking. No matter how delicious that May day may have been, I wasn't experiencing it; I was trapped inside my mind, obsessing about what was not working in my life. Replaying and rethinking the same problems I'd been replaying and rethinking for years; I was down the rabbit hole of thought.

And then something remarkable happened. My inner lens spun on its axis; instead of being inside my thoughts, I was now the one looking *at* and listening *to* my thoughts. I was now the one the thoughts were talking to. I could see, in the brightest technicolor, what I was choosing to pay attention to. I was suddenly watching my attention attach to this toxic content, watching it latch onto and lather up my discontent. I felt the insidiousness of my thoughts and a kind of bewilderment and horror at my own inclination toward them. I experienced my thinking as something I was actually doing to myself.

In that moment, I could see that I was the one replaying the same stories of discontent, conducting the same resentful conversations in my head—with the same results: suffering, my suffering. At last, I could really hear my thoughts, distinctly—and recognize how bad they made me feel. I observed my negative thoughts for what they were, a kind of self-administered poison. Then the aha moment arrived: It dawned on

me that I could do this differently, this whole *life* thing. I could change what I was paying attention to, turn away from the source of my suffering. Not just intellectually, but at a deep bodily level, I knew that I was creating my experience, and therefore, I had the power to change it. If I was willing to transform the way I related to my thoughts, I could create a radically different kind of life for myself.

Simultaneously, it became clear that no amount of thinking and none of my “brilliant” thoughts were actually going to solve the problem I was ruminating on. My thinking mind had met its match. I couldn’t solve this particular problem, not with more thought anyway. Whatever I wanted to get, wherever I wanted to get to...if it was going to happen, it was not going to happen through more thinking. I got it: thinking was not going to bring me the happiness or peace I had hoped it would.

That moment arrived after a lifetime of narrating, analyzing, and making sense of my own and everyone else’s experience—all to an audience of one: me. Ruminating on what was bothering me, obsessing about how I would fix it, and describing my experience to myself, over and over again. It came after years spent constructing sophisticated mental narratives on why what was happening in my life was happening and what I needed to do to change it. The clarity came after far too much time spent justifying and defending why I was right, and right to have the experience I was having. Defending all this in the court of my mind. The awakening I experienced came after a lifetime of, essentially, fighting with and trying to control reality inside my own head.

On that day in the park, I discovered a new lens through which to see my life and, with it, a new identity. I had not previously known any way to experience life other than through my thoughts, *as* the thinker. There was no witness, no *me* other than the one who was thinking. I was collapsed into the thoughts appearing in my mind.

Like most people too, I had spent my life trusting that I could think my way into a state of happiness and inner peace, that more and better thinking was the solution to all the difficulties life presented. I had believed that if I worked hard enough, muscled my way

through enough mental gymnastics, I could figure out whatever was not right with my world. And once I figured it out, I could fix it.

Normal but Not Okay

For more than twenty-five years as a psychotherapist, I've been listening to people talk about their lives. Every kind of problem, situation, history, and personality has walked through my office door. While the contents of our problems and situations may appear in different forms and levels of intensity, there's really one universal problem at the root of all other problems. At the core, our stress, anxiety, and chronic discontent are caused by one thing: the way we relate to our thoughts. It's our relationship with thought that makes us suffer.

Jane is in a bad marriage. She spends her days and nights (and sessions with me) thinking about what's wrong with her husband and why he's so unlikable. Obsessively, she explains the reasons for her anger, the justifications for why she's right to feel how she feels; she explains all this—to herself and anyone who will listen. When she's not ruminating on her resentment, Jane is obsessing on her own faults—blaming herself for staying in a bad marriage, for not being the feminist who would leave. She is trapped inside a repetitive negative thought loop. She goes to work, takes care of her family, and looks healthy on the outside, like someone living a good life. She has moments of joy. On the inside however, she feels anxious, agitated, and held hostage by her own thoughts.

