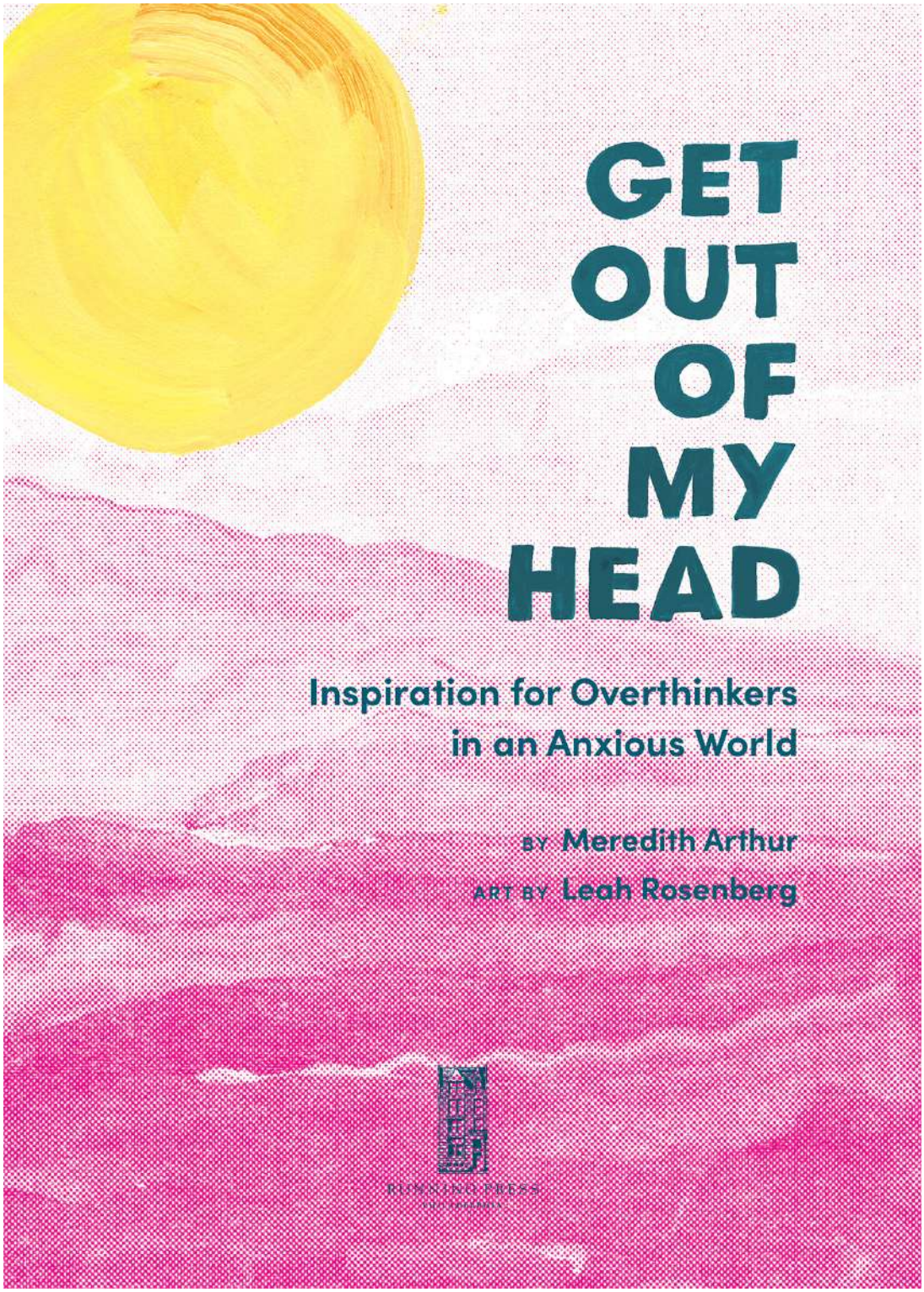
GET OUT OF MY HEAD

Inspiration for Overthinkers in an Anxious World

BY **Meredith Arthur**
FOUNDER OF BEAUTIFUL VOYAGER

ART BY **Leah Rosenberg**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RUNNING PRESS

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Running Press
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
www.runningpress.com
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First Edition: May 2020

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019953018

ISBNs: 978-0-7624-9769-0 (hardcover), 978-0-7624-9767-6 (ebook)

E3-20200303-JV-NF-ORI

For overthinkers everywhere, with love and gratitude

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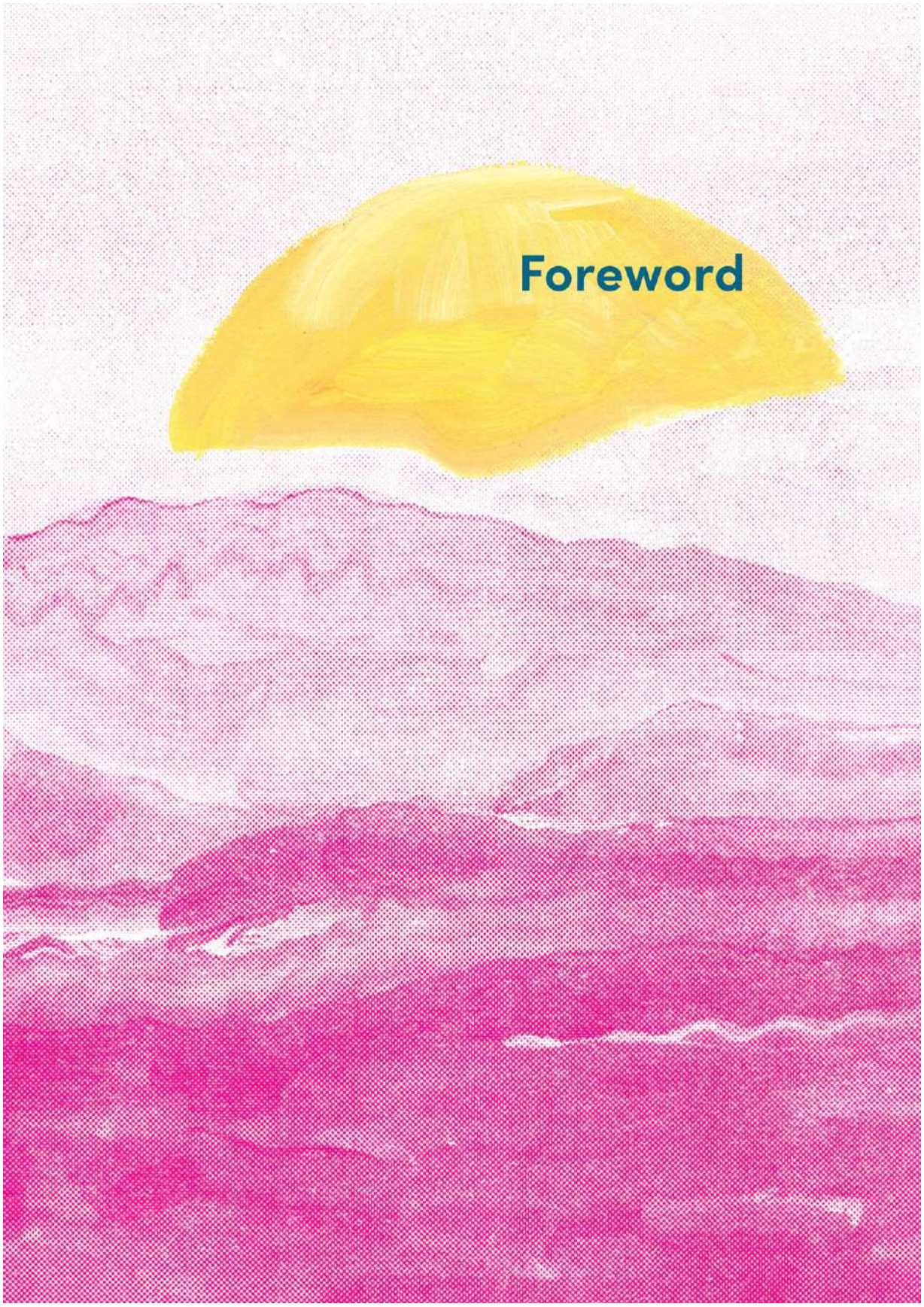
PRESS



Foreword

WHEN I was seven years old, my mother gave me a box of beautiful Guatemalan worry dolls. She set me on her lap and explained that these tiny, handmade figurines were special dolls I could hold in my hands before going to bed and confide in everything that was stressing me out. Afterward, I was to put them under my pillow. In the morning, she promised, all my fears and anxiety would be gone.

I had just begun to have suspicions about the tooth fairy, so I was skeptical of yet another under-the-pillow magic trick. I knew I spent a lot of time feeling anxious about everything in my little world, but I figured that was just the challenge of a second grader. It never occurred to me that other kids might not worry as much as I did.

Was tucking dolls the size of a pinkie under my pillow going to make me less nervous when my teacher asked me to solve a math problem on the chalkboard in front of the class? Would it get me back the sleep I'd lost lying awake at night, replaying every social and academic mistake I'd made that week? Would it stop me from wondering if/when my grandparents, parents, and—oof—I would eventually die?

