

SOUNDTRACKS

The Surprising Solution
to Overthinking



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The Surprising Solution to Overthinking

By Jon Acuff

12-minute read

Synopsis

Soundtracks (2021) is a simple guide to ending self-doubt, hesitation, and overthinking. Instead of being at the mercy of your fickle and often unhelpful thoughts, you'll discover patterns of thinking that can strengthen you, make you happier, and bring you closer to achieving your goals.

Who is it for?

- Lifelong overthinkers who finally want to start taking action
- Negative Nancies who need to inject some optimism into their lives
- Anyone who lets self-doubt interfere with work, life goals, or relationships

About the author

Jon Acuff is a motivational speaker and a *New York Times* best-selling author who lives near Nashville, Tennessee. He's the author of seven books, including the best-selling *Finish*.

What's in it for me? Learn to stop overthinking and start acting.

We all have an internal soundtrack. Unlike a movie's, this soundtrack isn't composed of musical notes. It's a mental soundtrack, and, more often than not, it's composed of self-denying thoughts. Our soundtrack, in other words, often consists of overthinking.

When we overthink, we allow doubt, hesitation, and self-criticism to interfere with our plans. We procrastinate. We pussyfoot. We postpone. And, as a result, instead of acting boldly and decisively to make our dreams a reality, we timidly cling to the secure lives we already have.

But what if things didn't have to be this way? Well, imagine no longer. The blinks that follow lay out some simple and straightforward advice for ditching your doubts and strengthening your self-belief.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how reading a couple of words can slow your physical movements;
- what overthinking has to do with neuroplasticity; and
- why excessive self-criticism is like facing a hostile jury.

If you want to stop overthinking, then change the soundtrack of your thoughts.

Imagine if you could only listen to one playlist of songs for the rest of your life – the soundtrack to a famous movie, say. Wherever you went, whatever you did, you'd hear the same songs repeated again and again. The soundtrack would become a permanent part of your life.

In that situation, you'd probably think long and hard about what kind of soundtrack you'd choose. Ideally, it wouldn't be something depressing, or scary, or unimaginative. No: you'd choose something comforting and inspiring instead.

This raises some provoking questions: If we'd scrutinize a musical playlist that hard, why don't we take the same attitude toward our thoughts? Why do so many of us allow a loop of worried overthinking to play on repeat in our heads? Why don't we decide to swap out that old, tired soundtrack for something exciting, fresh, and encouraging?

The key message here is: If you want to stop overthinking, then change the soundtrack of your thoughts.

You often hear people describe their thoughts as though they're independent, superpowered things – mind-dwelling creatures that can't be controlled. That's why people mention getting caught up in their thoughts or carried away by them.

But the truth is, you *can* choose your thought patterns and you *can* change the way you think. In other words, you can swap your old soundtrack for a new one – and upgrade your life in the process.

When you ditch your habit of overthinking, you don't just get rid of old thoughts. You give yourself the chance to replace them with new thoughts – thoughts that will encourage you to achieve your goals and that will raise you up rather than drag you down.

If you've been an overthinker for as long as you can remember, this might sound like an empty promise. As the old saying goes, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. But not in this case.

These days, we live in the age of *neuroplasticity*: we know that the brain itself will change in response to deliberate changes in our thinking. True, you won't be able to stop overthinking overnight – but with a little determination, you can make serious strides in the right direction.

So just how can you rid yourself of the soundtracks that are holding you back? And what on earth are you going to replace them with?

Ask if your current soundtrack is true, helpful, and kind.

When you were a kid, you probably heard the phrase, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Back then it could be a comforting line – especially if you were dealing with bullying and cruel schoolyard taunts.

But, as we all eventually find out, words *can* hurt – quite a lot, in fact. That's true no matter where the harsh words come from. They could be uttered by school bullies or by the equally cruel voice we use to criticize ourselves. The pain is the same.

In short, words count – which is why you need to interrogate how your old soundtrack is talking to you.

Here's the key message: Ask if your current soundtrack is true, helpful, and kind.

If you want to rid yourself of overthinking, then you've got to start by interrogating your soundtrack. Every time you have a thought that brings you down, lowers your self-esteem, or makes you fearful and hesitant, there are three key questions to ask yourself.

Question number one is whether the thought in question is true or not. If you're nervous about asking for a pay raise because you think your boss will fly into a rage and fire you, stop for a second and interrogate that thought. Is that really a likely scenario? Has your boss done anything like that in the past? Or are you just imagining unlikely catastrophes, and convincing yourself they're probable?