Alison is a new mother who's just returned to work from maternity leave. Every moment she's away from her son, she thinks about the thousands of terrible things that could happen to her child: terrorist attacks, SIDS, choking on a Cheerio, and on and on. Sometimes she calls me in the middle of the day, when her thoughts turn to panic. When her mind is not generating death scenarios, she shifts to thinking about the devastation she will feel when the terrible thing happens, how she won't be able to survive it. When she manages to pull her attention away from this imagined horror, she

thinks about how despicable she is as an absent mom, about how angry she is at her husband for not making enough money to let her stay home with her child, and endless other resentful thoughts. She thinks excessively and obsessively about the very things that torture and terrify her.

Finally let's consider Ken, who believed he was going to become president of the company he worked for. Unexpectedly, he was let go and has been out of work for nearly a year. Since his removal, Ken has been incessantly thinking about what he did wrong that got him fired, replaying the possible missteps he took along the way (down to the photographs he kept on his desk). He asks me every week, why I think he got fired. When he's not ruminating on his professional mistakes, he's thinking about his personal failures and specifically, how ridiculous and deluded he was for imagining he could be somebody important. Ken's thoughts, like many people's thoughts, remind him, day after day, of what he isn't.

While these individuals may sound like extreme examples of excessive thinking or what we sometimes call overthinking, they're actually quite typical of the reality many people live on a daily basis. Excessively and relentlessly is just how we think. Most of us are not thinking about unicorns or rainbows either; we're thinking about the things that make us feel the worst. We feel compelled to think about what hurts, and so we suffer. If you can't stop thinking even when you want to, you're not alone.

Like Any Other Addiction

It may sound ridiculous, disrespectful, or absurd to compare the process of thinking, something so utterly natural, productive, and important, to something so dangerous, destructive, and out of control as addiction. A friend, upon hearing the topic of this book, raised her voice to say, "Thinking is not like shooting drugs or drinking. Human beings think. That's what we do!" Thinking is inarguably useful, necessary, creative, and miraculous. It's what distinguishes human beings from other species. The ability to think is a good thing. Thinking is the source of invention, imagination, problem solving,

and organization, to say nothing of putting together a grocery shopping list. So, I am not suggesting that we give up thinking; we couldn't even if we wanted to. This is not an anti-thinking book or a how-to on living a lobotomized life. In fact, I am delighted to be thinking right now as I write these words.

Thinking itself, this natural ability of the mind, is not what causes us to suffer. Thoughts themselves are not inherently problematic. What's problematic is our belief that thoughts require being thought about. What causes us to suffer is our identification with thoughts—the belief that we *are* our thoughts. This is the real issue, and precisely what makes it so difficult for us to disentangle from thoughts and find freedom inside our own mind—our own life.

Are You Addicted?

If you ask most people, casually, if they are addicted to thinking, they will say yes. But if you ask people whether thinking is an addiction, the same people will balk and deny it. Our response to the question when we don't think about it too much, when we answer from the gut, is very different than when we pose the question to the mind, whose job, not coincidentally, is to make thoughts!

Do you find it hard to stop thinking about certain things even when you absolutely want to stop thinking about them? Do you feel like your thoughts control your attention and mood? You're probably addicted to thinking, which means you're normal. And yes, you *can* be addicted to something that's natural and good for you, *can* be addicted to an activity that you enjoy and benefit from, *can* be addicted to something you can't live without. While your thinking addiction may not cost you your job or land you in rehab, nonetheless, your behavior is similar, with results that are similarly redundant, destructive, and painful.

To start, let's consider the aspects of addiction discussed in the American Psychiatric Association's most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

(*DSM-5*)—the bible of sorts for all things psychological—and apply them to thinking as an addiction. Ask yourself:

- Does thinking, sometimes, negatively impact my overall well-being?
- Has thinking created problems in my relationships?
- Have work or home responsibilities been neglected because of thinking?
- When I notice that I haven't been thinking, do I experience fear or anxiety or a sudden excess of thinking?
- Do I find myself thinking more and spending longer stretches of time thinking?
- Have I tried to cut back on my thinking but not been able to make it happen?
- Do I spend a lot of time thinking?
- Has my thinking led to physical or psychological health problems, anxiety, or depression?
- Have I cut down on or stopped doing activities I once enjoyed in order to spend more time thinking?
- Do I ever look forward to or crave thinking?