I kept the worry dolls in their little box on the bookshelf in my room. I didn't tell them about my fears and sorrows, and I didn't put them under my pillow. But now that I've learned what I have from Meredith and this incredible book about overthinking, I'm guessing I should have.

So much of thriving as an overthinker is exploring the tricks and tools that work for you—that allow you to ride the wave, as Meredith says. Maybe off-loading the tight, growing knot of concerns in my belly to the worry dolls might have helped after all. Or maybe it wouldn't have, but if I had had *Get Out of My Head* back then, I would have known that the key was not to continue to spiral, but rather to *try something* and keep trying until I found the mantra or hobby or walking habit or whatever that helped, because something that works is always out there.

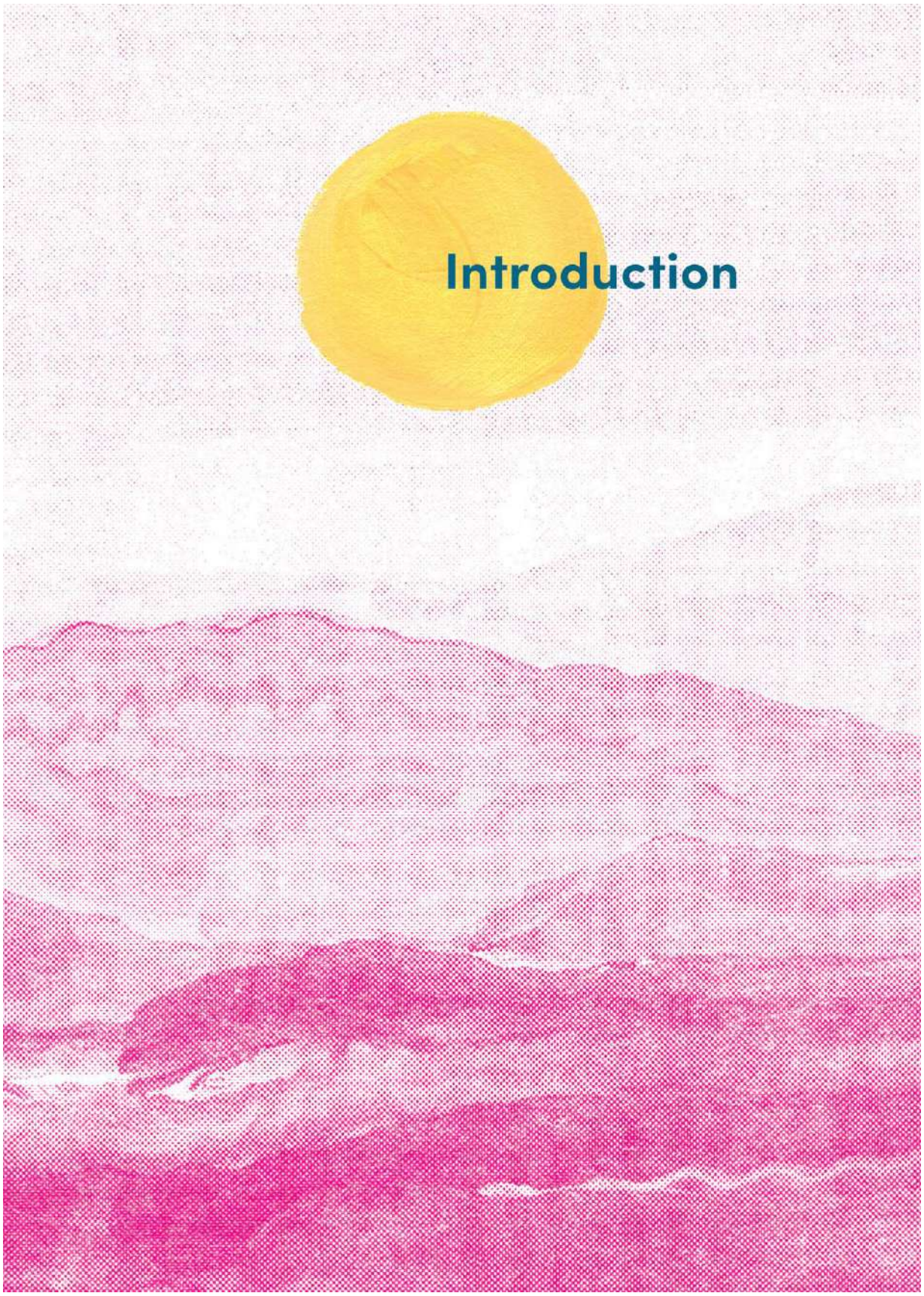
Get Out of My Head is not designed to sit untouched on your bookshelf or as decoration for your coffee table—though I understand that impulse, since it's a completely gorgeous piece of art in its own right. Rather, it should live close to you, wherever you

spend your time: next to your computer, on your bedside table, in your backpack. You should open it up whenever you feel that twinge of "*oh no!*" or that bubbling "*what if?*" rising in your throat. (For me, this is anywhere from a couple of times a day to every twenty minutes for stretches at a time—there is no "normal.")

The techniques laid out here aren't about making your thoughts and feelings disappear; instead, they are designed to help you get to know yourself and your thought patterns better. When you deepen your knowledge of any subject, you increase your ability to navigate it successfully, and that remains the case even when the subject is *you*. Funny though it may sound, you have to get out of your head to get to really know your head. Let this book be your guide.

—Gabi Moskowitz
San Francisco
March 24, 2019

Introduction



IF you walked past this book, saw the title, and felt a little twinge of recognition, you are not alone.

If you get regular migraines or feel carsick when no one else does…

If your face goes pale—or red and flushed!—when you meet with your boss or you get randomly shaky after a party…

If you frantically check your phone but can't figure out what you're looking for or wake up in the morning more stressed than when you went to bed…

If you've felt for some time that your head was revving way past the point of reason or necessity…

… then you're onto something. Keep reading.

It's possible, maybe even likely, that you've felt separated from the people around you for a while now. You've known something was different about you but couldn't say exactly what. I've spent much of my life in that murky confusion too, and I am here to say:

Welcome. Let's get out of our heads, together.

The good news is, if you managed to find this book, you probably already have a hunch that you're an overthinker. Like me, you might believe that your active mind helps you stay on top of things and motivates you to achieve more. But, also like me, you might be starting to discover a connection between overthinking and physical manifestations of anxiety like back pain and headaches. Maybe you just wonder if there's more going on in your head than is altogether productive, and you wish it were a bit quieter in there. That's how I felt in 2015 when I first started experimenting with describing myself as an overthinker on social media with both pride and a little confusion. Was overthinking a good thing? A bad thing? Could it be both? In October of that year, I created an online community called Beautiful Voyager to try to figure it out.

Five years later, I've learned a lot from that community of overthinkers, people pleasers, and perfectionists. I know that many

of us feel alone or different from others without knowing exactly why. I've learned that connecting with other people who are always looking for answers can be cathartic. Grappling with the confusion together makes it feel less… confusing. This book is a continuation of my efforts, a plumb line to that community and the wisdom there. I hope it will help you get better at understanding yourself and analyzing your choices.

You'll notice a few things about this book just while holding it in your hands: It's short; it's browsable; and it's designed and illustrated to foster calmness. All of this is intentional—you don't need any more reasons to be overwhelmed. My hope is that if you identify as an overthinker, perfectionist, or people pleaser, you'll keep this book in your backpack or tote bag—close enough to receive the tactile *"ping!"* it's been built to provide, the one that turns off the fight-or-flight response anxiety and overthinking like to activate and soothes the mind.

You may also notice that the advice in this book is pared down to its barest essentials—this too is intentional, so that it can operate like a portable weighted blanket. These are the flashes of wisdom that have resonated within the Beautiful Voyager community. These tenets, tricks, and ideas have worked for others to cut off hectic thoughts and reclaim sanity. Find the ideas that intrigue you and experiment with them. Disregard the rest.

There's no "right" way to read this book. Its organization follows the simple logic of problem-solving, but you don't need to stick to that order. Some days you may read it word for word, and some days you may just find yourself floating through, moving from color spot to color spot. We have artist Leah Rosenberg to thank for those serene visuals. I think of them like buoys on the waves.

Toward the end of the book, you'll notice a special chapter called "Read in December" that specifically addresses a time of year I've learned can be particularly fraught, especially for overthinkers. And at the very back of the book, you'll find a special surprise tucked into a pocket. When you need to change your state of mind, slide the surprise into your hand, open it, and move into a new environment.

Okay, let's begin. Here you are. Grab hold…

CHAPTER 1

Start Here

SO what is overthinking, anyway? And how can you know when it's too much? The simple answer is: when it starts to hurt. Unlike the thinking itself, the pain you might be experiencing—your physical symptoms—is objective and observable. You can't tune it out.

The point of *Get Out of My Head* is to catch yourself overthinking before the pain caused by your thoughts kicks in. And for that, you have to tune in to the wave.

