

IMPULSIVITY

Impulsivity and Overthinking – Support Resource

Impulsivity and Overthinking are different ways of both processing information and responding. Impulsivity happens when a person responds quickly, often without stopping to think too much first, while overthinking happens when a person's brain wants to slow down and consider every detail.

Both impulsivity and overthinking can make it harder to feel calm, learn new things, or connect with others. Using a neuro-affirmative approach means we don't see impulsivity or overthinking as a problem to fix but as part of a person's natural brain differences. Young people can often be creative, caring and full of energy and they may have a strong sense of fairness,

Understanding Impulsivity

Impulsivity is common in neurodivergent conditions like ADHD and autism. It often shows up as:

- Acting without considering consequences
- Interrupting or blurting out
- Emotional outbursts or meltdowns
- Difficulty stopping a behaviour once started

Why It happens in Neurodivergence

- **ADHD:** Differences in executive function and dopamine regulation make delaying gratification harder.
- **Autism:** Impulsivity can stem from sensory overload, anxiety, or rigid thinking patterns.
- **Other Conditions:** Trauma or co-occurring mental health challenges can amplify impulsivity.

Impact

- Social misunderstandings (seen as "rude" or "disruptive")
- Increased vulnerability to bullying or risky situations
- Emotional dysregulation leading to stress or shutdowns

Parent Strategies

- **Understand the Neurology:** Impulsivity isn't "bad behaviour"—it's a brain-based challenge.

- **Use Visual Supports:** Timers, cue cards, and social stories help with transitions and self-control.
- **Reduce Sensory Overload:** Calm environments lower impulsive reactions.
- **Collaborative Problem-Solving:** Involve the child in creating coping strategies.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Reward effort, not just outcomes.
- **Professional Support:** Occupational therapy, CBT adapted for neurodivergence, and parent training programs.

Strategies for Young People

- **Safe Outlets:** Fidget tools, movement breaks, or sensory activities.
- **Scripts for Pausing:** Practice phrases like “Let me think” or “I need a minute.”
- **Mindfulness Adaptations:** Short, concrete exercises (e.g., counting breaths, grounding with objects).
- **Executive Function Coaching:** Apps or planners designed for ADHD/autism.

Understanding Overthinking:

What Is Overthinking?

Overthinking means getting stuck in your thoughts—especially about choices, mistakes, or things that might happen. It can feel like your brain is on a hamster wheel, going around and around without stopping.

Why Does It Happen?

For Neurodivergent Young People:

- **ADHD:** Your brain might hyperfocus on worries and have trouble switching gears.
- **Autism:** You might feel safer when things are predictable, so uncertainty can lead to lots of thinking.
- **Anxiety:** Often shows up alongside ADHD or autism, making worries feel bigger and harder to let go.

For Parents:

- Neurodivergent kids may not be “overreacting”—they’re often trying to feel safe or in control.
- Overthinking isn’t laziness or defiance—it’s a sign their brain is working overtime.

How Overthinking Can Affect Daily Life

- **Decision Paralysis:** Struggling to choose because of fear of making the wrong choice.
- **Emotional Exhaustion:** Feeling drained from constant mental effort.

- **Sleep Disruption:** Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep due to racing thoughts.
- **Increased Anxiety:** Worrying more often and more intensely.

STRATEGIES

Tools & Strategies to Help

Digital Tools

For Young People:

- **Worry Tree App:** Helps break down worries into steps you can take.
- **Daylio / Moodnotes:** Track your feelings and spot patterns in your thoughts.
- **Headspace / Calm:** Guided meditations to help your brain slow down.

For Parents:

- Use these apps together to model healthy habits and talk about emotions.

Behavioural Techniques

For Young People:

- **Thought Parking:** Write your worry down and “park” it to look at later.
- **Worry Timer:** Set a timer for 10 minutes to think about your worry—then stop and do something else.
- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding:** Notice 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste.

For Parents:

- Help your child use these tools by practicing them together.
- Keep visual reminders (like cue cards) nearby.

Parent Support Tips

- **Validate Feelings:** Say “I hear you’re worried. Let’s make a plan together.”
- **Redirect Gently:** Guide your child toward problem-solving instead of staying stuck in “what ifs.”
- **Use Predictable Routines:** Reduce uncertainty to help your child feel safe.
- **Model Calm Thinking:** Talk through your own decisions out loud so they learn how to do it.

When Overthinking Meets Impulsivity

Sometimes neurodivergent brains flip between thinking too much and acting too fast. Here's how to balance both:

Combined Tools

For Young People:

- **Impulse Pause Toolkit:** Include a "Thought Parking" card to remind you to pause.
- **STOP Technique Upgrade:**
Stop → Take a breath → Observe: "Am I acting too fast or thinking too much?" → Proceed mindfully
- **Visual Flow Chart:** Use a chart that asks "Do I need to slow down or stop overthinking?" with calming steps.

For Parents:

- Help build and use these tools together. Keep them visible and accessible.

RESOURCES

Helpful Apps

1. Impulse Control

- **Impulse Control Game:** Practice waiting and thinking before acting.
- **Stop, Breathe & Think:** Short mindfulness exercises to calm your brain.
- **Headspace / Calm:** Breathing and grounding support.

2. Executive Function Support

- **Todoist / Trello:** Plan tasks and break them into steps.
- **Forest App:** Stay focused by growing a virtual tree when you avoid distractions.

3. Visual Timers

- **Time Timer:** Shows time passing with pictures—great for transitions and reducing impulsive reactions.

Physical Tools

For Young People:

- **Fidget Tools:** Stress balls, sensory rings, or chewable jewellery to release energy safely.
- **Cue Cards:** Cards that say "Pause," "Think," or "Ask for Help."
- **Impulse Pause Box:** A box with calming items like colouring sheets, breathing steps, or soft textures.

For Parents:

- Create a calming corner with these tools.
- Let your child choose what goes in their box.

Behavioural Strategies

For Young People:

- **STOP Technique:**
Stop → Take a breath → Observe → Proceed mindfully
- **Delay Practice:** Practice waiting 5–10 seconds before acting, then slowly increase.
- **Reward Systems:** Use tokens or apps to celebrate thoughtful choices.
- **Mindfulness Adaptations:** Try short grounding exercises like "5 things you can see, 4 you can touch..."

For Parents:

- Reinforce these strategies with praise and consistency.
- Celebrate small wins and progress.

Online Resources

[Resources for autistic teenagers](#)

[NHS England » Useful autism resources and training](#)

[Home | Spectrum Gaming](#)

[Parent Handouts & Resources | Explaining Brains](#)

[Neurodiversity-Understood-Parent-Guide.pdf](#)

[Words-Matter-Talking-to-neurodivergent-children-and-young-people.pdf](#)

[ADHD in children and young people - NHS](#)

[A quick guide to ADHD | Resources | YoungMinds](#)