If you are like most people, you answered yes to six or seven of these questions. Every person I've ever interviewed, without exception, has said that their thinking in one way or another, creates problems in their life and disrupts their overall well-being. Whether it's from too much thinking or the content of what we're thinking about, excessive thinking causes problems in our relationships, work, health, quality of life, and overall well-being. Thinking is like any other addiction, except for the fact that we don't think it's an addiction. And also, for the fact that we take breaks between our drink, drug, and food binges, but we don't when it comes to our thinking. We devote ourselves to thinking without pause—from the cradle to the grave.

Remarkably, no matter how much we suffer as a result of our thinking, we keep at it with the same resolute faith that thinking will provide the solution to whatever ails us. We continue doing what we've always done despite inarguable proof that much of our thinking is not productive and actually makes us more anxious, stressed, and unhappy.

We keep doing the very thing that harms us while hoping for and believing in a different result. We do what we've always done and get what we've always gotten.

Where Oh Where Is the Off Button?

There's no off button is how many people describe their relationship with addictive thinking. Once we start thinking about a problem or situation, we're unable to pull ourselves away from it. We descend into the rabbit hole even though we don't want to go in there, even though we're aware that the thinking itself is what's making us unhappy. As Jane lamented, "There are times I am literally asking myself, *as I'm thinking, Why am I still thinking about this? I want to stop. Why can't I stop?* But I just keep at it."

It can be astoundingly difficult to pull our attention away from negative thought loops. We are physically, mentally, and emotionally *hooked*—intensely resistant to the idea of letting go of the thoughts, no matter how much pain they're creating or how much we hate thinking them. We are at war with our thoughts and ourselves at the same time. The obsessive thoughts feel dreadful, but if we dare turn our attention away from them, we experience a fierce backlash that can feel almost worse than the thoughts themselves. While strange, it seems as if we, at some level, actually enjoy, benefit from, or feel empowered by the negative thoughts. For sure, we are attached to them and unwilling to let go.

Usually, we keep thinking until we're forced to turn our attention to something else that can't wait, a crying child or burning pot, or until we go unconscious, either through sleep or self-medication, which, sadly, is the solution many people are choosing these days. In order to stop the cacophonous noise in our head, we have to anesthetize our thoughts and ourselves in the process. We use external substances to relieve our addiction to this overpowering substance called thought.

And yet, it is apparent that the word “addicted” is also misused, misunderstood, and thrown around with far too much levity. Addicted has become a trendy way of describing any behavior we think we overdo or even enjoy. *I’m addicted to gummy bears. I’m addicted to Netflix. I’m addicted to spin class.* There’s nothing light or enjoyable about real addiction. I do not use the metaphor of addiction without deep respect for the reality of it. Thinking can indeed lead us down its own path of self-destruction, a destruction we live privately, in the confines of our own mind, and sometimes, without the visible or obvious consequences that often lead us to seek help.

Who’s in Charge?

We must remember this: *when* thoughts happen and *what* they’re about are not in our control. The mind produces thoughts like the heart pumps blood or the pancreas generates insulin. It’s what the mind does—its job. Thoughts form in mysterious ways in the recesses of our consciousness and seem to appear out of the ether. They certainly don’t ask our permission to enter into awareness. The reality of constant, random, and unvetted intruders appearing in our consciousness would be challenging enough, but when we compound this truth with the fact that we believe we must also engage with and make sense of each of these unvetted intruders, we end up with a much bigger challenge than just randomly appearing thoughts. We end up powerless over our own attention. As long as our attention is bouncing around at the mercy of thoughts we don’t choose, we remain passengers rather than pilots in our own life. As long as our own attention is out of our control, we’re trapped on the thinking train, and our life, essentially, is out of our control.