This wave is the physical side of overthinking. Have you ever heard that hormones flood your system when you're confronted with real-life challenges? It's true. During a big fight with your boss/spouse/parent/friend hormones like adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine hit your body in a surge and then roll back—just like a wave hitting the beach. These hormones can arrive in one big crest or as many wavelets, bringing with them physical symptoms like sweating, a racing pulse, or nausea. One of the first steps toward a healthy relationship with your overthinking and stress is simply identifying when and how it happens for you.

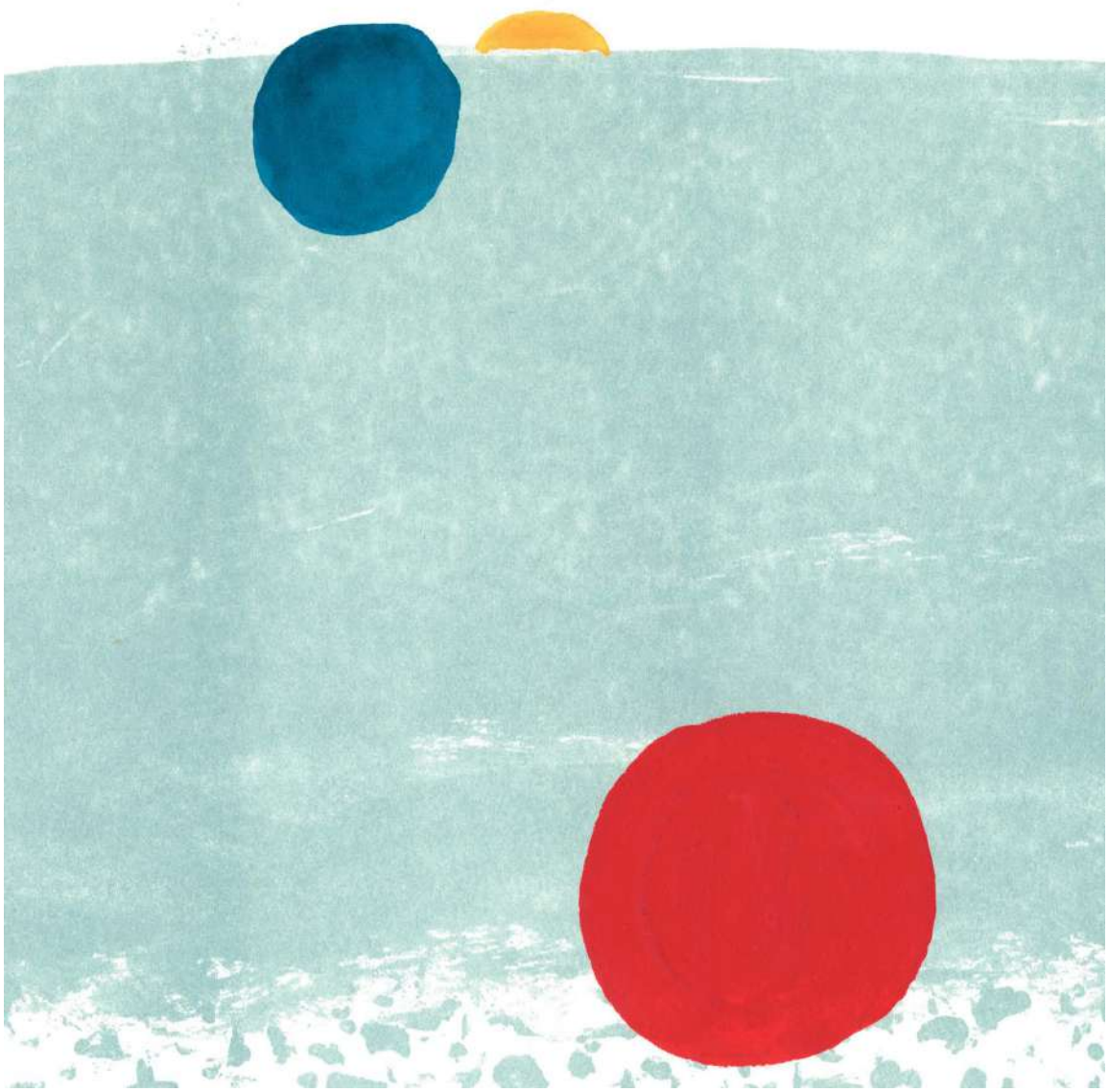
Get to know the wave.

If you're experiencing intense stress or even anxiety, it's easy to see all evidence of its presence as a negative. You might think, *"Ugh, here I am again: frazzled, sweating, and dizzy with nervousness. This is proof I'm a system out of control."* But if you can learn to break down the experience into its constituent parts, the wave can work for you instead of against you.

Remember, your body creates a surge of hormones—particularly epinephrine, aka adrenaline—that hits your system in response to stressful situations or thoughts, and those hormones bring with them a flood of physical symptoms like chest constriction, tingling arms, heart palpitations, nausea, or dizziness. Since these symptoms are undeniable, concrete proof that we're responding to the hormone wave, we can use that knowledge to work to accept the wave and its inevitable passage.

By getting to know the wave, you have begun to change your relationship with stress and overthinking. It is the very best place to start on this journey.

TRY: Allowing that physical sensations like dizziness, nausea, neck pain, headaches, and heart palpitations could mean hormone surges are hitting your system.



If you're shaking, it's time to celebrate.

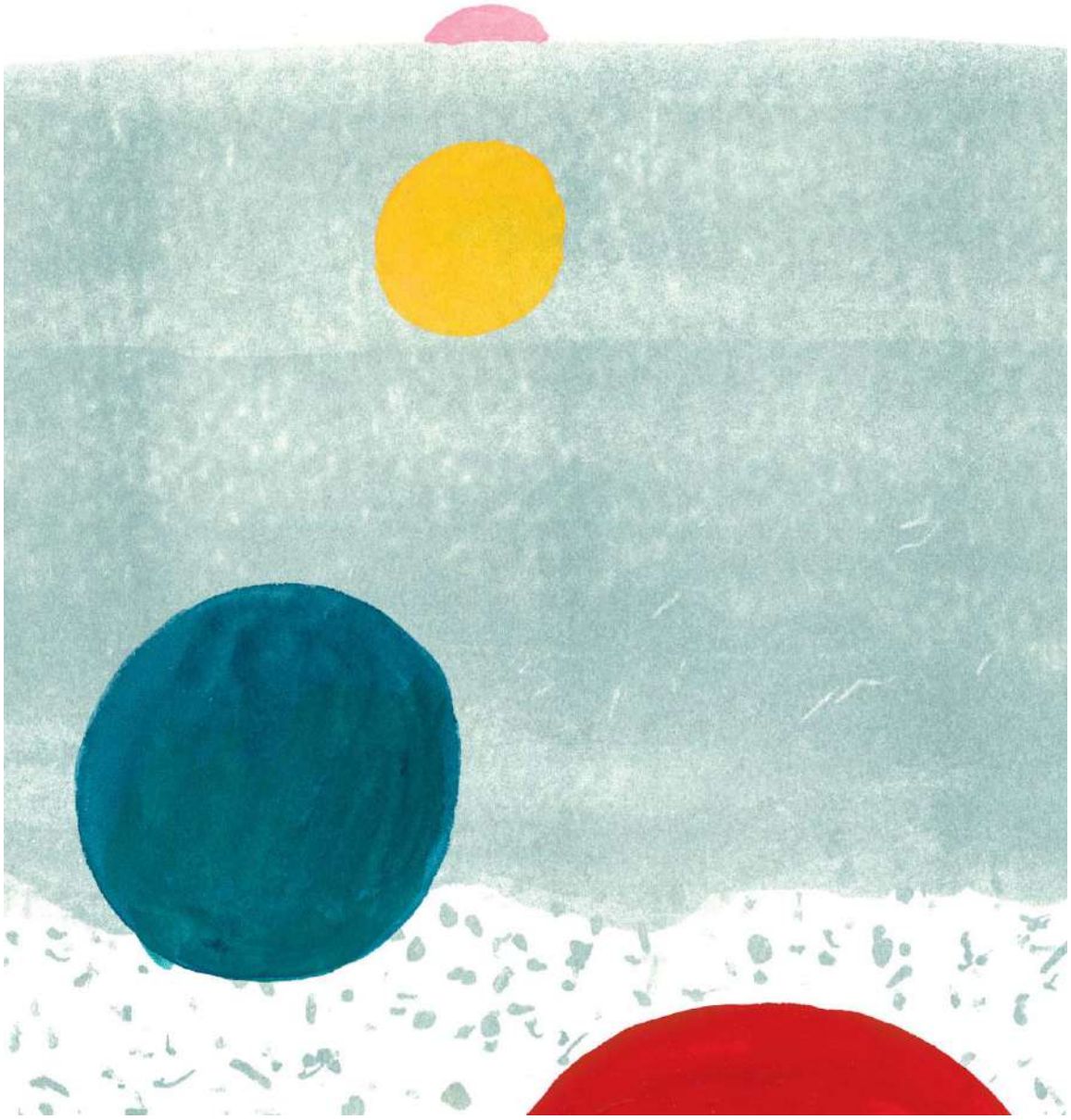
Now that you can spot the hormone wave hitting your system, you're ready to learn to celebrate its passing. Have you ever felt a shaky feeling, a weakness in your knees or chest, after stress or panic is over? That shakiness signals the hormone wave is receding. Despite what you may have thought in the past, that shakiness is actually a good thing.