If the thought isn't true, then discard it. If it does seem true, then it's passed the first hurdle – but there are still two more.

Second, you need to ask whether the things your soundtrack is telling you are actually helpful. What effect will the thought have on your life if you allow it to circulate freely in your mind? Does it encourage you or discourage you?

If you're trying to lose weight and you keep thinking about the previous four diets you've failed, then all you're doing is weakening your resolve and discouraging yourself.

The final question is whether the thought is kind. Does it sound like something you'd say to someone you care about? Or is it downright nasty? If it's the latter, then the solution is clear – remove it from your mental soundtrack.

Borrow new, helpful soundtracks from the world around you.

Kanye West, superstar rapper, record producer, and fashion designer, isn't a man who's known for his modesty. Even before he found fame, his ego was big. In his early days, he was once overheard saying to a friend, "My life is dope, and I do dope shit."

Now, that kind of brag might not be the type of thing *you'd* say to a friend – but as an addition to your inner soundtrack, it's hard to beat. If you tend to think your way into self-doubt, then a soundtrack that reinforces your openness and the openness of your life is probably exactly what you need.

There's a lesson here. As you're interrogating your old, unhelpful soundtracks using the techniques from the previous blink, you should also be drawing inspiration for new soundtracks from the world around you.

The key message here is: Borrow new, helpful soundtracks from the world around you.

When it comes to finding new soundtracks, the world isn't just your oyster – it's your record shop, and you can try out any new albums you like.

When the author first borrowed Kanye's line, he felt a little corny. But, bit by bit, he actually started to *believe* it. He also started reacting to positive events by saying, "Everything is always working out for me" – even if the event in question was something relatively trivial, like finding a handy parking spot.

Gradually, the author found himself feeling better about his life, and more optimistic about the future.

Not sure where to start when it comes to picking a new soundtrack? Here are some good ones to try: Next time you face a difficult task, instead of focusing on the hard work ahead of you, dwell on how good you'll feel once you've finished it. Whether it's a tricky workout at the

gym or a long day in the office, use this soundtrack: "I'll feel awesome after."

By foregrounding the sense of accomplishment you'll feel rather than the difficulty you'll face, you prime yourself to start your task with a more optimistic and enthusiastic attitude.

Another soundtrack you might want to try is one the author calls "Pivot, don't panic." When the coronavirus pandemic struck in 2020, people across the globe faced a decision: lose their heads, or calmly adapt as best as possible – in other words, to panic or to "pivot."

To pivot means to remain flexible, knowing that the world can change at any second. In a time like ours, that's a valuable ability.

Invert an old soundtrack in order to create a new one.

OK, so you've begun to interrogate your old soundtracks, and you're drawing inspiration for better ones from the world around you. But what if you don't know anyone like Kanye West? What if your environment isn't furnishing you with the type of inspiring examples you need?

Well, then it's time to reconsider the old soundtracks – that's right, the same ones you're trying to get rid of. Don't worry: the point isn't that you should hang onto them after all. Quite the opposite – every unhelpful soundtrack can actually be turned into a positive one. All you have to do is reverse it.

Here's the key message in this blink: Invert an old soundtrack in order to create a new one.

Broken soundtracks often come in the form of absolutes and exaggerations. The absolutes tell you that things "must" happen a certain way, or that you'll "never" be capable of achieving your goal, or that you'll "always" experience failure.

Negative absolutes like that are a telltale sign that a soundtrack is ripe for inversion. In the author's case, one of his soundtracks was putting him under intense pressure to finish writing a book. Every time he sat down in front of his computer, a voice inside his head insisted that he *had* to finish the entire book there and then – no ifs, ands, or buts.

Did he succumb to the pressure? Not at all. The author recognized that absolute for exactly what it was: an old and broken soundtrack, something holding him back rather than driving him forward.

Instead of giving in to it, he reversed it. Whereas the old soundtrack insisted he had to finish writing the book in a single sitting, the new one said something very different. In short, it said that writing just a few pages would be perfectly fine.

If you're looking for a soundtrack to flip, then pay attention to the unkind things you believe about yourself. If your current soundtrack is telling you, "I'm not going to get that promotion," then flip it – tell yourself you *will* get the promotion, and then put in the work to make it a reality.

You can't make something happen just by saying it, of course. But by exchanging your broken soundtracks for new, encouraging ones, you break the cycle of self-doubt – and allow yourself to take the first steps in the right direction.

Gather the evidence you need to prove your pocket jury wrong.

In a courtroom, the job of a jury is to listen to evidence and issue a verdict concerning the guilt of the defendant – guilty or not guilty, in that familiar legal phrase.