The Fun of It

I recently asked an addict what he feared most about giving up his substance of choice, which in this case was alcohol. Without a moment’s hesitation, he said that if he stopped

using, he would never have fun again, never have sex again, never go out with friends again, never enjoy life. His life would be utterly mediocre, joyless. Indulging, as he viewed it, was the key to excitement and a *happening* life. The thought of a life with less thinking is similarly perceived as empty or boring. One client described it as a “life without spice, bland, dull...a void.” Another asked, “Without thinking, why be alive?” From inside our thinking addiction, we can’t imagine what could make life interesting without our stories and drama, all the yummy by-products of our thoughts.

When I told people I was writing a book about our universally shared addiction to thinking, I was frequently met with a sense of outrage: “That’s ridiculous...how would we get anything done if we weren’t thinking?” “Nothing is possible without thinking!” Or, as one friend retorted, “So then, I should face a blank wall and hum *Om* for the rest of my life? Life is short...I want to be *in* it!” Their reactions imply that, without our perpetual thinking, we will be left in some sort of vegetative state, unable to take action or *do* anything. It is as if the very possibility of life occurring depends upon our thinking.

Exploring this topic has shown me how provocative and unwelcome the idea of doubting the veracity of our thoughts, of disidentifying with them, really is in our society. Contemplating the act of thinking as something we do, not as something we are, appears to be deeply threatening to us. *Not* thinking suggests a kind of death. Given the complexity of what thinking represents, we ferociously protect our relationship with it. To that end, most of us employ a sophisticated array of beliefs about why we should never and will never give up our love affair with thought, even when evidence suggests our thinking is hurting us.

In truth however, we are not to blame for our relationship with thoughts. We relate to thoughts the way we’ve been taught to relate to thoughts—as profoundly important bits of wisdom that deserve and demand our rapt attention. We kneel at the feet of all our thoughts as if they contain the answers to all our questions.

Recovery

Why are there so many books written on the topic of thinking: negative thinking, overthinking, binge-thinking, and all the other kinds of thinking that create stress and unhappiness, and leave us feeling powerless? Why do the theories and solutions to our thinking addiction keep coming? And furthermore, why is thinking still such an epidemic problem?

Most of us believe that if we could only change our bad thoughts to good ones, write enough gratitude lists, repeat enough affirmations, then we would be happy. Most of us think it's our fault that our mind overwhelms us so much. We must not be doing the right work or enough of it. But the truth is, it's not our fault. We don't recover from our addiction to thinking through the strategies most self-help literature advises. We don't have to like our thoughts to be free. Self-help is solving the wrong problem.

Recovery from excessive thinking is *not* about stopping thoughts or achieving a thought-free existence. At the same time, it's not about changing what our thoughts are *about*, skewing our thoughts from negative to positive. Although this can be helpful, it's not the solution. Recovery happens when we change the way we interact with thoughts, the value we assign them, the belief we invest in them, and the attachment we have to them—no matter what contents or messages they contain. We recover when our allegiance shifts from being aligned with the thoughts and their content to being aligned with the one who the thoughts are talking to (or at), which is what you'll be learning more about in the pages to come.

This book is here to help you build a safe shore, a refuge inside yourself, from which to see and interact with the thoughts appearing in your consciousness. My hope is that with this new awareness, you will be able to cultivate a more conscious and intentional relationship with thoughts. All this, so that you can be content regardless of what the out-of-order computer in your head is spitting out at any given moment. This book is designed to show you how to break free from the compulsion to turn every thought into an occasion for thinking, to stop worshipping at the altar of your mind. My goal is not

to help you find freedom *from* thought but rather to find freedom *with* thought. Thoughts are not going away; they're not going to go away. (We wouldn't want them to anyway.) My purpose here is to illustrate a way to be free and autonomous...*while* your thoughts are firing. And most of all, to shepherd you into the well-being and peace that is inside you, and always there—below the thoughts and thinking.

