



# How to Stop Overthinking and Swim Fast

At some point most swimmers have suffered the ill effects of overthinking. It's been shown to ruin our best intentions and performances with ease. **Here's how to stop overthinking in the pool.**

Where do your thoughts go when you are in the water?

When you are churning around the black line during warm-up, the kick set, the lactate-in-my-mouth main set, where does your attention go?

Are you *thinking* about your swimming?

Or are you *focusing* on what you are doing?

*(Wait...there's a difference?)*

**Swim faster by thinking less and focusing more.**

Seems like a trivial difference.

But there's a Grand Canyon-sized chasm between thinking and focusing.

Here are some of the highlights of both:

Focusing:

- Is impartial, almost cold.
- You are locking your attention on your performance cues.
- Focusing doesn't involve excess emotion or overblown judgement.
- Tends to self-directed—less worrying about what others are doing.
- Focus, when used properly, is process-based.

Thinking:

- Tends to be more about your ego and emotion.
- When we are thinking it is often about how much the sport means to us, how super duper important that upcoming meet is and how we don't want to disappoint our teammates/coach.
- We more easily get distracted by what's happening around us—most notably how other swimmers are doing and how we measure up against them.
- Funny enough (but not really), thinking tends to lead to frustration and anger, which reduces your ability to focus on the things that will help you get the most of yourself in the water.
- Thinking is almost always outcome-based.

## Thinking vs. Focusing: Practice

I'm going to give you an example that I've been working/suffering through for the past six months.

In a recent email I told you all about my mission over the summer to swim as many fast 50s as possible, with the goal of pushing a :25 long course by the beginning of September.

It didn't take long for me to realize what a difference *thinking vs focusing* made during those effort 50s...

After all, no matter how well-conditioned you are, swimming a series of all-out 50s is going to *hurt*.

The moment I started thinking about what I was doing (usually around 30-35m when the pain starts to really deepen), it meant I was thinking about how much agony I was in (plenty), how many more 50s I still had to go (lots), and whether or not what I was doing was actually helping me improve.

When I started thinking about all this stuff I subconsciously backed off. These were the 50s where I consistently missed pace. Not by much, maybe half to a full second, but enough to give me a shot of doubt.

(I'm no space scientist, but 0.5-1 second per 50 adds up over the course of a practice/training cycle/season.)

Why was this happening?

Because my brain isn't stupid.

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**When we are overthinking  
we are looking in the past or  
into the future. Being  
focused means **being**  
**present.****

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It knew that I was in a world of hurt, and that there's a whole bunch more hurt to come, and so it does what it does...

Tried to protect me by hedging my effort.

The crazy part?

This wasn't even a conscious decision.

After a while of this good days/bad days stuff, which was plenty frustrating and a source of a lot of doubt and uncertainty, I threw together some performance cues for my 50s.

The [performance cues were super simple](#), and the one that I leaned on the most was the one at *that* moment during the 50s when the agony was hitting peak ouchie...

You might laugh, or think it's corny, but it was...

*“Hulk smash!”*

True story.

And it worked.

I would tell myself that over and over again soon as I was around 15m from the wall.

It was simple, kept me from “thinking” and exemplified the effort I was supposed to be giving.

It’s no accident that when I stuck to my cues, I was successful in hitting pace nearly all the time ([barring a random leg cramp](#) or [errant public swimmer head-up breaststroking across the lane](#)).

## Thinking vs. Focusing: Competition

When you are thinking you are looking around at what other swimmers are doing.

You are assigning extra meaning to every little thing that happens to you (*My warm-up didn't go perfectly, so it's likely that this whole meet is gonna stink*).

You are going overboard with worrying about [technical elements of your stroke](#) (commonly known as “paralysis analysis”: the harder you think on what you are doing in the water, the more likely you are to screw up. Our brain has a twisted sense of humor).

Overthinking, to put it simply, [causes you to choke](#).

But when you are focused you are locked in on the thing *you are doing*...

Like executing [your pre-race routine](#)...

And utilizing performance cues behind the block (“Loosey goosey!”), off the start (“Explode!”) and on those final 15m into the finish (“Hulk smasheroo!”)...

And avoiding the pointless comparisons we make with other swimmers.

When you dial down the thinking and rely on a simple focus you give yourself the best chance to swim at your full potential on race day.

*“Okay, cool... But how can I tell if what I am doing is thinking or focusing?”*

Great question, imaginary reader!

And here's the answer:

**Thinking usually means you are time traveling with your thoughts.**

In both practice and competition when I am thinking my thoughts are doing some form of time traveling.

- They are either floating towards past performances... *I felt so much better in the water last time I did this set, how am I supposed to swim fast today?*
- Or they are floating towards the future... *How am I going to possibly achieve my goals when my competition is dropping time every week?*

**Being focused, on the other hand, keeps ya present.**

You aren't looking beyond the thing you have to do right now.

And you aren't looking backwards.

Being focused means you are executing on the thing you are doing *right this very second*.

**The power of focus is that it keeps you in the moment. It keeps you present.**

It boxes out the thoughts of what might happen, what has happened, and keeps you locked in on what's happening.

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Some of the smartest swimmers I've known [were also the same ones who struggled the most in competition.](#)

The classic over-thinker who assumes that if they just think hard enough, just will it hard enough, that they will unlock some next-level swimming on the day it matters most.

But to their utter and total frustration it's the *laissez-faire* swimmer, the kid who doesn't seem to care that is able to swim like their hair is on fire on race day.

# The Next Step

Start with performance cues to teach you epic focus.

It's natural for our thoughts to wander like crazy when we are in the water.

We are performing wildly complex movements with our bodies, at full effort, while trying to beat the swimmer in the lane next to us *and* not disappoint our teammates and coaches.

There's *a lot* going on.

Performance cues help box all that stuff out.

Write out a quick list of 3-5 performance cues that you can use before a main set, before you get on the block, [when things really hurt in the water](#), and when you find your focus turning to thinking.

Keep them simple.

Keep them fun.

And use those bad boys to swim with a clear mind and a full effort