Reframing, or telling yourself a new story about an old thought, is a very powerful technique all overthinkers need in their tool kit. You'll hear more about reframing over the course of this book, but let's start now, with the retreat of the hormone wave. Instead of thinking of shaky knees or a weak stomach as a sign that something is wrong, reframe those feelings into something positive: relief from stress. It means you're going to be okay.

By welcoming the knowledge that the wave is passing, you are celebrating that you've been able to coexist with the surge and land safely on shore.

As you celebrate your resilience again and again, you'll be building your strength into a virtuous cycle that will help you face the next wave.

TRY: Celebrating, rather than avoiding, the shaky feeling of the wave receding. It's a positive sign that you're getting stronger every time.



You can’t always please the people you want to.

By embracing the wave, you’re building self-awareness around the physical experiences of overthinking. This is a great time to start working on the other side of the equation: self-acceptance.

This work is especially important for people pleasers. I’ve heard overthinkers in the Beautiful Voyager community describe themselves as *“running on a daily people-pleasing hamster wheel,”* only to find themselves suddenly *“waking up”* to what’s really happening in their lives, as if from a crazy dream.

Wanting the approval of people around you—especially romantic partners, best friends, parents, and bosses—is pretty common. Maintaining those relationships is, of course, part of being human. But ruminating on microscopic relationship ruptures, filling journals with what-ifs and regret, and fixating on the possible meanings of small social interactions are strong signs of overthinking, and they can be a big distraction, keeping us from tuning in to what’s really at stake: the opportunity to be in sync with what we think and feel. Put another way: If we’re ruminating on moments from the past that we can’t change, we risk not being able to act on what’s important now.

Fellow Beautiful Voyager member and marketing manager Sarah eloquently describes the feeling:

> *I used to spend my commute home worrying about conversations I had during the day, feeling sure I had said the wrong thing and my coworkers were annoyed with me. But the next day everything would be totally fine. I eventually realized that people were more tuned in to the overall tone of our interactions and less about whether I had worded things exactly right.*

To move away from fixating on insignificant details, Sarah tuned in to what *did* matter: the feeling of the interactions she was having with others. If you're having trouble making a similar leap, remember this immutable fact: You can't always please the people you want to. It's easier to write that than it is to internalize, but it's always true.

The people you love and respect the most are going to be upset with you at times, but they're also usually going to be the quickest to forgive. Allow the bumps in your interactions and see where they lead without trying to smooth them over immediately. Resist the urge to fixate on and fix every disruption. Just wait: there's information lurking in the lag time, and you will learn from it.

TRY: Accepting the fact that you can't please everyone. Ruminating on perceived discord can distort your perspective, making small conflicts for others big to you.

Protect the head.

Here's something else I've heard frequently on Beautiful Voyager: *"I just feel like everything affects me more than it affects others."* The reason these community members feel that way is… it's true! We overthinkers get stuck in our heads more frequently, triggering hormone waves in our bodies that lead to self-criticism and confusion.

This is particularly true during stressful situations when we most need to disengage our busy minds. Over time, I've discovered new ways to do this. Here's one for you to try.

First, identify your everyday stresses that could benefit from a defensive boundary. Maybe it's toxic news downloading into your brain from the Internet or the rush to get to work before the boss each morning. One fellow Beautiful Voyager says, *"I sometimes find myself sucked into the problems of others in unhealthy ways. I want to be able to help, but often just end up feeling saddened on their behalf."*

If you can relate, it might be time to create a protective catchphrase for yourself. My catchphrase is "*protect the head."* It's a boxer's axiom. If a professional boxer gets hit in the head, she's likely down for the count. We overthinkers are not so different. I say *"protect the head"* to activate the part of my brain that will get me out of harm's way. Sometimes I say it preemptively, stopping the spiral before it starts—for instance, by *not* clicking on headlines—or maybe even not looking at the news at all. Sometimes I say it as I'm entering a spiral, to help myself find a door—literal or figurative—out.

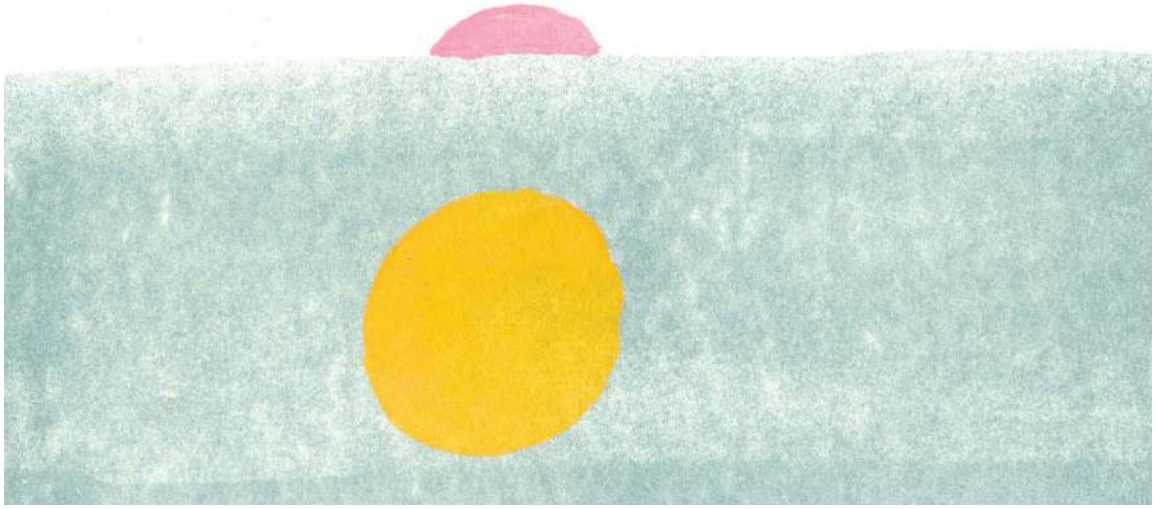
The right catchphrase gives you permission to change course immediately, which will, in turn, interrupt the hormone hit before the wave starts to build. Is social media making you feel like you need to solve all of the world's problems? Protect the head and close the app. Is getting to work before your boss causing massive trouble

with your family's routines? Protect the head and set up a meeting to talk about schedules with your boss.

Remember, mental health is a *"get the oxygen mask on yourself first, then help others"* situation. By recognizing moments when a boundary could help you breathe easy and then using your catchphrase for support, you'll begin to be able to assist others when the air gets thin.

TRY: Inventing a simple catchphrase to create a defensive boundary for your mind. The right phrase will help you let go and take action.

Protect the head.



You gotta be gawky to get graceful.

When I first started writing about anxiety and overthinking online, I was as gawky as a seventh grader at her first dance. My virtual braces and ill-advised perm were on display for the world to see. Like my thirteen-year-old self, however, I felt I had no choice but to walk into the fray. I needed to figure out what the hell was going on.

Many of my fellow overthinkers have learned the same lesson: Being a beginner is awkward. You can't start something new and expect to be a master at it. Getting comfortable with the awkwardness is the first step to learning.

And usually, we don't look nearly as awkward as we feel. Fellow Beautiful Voyager Jordan Brown, a social worker in his early thirties, expressed this so well:

> *When I first started my mental health blog, it looked awful. I'm embarrassed to think about it now. But you know what? People still reached out to me because I had something to say. They could sense that this was personal—and it was. It still is.*

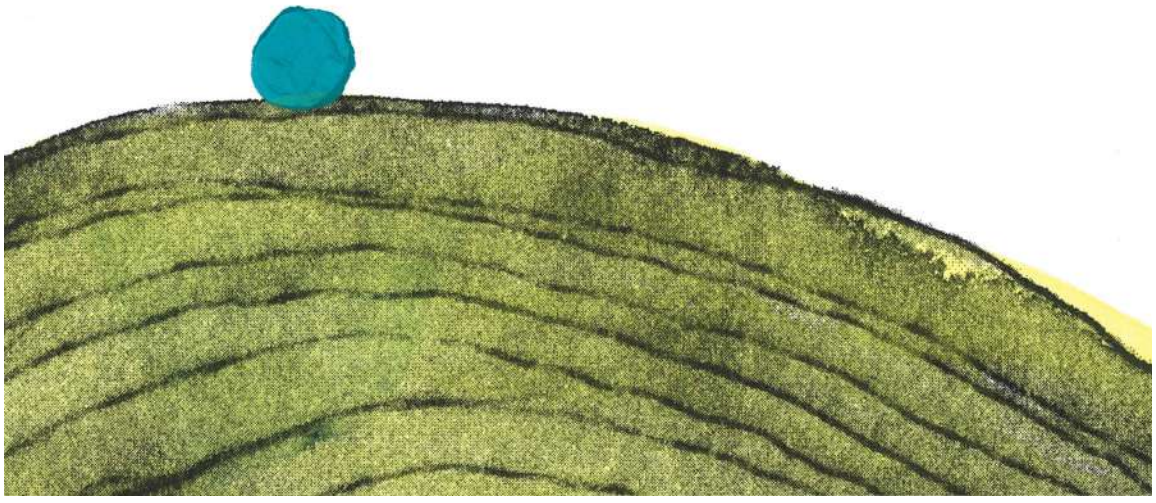
This awkward but important feeling isn't just something we experience as beginners. Sometimes it crops up when we try a new path through a familiar "neighborhood." For example, try to share something you typically keep hidden with a friend as a way to put yourself out there and deepen your friendship. Or try to share one less-than-perfect selfie next time you're on social media. Then try it again the next day. These are the first steps toward being seen for your idiosyncratic authentic self in the real world.