Breaking your addiction to thinking requires falling out of love with the endless material your mind generates without your consent. This process involves a willingness to recognize what your excessive thinking is actually doing to you, the suffering you are creating for yourself. And, how your thinking choices (or lack thereof) are impacting the quality of your life. The good news is that your thoughts don't need to change one iota for you to be released from them, or rather, to release yourself from them.

A Good Life

While we have a sophisticated educational system, oddly, we don't learn the most important skill we need to maintain a basic state of well-being. In order to create and sustain a good life, we must cultivate a conscious and constructive relationship with our own thoughts, a relationship that allows us to use thinking for the delicious benefits it offers—but that doesn't permit thinking to take over our life or wreak havoc on our experience. We have infinitely more choice than we know when it comes to our own attention and what we do with it. We are not powerless when it comes to which thoughts we take a ride on. We don't have to live at the mercy of the thoughts our mind throws at us, which is positively not what our mind wants us to think.

A glass of wine can be used as a lovely treat at the end of a long day, but that same substance can be used as a means to flee from our life, avoid the present moment, inflict self-harm, fulfill an obsession, or any number of destructive ends. This is true of our thinking as well. When we think without awareness, discernment, and discipline, we give up control of our life. We give away our own attention, and with it, the authority to decide our state of mind and being.

Throughout this book, I will lay out the subtle and not-so-subtle consequences of excessive thinking, which, if you are old enough to be reading this book, you have probably experienced firsthand. I'll explore the infinitely complicated conundrum that the activity of thinking presents—what it does to us when we let it control us and what we can do about it. But most importantly, I'll provide the tools to build a new and empowered relationship with thoughts, one in which you are in charge—not your thoughts. In so doing, I hope to offer liberation from your universally sanctioned addiction—lasting relief from the real source of your chronic discontent. In the pages that follow, I wish to invite you into a life in which thoughts do not control the most precious asset you possess—your own attention. And furthermore, a life in which your thoughts are not the truth and, most definitely, not who you are.

A New Way of Living

We live in a society that demands and expects immediate answers: strategies to implement for life's challenges. We want relief from our suffering—understandably. And indeed, this book includes exercises to help you break free from the unending thinking that causes you to suffer. But unfortunately, you can't just think your way out of excessive thinking or you would have been free of this addiction years ago, and your life would be radically different. Trying to think your way out of excessive thinking is a recipe for even more thinking.

The best way to change your life is to change the you who's living it. When the eyes you're looking through change, what you see changes. The observed is changed by the observer. When who you are in relationship with your thoughts shifts, so too will your life experience.

I encourage you to let the words on these pages soak in, to let the meaning be absorbed by your body and heart, not just your mind. It's strange what I'm asking you to do—to think about thinking and at the same time to experience these words through a different portal than just your thinking mind.

I invite you to suspend judgment and resist the urge to think too much about how to *not* think or to think more about thinking less. Try experiencing the journey of this book in a new way, not knowing what it means immediately and just letting it wash over you. As odd as this all may sound, try not to get it all figured out too soon. Your own path to freedom from excessive thinking will emerge. For now, trust that the way you see your thoughts *can* shift, that *you* can shift in relationship with your thoughts, that your thoughts may indeed become *thoughts without a thinker*.²

My hope is that this book will be helpful for you no matter where you are in your life—whether you’ve never meditated or have been practicing awareness for decades. Know that this book will be more helpful if you have the courage to listen to your own experience as you read it. And...*most* helpful if you’re willing to refrain from thinking it out of its helpfulness.

If you picked up this title, chances are some part of you wants to ruminate less, stop catastrophizing, turn off your thoughts when you want to turn them off, have more choice in what you think about, hear less noise in your head, feel less anxious, experience more peace, or maybe all of the above. Perhaps you already know that the way you think is making you unhappy and that changing your life will mean changing your thinking. The good news is that you’re right. The even better news is that it’s possible. I’ll make one promise to you in this book: if you change your relationship with thinking, you will change your life.