Now, speaking in front of a courtroom can be a harrowing experience. A jury is instructed to scrutinize your words and evaluate your behavior very carefully. And in a court of law, that makes sense. But what if you had a jury following you around all day, every day, analyzing your mistakes and reaching cruel verdicts?

What if you had a *pocket jury* – a soundtrack of harsh and unrelenting jurors sitting in your shirt pocket and criticizing your every move? What would you do then?

The key message here is: Gather the evidence you need to prove your pocket jury wrong.

If you're like most people, you already have a pocket jury. You tend to form one over the course of your life. As you grow up and take on challenges, you'll inevitably make a number of mistakes, and encounter some blame and criticism along the way. That's only natural.

But a problem arises when you allow someone who criticizes you to join your pocket jury. Whether it's a cranky former teacher, a disgruntled ex, or a horrible boss, it's not uncommon to pick the harshest jurors and carry them with you throughout your life.

Luckily, you can actually teach that jury to behave. How? Well, we're talking about a kind of courtroom here – so the best strategy is a legal one: gathering and presenting evidence.

If your pocket jury is constantly telling you that you're an unlikable person, then you need to be on the lookout for any evidence that suggests otherwise. Did an old friend reach out to you on Facebook? Well, that seems like evidence that she likes you. Did a stranger strike up a conversation with you on a flight? *He* must have seen something to like in you.

At the start, you may find this difficult. A psychological phenomenon called *confirmation bias* ensures that we pay the greatest attention to information that confirms our existing views. That means that if you're convinced

your city is dangerous, you'll quickly notice and remember any threats you come across – while paying less attention to signs that the city is actually relatively safe.

Over time, though, as you deliberately gather evidence, you'll overcome your existing biases – and the harsh voices of your pocket jury will begin to fade.

Use symbols to make your new soundtracks stick.

Do you have any tattoos? These days, more and more people do.

Lots of people get them simply as a kind of decoration. Getting inked with flowers, sparrows, or a geometric design is like having a kind of colorful jewelry that can never be lost or stolen.

But there are also people who get tattoos for a different reason. Rather than just decoration, the designs they opt for signal something – a serious decision or a new, lifelong commitment.

These tattoos memorialize something profound; in short, they're symbols, condensing a big idea into a few lines of ink. When it comes to adopting new soundtracks, tattoos have a lot they can teach us.

The key message here is: Use symbols to make your new soundtracks stick.

One of the worst aspects of overthinking is that it can stop you from achieving your highest goals. "Don't bother aiming for that," the old soundtracks say – that plan is too ambitious, or too unrealistic, or just plain stupid.

Those are the kinds of thoughts that Priscilla Hammond was facing in 2014, when she was putting in long hours trying to complete her doctoral dissertation. If she could finish it, she'd get her PhD. But the work was tough.

So what did she do? Did she listen to the old, discouraging soundtracks that told her to give up? Did she accept everything her pocket jury told her? Not at all. Priscilla Hammond used a symbol to represent her new, ambitious soundtrack. She wrote her goal on a piece of tape and stuck it up near her desk. The words on the tape? "Dr. Hammond."

That one small gesture didn't lighten Priscilla's workload. It didn't change the fact that years of hard work lay ahead. But it made her new soundtrack seem concrete – it symbolized her belief that she could finish her dissertation, gain a PhD, and earn the title Dr. Hammond. And, in the end, she did just that.

You could probably learn a lesson from Dr. Hammond. Pick something simple, personal, and visible to serve as a symbol of your new soundtracks.

If you're trying to get fit, that might mean you hang running gear prominently in your bedroom. If you're daring to do something new and risky, your symbol might be an encouraging note from a family member or a friend.

Every time you look at your symbol, you'll be reminded of the fresh and inspiring soundtracks you're just beginning to adopt.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

You're not stuck with your current thoughts forever. If you're prone to overthinking, you can overcome it. Identify what old, broken records your existing soundtrack consists of, and replace them with new, more optimistic patterns of thought – patterns grounded in real evidence gathered from the world around you.

Actionable advice:

Instead of reacting to problems, respond to them.

Imagine that you're taking a new medicine and you experience a reaction to it. For most people, that word – *react* – probably conjures images of allergies, hazards, and imperiled health. But if you *respond* to a medicine? That means that it's working well; it's having the desired effect. The late self-help guru Zig Ziglar recommended approaching difficulties with the aim of responding, not reacting. Taking action calmly, decisively, and optimistically is what responding to a problem looks like. Try it next time you feel yourself reacting negatively to stress.

Got feedback?

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