TRY: Revealing your real self to others, warts and all. Matching your internal and external selves will bring clarity to each.

CHAPTER 2

Next, Start to Play

CONGRATULATIONS! Look at all you've accomplished: You've gotten to know the wave and celebrated its passing, you've started accepting that you can't please everyone, and you've begun building a basic defensive boundary for your mind. Let's take our skills to the next level with… recess! A great way to get out of your head is to inject playfulness into your thinking. Have you ever found yourself laughing in the middle of a fight with a friend? The fight quickly dissolves, right? The same thing happens with overthinking. A dose of levity at the right moment can magically loosen overthinking's tight grip.



Start talking to yourself.

Have you ever seen behind the scenes footage of charismatic public speakers pumping themselves up before giving a talk? (For example, Tony Robbins, who is shown jumping up and down on a trampoline to get his blood flowing before stepping on stage in a recent Netflix documentary.) Or performers who look into the mirror, repeating *"I can do this"* again and again?

It may look silly, but they're on to something… Studies about self-talk have shown that speaking aloud to yourself positively shapes neural pathways in a way that benefits self-perception. Beautiful Voyager Maclean Mbepula of Malawi—it turns out overthinking is a worldwide phenomenon—says, *"I think of self-affirmations as a new way of communication with myself."*

I self-talk to the pounding drums of the *Rocky IV* soundtrack before big events. ("Eye of the Tiger," baby!) I say to myself, aloud: *"If Rocky can chop down trees in the backwoods of Siberia to prepare for his showdown with evil colossus Ivan Drago, then you, Meredith, can totally kill this job interview."* It's completely dorky, but I've found I go into interviews and other stressful situations in a much better frame of mind.

Writing coach and journalist Dianne Jacob recently shared this tip for creative perfectionists on Beautiful Voyager: *"Try giving your inner critic a name. I call mine Myrtle. Myrtle helps me make good decisions in the face of criticism. When it comes to writing, however, Myrtle is an obstacle. Sometimes I just politely ask her aloud to back off. It works!"*

Use your own name. Use a made-up name. Just be sure to talk to yourself as if you were a separate person, since data shows using the third person has a greater correlation with success.

TRY: Talking aloud to yourself. Though it can feel extremely dorky,

positive self-talk can reshape self-perception.

Immerse yourself in a hands-on project.

Why bother with a silly new hobby if you're stuck in the spin? *It can help get you out*.

From the recipe tester who throws clay on weekends to the engineer who plays elaborate board games with friends, from the lawyer who gives handknit socks at Christmas to the speech therapist who mixes her own paints, the world of overthinkers is filled with people cultivating hands-on hobbies that help them move through anxiety. Scientists believe that the singular focus required for hands-on projects is good for your brain. They act as meditations in action.

Celebrated cookbook writer Irvin Lin, fellow Beautiful Voyager and clay enthusiast, describes the experience in this way:

> *Working with clay is so absorbing for me I can't obsess about anything else. I can't fret that I inadvertently insulted a friend because I still haven't written about her cookbook on my blog even though she totally wrote about my cookbook on her blog. All I can do is concentrate on the clay in my hands, especially when I use the wheel.*

But there's something else. Starting a new hobby means accepting that you are a beginner. You can't learn a new instrument without the squawks and squeaks that emanate from it at the beginning. The first hat you knit will probably look like an amoeba. But that's how it's supposed to be. Confronting and learning to accept mediocrity is a huge blow against the tyranny of perfectionism. Starting something new is just what you need to recalibrate your expectations and go easier on yourself.

And I think you should do more than just accept the ugliness of

your early creations: I think you should celebrate them. This is not about reveling in failure, but applauding the beauty and vulnerability of trying something new and learning to value the process as well as the result. So go ahead, and proudly serve your guests food on the bumpy, not-quite-round plates you made with your own hands!

TRY: Being bad at a new hands-on hobby just to see where it leads you. It can feel good, regardless of how it turns out.

Use color to stop the spin.

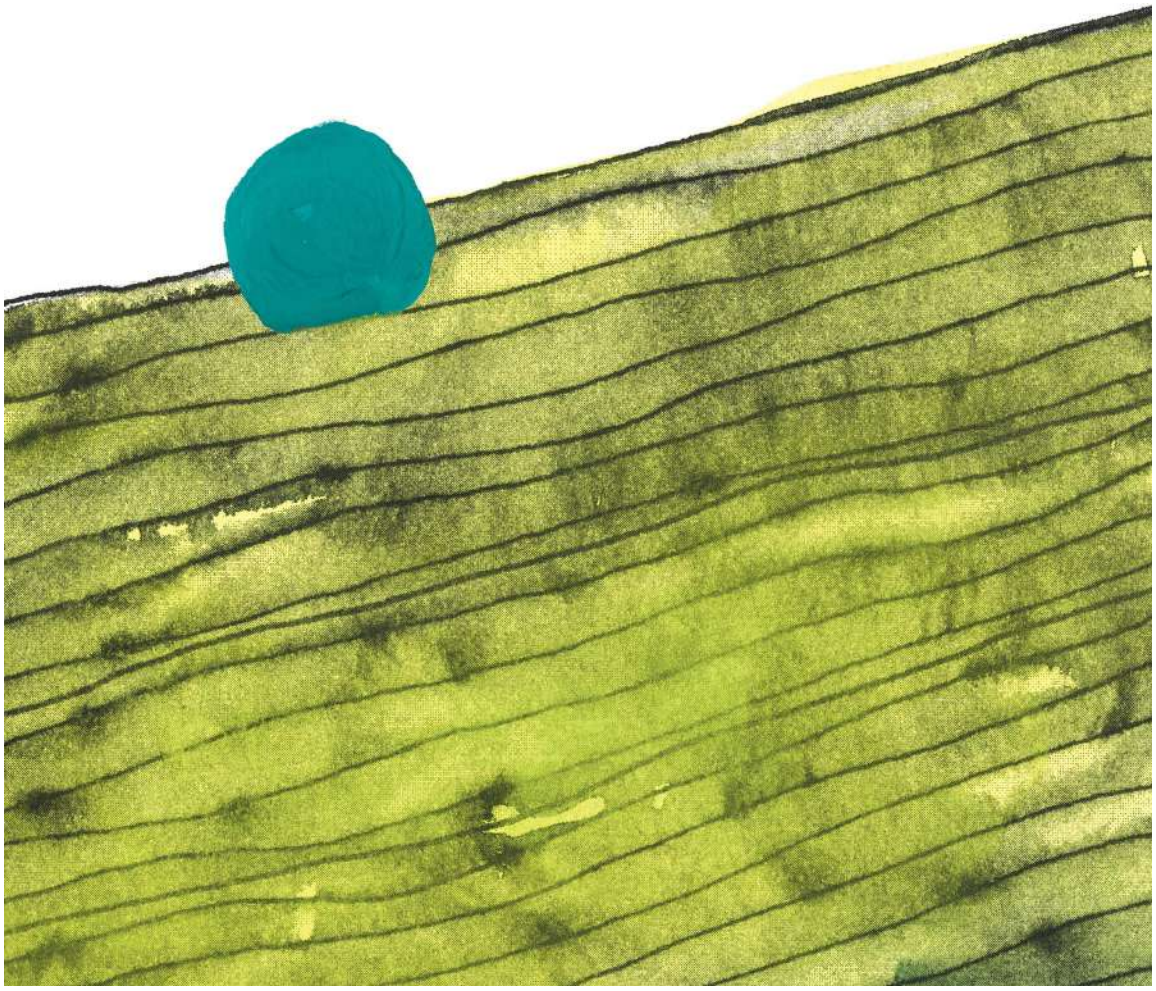
You find yourself stuck in repetitive thought. There are loops inside loops in your head. You pace in place or, even worse, furiously try to find balance like a contestant in a logrolling competition. And then you find color.

