

Constantly worrying about your never-ending to-do list? Fretting about your career? Or how you'll ever save enough to get on the property ladder? If so, you're a binge thinker. Here's how to do an emotional detox

'WHERE'S MY CAREER GOING?' 'What am I going to wear tomorrow night?' 'When will I find The One?' Sound familiar? Everyone has occasional worries, but if you find yourself consumed with concerns on a daily basis, you're not alone. Instead, you're one of a growing number of women who are 'binge thinkers' – unable to stop a constant stream of random thoughts and worries whizzing through your brain.

'We spend our lives with this washing machine of worry in our minds,' says psychologist Steve Taylor. 'We over-think past and present situations, and worry about future ones. Is it any wonder we're too wired to sleep properly?'

He's got a point. A recent study has found that the number of British women suffering from stress-related insomnia – and, as a result, sleeping-pill use – is on the increase. Hands up who has pinged awake at 3am worrying about money, relationships, work – or all three at once. It seems we're all balancing on the edge, coping with constant low-level anxiety. And much of that, according to Taylor, is caused by over-thinking.

He believes some of us are more 'past-focused' and mull over old break-ups, mistakes we've made or people who have hurt us. Others are more 'future-focused' and worry about finding the right ▶

Are you a
BINGE THINKER



partner, when to have a baby or whether their career is on track. The bottom line is, whether it's the big stuff (careers, babies) or the small (a meeting, an outfit), we're all falling victim to worry.

'We've become a nation of binge thinkers with worry in-trays we can never clear,' says stress expert Professor Cary Cooper from Lancaster University. 'It's caused by many factors, including the stress of the recession, the onslaught of technology – which stops us from switching off – and the frenetic pace at which we live life. We're trying to *do* too much and *be* too much, and it's making us anxious, stressed and unable to just switch off our minds.'

So, how can you stop being a binge thinker and empty out – or at least organise – that overflowing emotional in-tray? We asked the experts...

FOCUS ON ONE THING AT A TIME

It sounds obvious, yet how many of us watch TV in the evenings while checking our work emails on our smartphone, reading text messages and flicking through a paper, all at the same time? Or work on a document while keeping one eye on Facebook? 'We're not focusing on one single thing any more,' says Professor Cooper. 'Where possible, just do one thing at a time and you'll instantly feel calmer.' In his new book, *Back To Sanity: Healing The Madness Of Our Mind*, Steve Taylor says that we've become so used to constant distractions – the TV, radio, texts, emails, Facebook, Twitter – that we can't just

'be' any more. 'Whether you're at work or home, just do one thing at a time and you'll feel less stressed as a result,' he says. 'Our minds aren't designed to be faced with a constant stream of distraction.' So that means just one spreadsheet or Word document open at work, and only your phone or a magazine or your laptop or the TV when you're supposed to be relaxing at home.

DE-STRESS YOUR DIET

Your diet and mind are linked, so if your mind is wired with work or social worries, don't ramp things up with drinks high in caffeine (coffee, tea, cola) or sugar, which are stimulants. Alcohol and junk food are also best avoided, as studies show they're both depressants, which can leave you feeling anxious. 'Alcohol is fine in moderation and can have a temporary relaxing effect,' says Professor Cooper. 'But too much too often will just leave you more stressed, jittery and unable to sleep properly.'

Instead, eat calming foods such as wholegrains (studies show brown rice and wholewheat pasta, for example, help calm your nerves), and drink green tea (one recent study found regularly drinking it helps lower stress levels). Also, eat foods rich in selenium, as this reduces irritability and anxiety (try Brazil nuts, fish and sunflower seeds) and foods high in vitamin B, as they can also lower anxiety levels (try lean red meat and yogurt). 'Exercise is also good for quietening a racing mind,' advises Taylor.

TALK IT THROUGH – THEN LET IT GO

'Sharing your worries is healthy and important,' says Professor Cooper. 'Women are naturals at this and will often talk through their concerns with a friend in a way that men tend not to. However, there's a fine line between sharing a worry and overburdening others until you or your friend become bored with hearing the same old complaint.' Professor Cooper says that we shouldn't have a 'cathartic whinge' – we should be looking for a solution. 'Instead of banging on about your inability to find a man or your bad job, ask for your friend's advice in dealing with the problem. Find a solution together and then move on.'

LET LIFE UNFOLD

In his book, Taylor encourages us to allow our lives to unfold organically, rather than shoehorning it into how we think we should live. 'Your life should be based on instinct,' he says. 'Instead of thinking you should do this or that, allow your intuition to guide you. Most happy people gently prod their life in the direction they want it to go, then step back and allow it to happen. Make decisions – such as what job to go for, where to live, who to spend time with – based on instinct and feeling.' In other words, don't stay in a career that pays well but leaves you feeling empty, don't live in a city if you crave the country, and don't spend time with people who drain you. 'If you don't let your instincts guide you, your mind will never be quiet and calm,' he says. ■

SO ARE YOU A BINGE THINKER?

If you answer yes to three or more below it could be time for a mind detox...

- Do you wake up at 3am worrying about your debts and how you'll never clear them?
- In a work meeting, does your mind drift to fretting about what your friend really meant by that email. And whether you'll ever meet Mr Right?
- Do you obsess over past break-ups and arguments?
- Is your commute to work consumed by worrying about the day ahead?
- Do you deliberately drink caffeine to cope when you feel tired but then feel increasingly jittery?
- Do you look at Twitter, Facebook and your email the moment you wake up? Then feel the need to respond at once?