Color, like music, can have an immediate grounding impact on thoughts. It draws us away from our racing mind and into the physical reality of the moment. Artist Leah Rosenberg, who created the art you see in this book, has studied the power of color to melt stress and amplify positive emotions. She says, *"Color is more than a visual experience; it is shaped by memory, sense of place, changing seasons, and times of day. I connect hues and humans to help highlight color in our lives each day… turning to it like a multivitamin."*

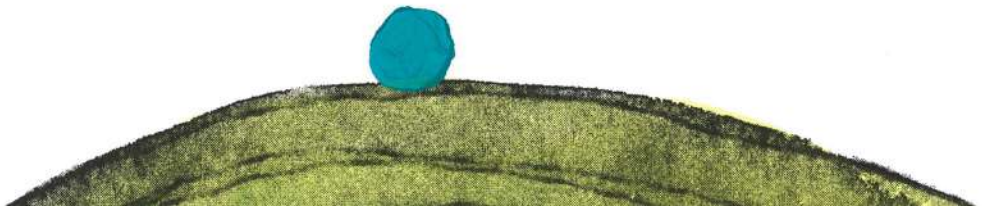
Try this trick for stopping brain chatter shared by fellow Beautiful Voyager Molly: *"Look around—inside or outside—and name the colors you see. Speak aloud: Blue, green, London telephone booth red—whatever. Your goal is to get out of the loop and into the present."*

That's all. It's very basic. If you want to keep going after you've named the colors you see, list the movement you can spot, from the bees in the trees to the birds pecking for worms. Keep going if you'd like: Smell the breeze as it passes by. The idea is to feel the present moment as it rushes around you, starting with color and pulling in everything that comes with it.

TRY: Naming the colors you see around you to get out of your head and ground yourself in the present.



Get grounded by seeking out a calming color.



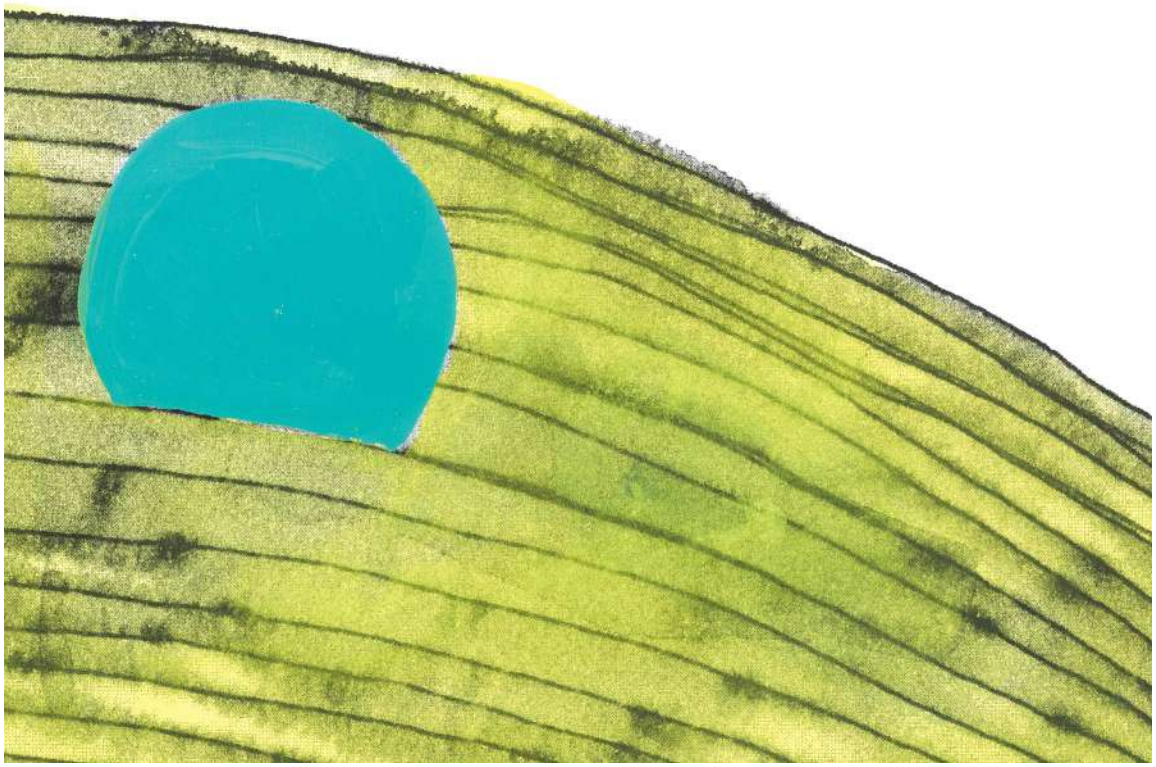
Even if it's boring, take a walk.

At first glance, getting bored might not sound like it belongs in the "play" chapter of this book, but very often when we give ourselves a break from constant stimulation (i.e., we put away our phones!), something interesting happens. Remarkable observations, surprising conversations, and new experiences can burst out of boredom like orange poppies exploding into life in a muddy field.

Kids get this. Think about what happens when little kids aren't allowed to watch a show or play a video game. At first they get bored. They tend to flop around on the floor and whine something like *"What should I do?!"* (My daughter sometimes literally shouts this when we cut off her iPad use.) But then, after a bit, they usually come up with some amazing activity like building an underwater tent in the living room. Don't step on the floor—*the carpet is sharks!*

Try letting your phone die, then invite a friend to take a walk. The pumping blood will relax your brain, and having a friend with you will lull you into seeing your environment with new eyes. Introduce incidental walking into your routine by trying new routes home or giving the dog an extra evening walk. It doesn't take much to bring us back to a childlike bout of creative thinking. Get bored, then get walking.

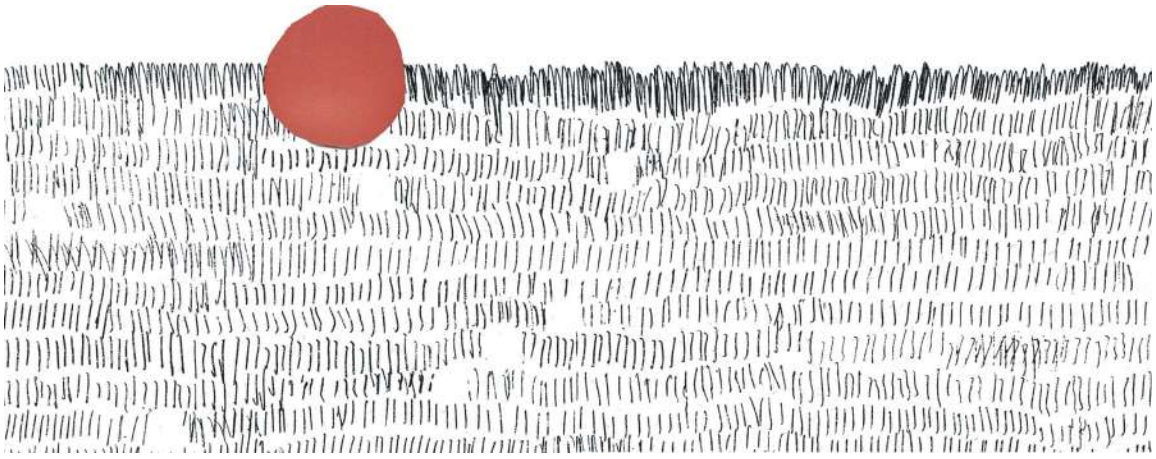
TRY: Unspooling your brain by taking a phone-free walk. Boredom is a means to an end.



CHAPTER 3

Now Make a Map

THIS chapter is about calibration and individuation. You are different than every other overthinker, so what works for someone else might not work for you. Mapping your own internal landscape is a first step to learning how to navigate different mental seasons and conditions. What you read in this book is only as helpful as it is useful to you. By learning about your own unique ground rules, you will be able to recognize advice that is irrelevant and be more confident in holding on to the ideas that can orient you and help you grow.



Set your own ground rules.

You know that time you spend thrashing around in your head, stuck, replaying a negative event? The thrashing can last for hours, sometimes even days. It took me years of investigation and discussion with other overthinkers to create mental guardrails against these episodes, with rules like these:

1. Break hazardous linguistic habits by identifying phrases that lead you to negative thinking, then ban them from your vocabulary. For example, I'm banned from starting a sentence with the phrase "*if only."* Bound together *if* and *only* are the hemlock of the mind, leading to cognitive distortions like black-and-white thinking (e.g., *"If only I could get a new job, everything would get better,"* or *"if only I hadn't made that comment, she'd still be my friend"*).

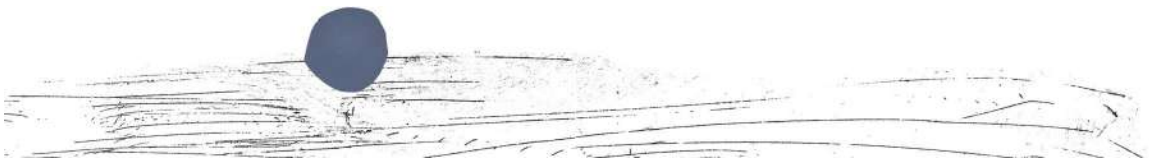
   The important thing is to catch the phrase as it happens. Once you're able to spot your warning phrases, you'll find yourself reversing out of sentences, saying *"Oh, I'm not allowed to start a sentence that way."* It's less weird than it sounds.

2. Confront unhealthy communication habits. Are you guilty of the premature goodbye, aka ghosting? Here's how one Beautiful Voyager described a personal ghosting practice:

I'd quietly ditch parties without saying goodbye to anyone not long after arriving. Not only did this behavior further isolate me, but it became a vicious cycle that reinforced itself; parties got shorter and shorter for me, if I even went at all.

I did the same until I forced myself to change my habit. Now I skip parties I don't have the energy for, or when I'm there and need to depart, I just tell the truth: *"Hey, I'm getting a headache so I'm gonna cruise out of here, but thank you for having me and I love you!"* This technique has brought me closer to others and helped me feel stronger in big group situations. Another easy "comms" adjustment: call an old friend instead of sending a text.

3. Break out of the spin faster by tackling something onerous on your to-do list. Yes, this one is particularly unappealing, but that's the point. When we're feeling stuck, a pile of bills can seem insurmountable. But it's just this sort of approach—try doing just one thing—that can unstick you by giving you the satisfaction of accomplishment.



Here's how Malawian business owner and consultant Maclean Mbepula describes that experience as an overthinker: *"Creating a to-do list can be a challenge for me, but once I do make one, checking an item off motivates me to do the next one and so forth. I find a lot of satisfaction in checking off my list."* She's not the only one to unleash the power of the to-do list—my husband's very organized and efficient boss used to write one every day that started with "Make to-do list" so he could check it off and immediately feel like he was getting stuff done, which then made it easier to get *more* stuff done.

Since to-do lists are never-ending, this approach works time and time again. To be clear, this rule isn't about doing *everything*. It's about doing *one thing*. And then, maybe, you could squeeze in one more—if the spin cycle isn't finished.

TRY: Setting ground rules in three areas: 1. phrases to avoid, 2. communication habits, and 3. using to-do lists.

Write your way into self-knowledge.

For most of my life, I searched for external explanations for my nausea, dizziness, and migraines. I went to every type of medical doctor and many natural healers trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I spent a lot of my time searching for external answers but not nearly as much looking within. I wrote very little during this period.

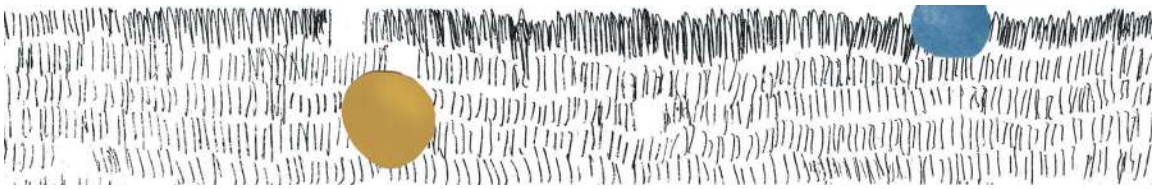
When I finally made the connection between my overthinking and physical symptoms (more about that in the epilogue), I experienced a light bulb moment. Within a matter of days I was writing like crazy. Finding myself in a wild new land, I suddenly wanted to understand it—the world *within*. I turned to writing to map out my personal terrain.

Of course, old habits die hard, and I had to constantly remind myself that it's *"the journey, not the destination, Meredith."* Who wouldn't want a simple fix to get out of their heads? But that's not what I got, and I'm glad (now). Instead of uncovering a singular answer, the essays, interviews, journal entries, and book reviews I was writing lit my way through a more confusing but more honest internal landscape. And all that led me here: a very good place to be.

Ready to start exploring for yourself? Writing morning pages is a great place to begin. A simple approach first shared by author Julia Cameron, morning pages take just ten minutes a day.

Here's how you do it: As soon as you wake up, grab an empty notebook and write three pages in longhand. That's three pages—no more, no less—of anything that comes to mind, taking care not to censor yourself. You'll be amazed at what comes out. Then—and this may sound counterintuitive—recycle the notebooks once they're full. This is not journal writing. It's not meant to be held on to and pored over later—as much as the overthinker in you might want to. The goal is to tap into your emotions with a light touch, get them out, then learn to let them go.

TRY: Writing three pages in longhand every morning when you wake up. When your notebook is full, recycle it. Let writing be a process as well as an outcome.



Balance your energy budget.

I remember the moment that gave birth to a concept I call *energy debt*. I was talking to a Beautiful Voyager member I'll call Carolyn. A vivacious, accomplished video producer in her late thirties, Carolyn loved being busy and threw her whole self into work, taking on new freelance projects before finishing old ones. Her self-proclaimed motto was: *"I want to be able to do it all, all the time."* This mantra exhausted her, but she stuck with it. The alternative was, in her eyes, failure.

On one specific day, Carolyn was stuck in her head: Should she attend a friend's party that she'd promised to go to? Or should she stay home and work? She had so many projects due. Work? Play? Work? Play?

"How would you feel if you RSVP'd 'no' to the event right now?" I asked Carolyn.

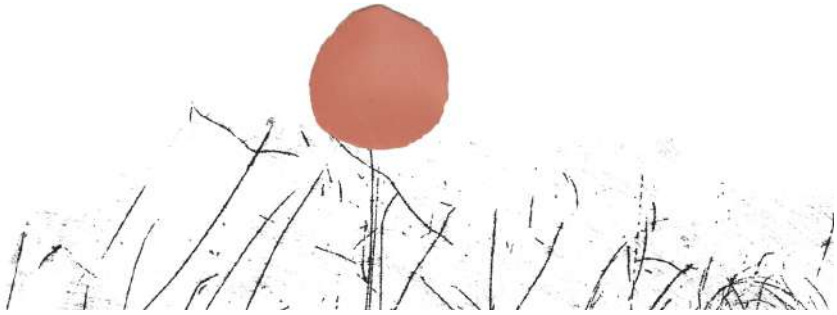
"I'd feel amazing," she said, then paused. *"On the other hand, I tend to have a lot of energy in the morning. Maybe I should just use that energy to do both things—my work and the party."*

Hearing this made me snap to attention. This was behavior I had seen again and again from fellow people pleasers and perfectionists—and, of course, from myself. I told Carolyn that it sounded like she was in serious debt—energy debt. *"Every time you get the slightest bit of energy in your hands, you run to spend it. It's time to pay back some of your debts and start saving."*

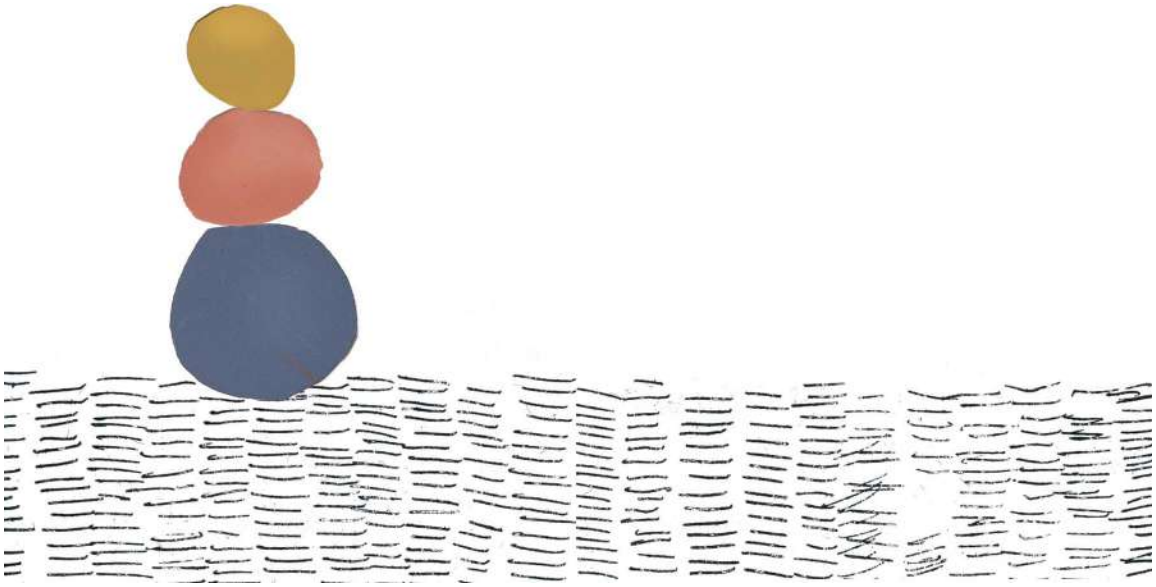
There was no clear right path for Carolyn that night, but the idea of energy debt resonated with her, as did the accountability that came with the idea of keeping an energy balance sheet. Thinking about energy as something that is spent or saved, like money, and then using the tools of observation and accounting to track it helped put her in control of her head. Carolyn recently told me not a week goes by that she doesn't think about her energy budget. She knows

this to be true: Energy is like money; each person has a different balance in their account.

TRY: Figuring out your energy budget, then spending carefully in favor of equilibrium—even if it means letting go of something important.



Balance your energy budget.



Experiment with temperature.

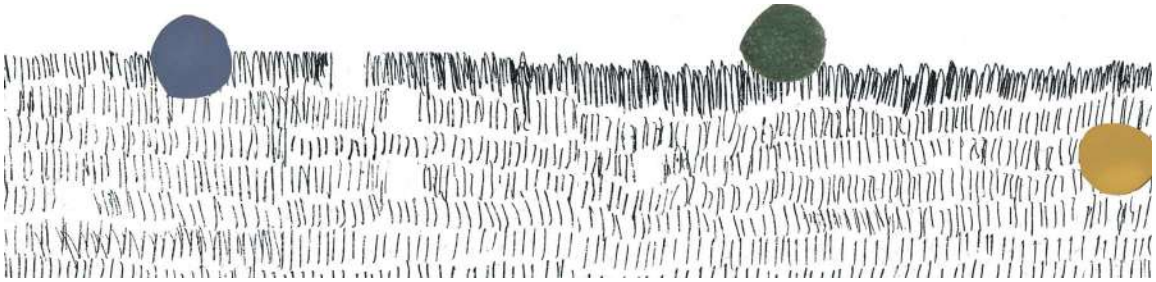
Fellow Beautiful Voyager and entrepreneur Luis Rivera has noticed cold showers can have an effect if you are stuck in the spin. Luis says, *"I don't know exactly why it stops overthinking in its tracks—but it does."* A student of the human body and an adherent of the body hacking movement, Luis first started taking cold showers in 2015 after learning about the process through an online course called the Wim Hof Method.

Tim Ferriss, granddaddy of the biohacking movement, first talked about cold showers in his 2010 book *The 4-Hour Body*. Back then, the focus of the movement was physical health. In fact, the subtitle of Ferriss's book, *An Uncommon Guide to Rapid Fat-Loss, Incredible Sex, and Becoming Superhuman*, tells you a lot about the productivity mind-set of that time. The movement has since evolved, and today you'll hear Ferriss talking more about meditation and cognitive focus.

It's easy enough to experiment with temperature. Go outside on a chilly, windy day in a sleeveless shirt, and—this may sound strange—try to enjoy the sensations.

Hot baths get a lot of attention for calming the mind, but don't ignore the opposite end of the temperature spectrum. It may work for you.

TRY: Removing a layer of clothing or opening a window when you're stuck in your thoughts. See if it brings you back into the moment.



Calibrate your own internal compass with emotion.

Meaghan, one of my oldest and closest friends, was struggling with a difficult career decision. An established television producer with loads of experience, Meaghan was suddenly waking up every night, weighing the pros and cons of two potential jobs: one a seemingly safer bet, similar to what she was already doing, and the other a pivot that brought new opportunities but also risk. As she ran through her options during one of our morning commute conversations, I picked up on something new in her voice I'd rarely heard before from my strong and successful friend: fear.

You see, Meaghan had done all of the information-gathering she possibly could. A successful mom in her early forties, she knew how to make smart decisions for herself and her family. She'd managed to move across the country with a toddler and newborn in tow for a career change in the past. But the answer to this quandary was eluding her. Why weren't her pro/con lists leading her to the answer?

It turns out, something was missing from her lists, and I heard it in that moment: emotion—specifically fear. It was adding noise to her decision-making process. She felt it in her body, but she couldn't understand what it was telling her until she tuned in.

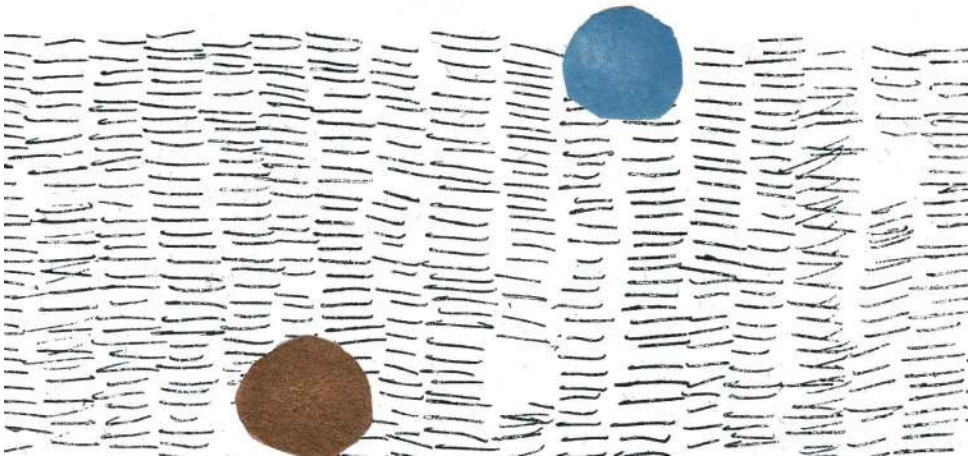
We all have an internal compass. It's like the traditional compasses that help travelers situate themselves in space, pointing north. But to follow an *internal* compass, you must orient your perspective away from surface data points—the pro/con lists—and toward deeper personal truths. You have to tune in to it.

That's what my friend Meaghan did. Once she understood her fear, she could look her options squarely in the face. It didn't make her decision easier, but it allowed her to understand her sleepless nights. And that let her calm down.

Finding your internal north is a tall order. Our minds want to skip

along the surface of our thoughts like a rock on water, distracting us from what's really happening. By sinking deeper into your feelings, you may get a new set of information to help you find your way.

TRY: Tapping into what you're feeling—not just thinking—to orient yourself when facing a difficult decision.

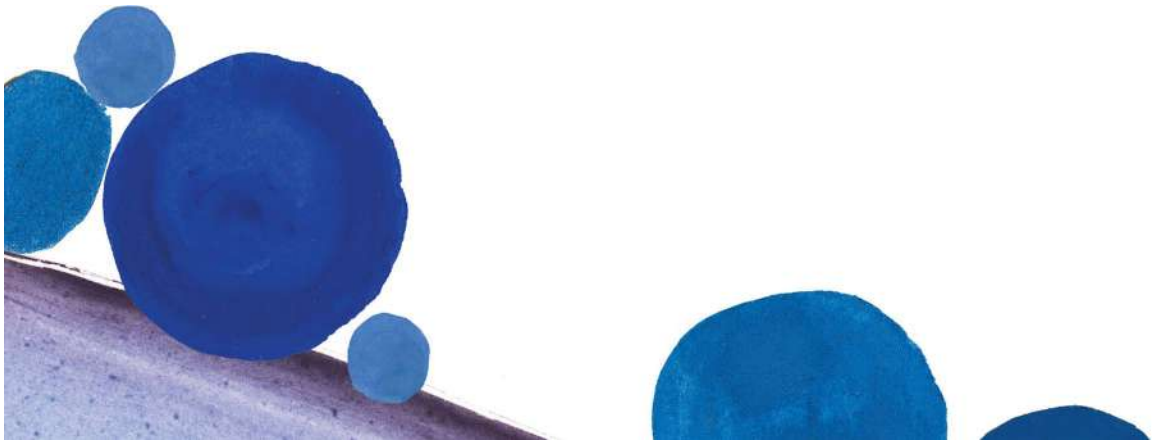


CHAPTER 4

Time to Build Balance

IF you've ever read about stress or anxiety, you've probably heard about the fight-or-flight response of the sympathetic nervous system—that prehistoric kick of adrenaline that energized us when cornered by a saber-toothed tiger or enemy tribe. We need that kind of massive adrenaline rush far less these days, violent threats being mercifully diminished in our modern society. But overthinkers' autonomic nervous systems haven't gotten that memo for some reason, so we are often flooded with hormones as if we're in serious danger when we really are just trying to get ready for a work meeting or deciding whether or not to attend a party.

One way to ratchet down the kill-or-be-killed feeling is to amplify the less discussed but equally important "rest-and-digest" parasympathetic nervous system. This is the system that tells the fight-or-flight response to chill out, and it's the one that overthinkers need to nurture and empower. This chapter is all about techniques for doing that, like visualization, controlled deep breathing, and mindful walking. By paying more attention to your rest-and-digest functions, you will start to rein in full fight-or-flight and begin to build balance, slowly but surely.



Use your mind's eye.

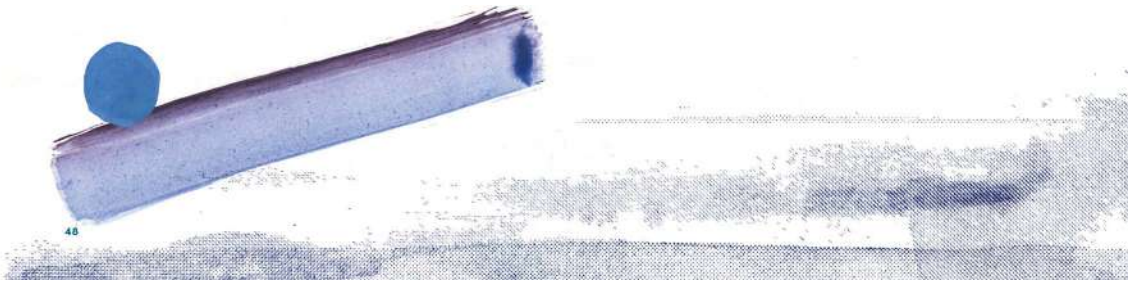
Visualization is a way to transport your mind to a new place. In theory, it's easy; you just concentrate on a new environment. The hard part comes when you second-guess yourself or your technique, wondering if you're doing it "the right way." This is just the sort of thing an overthinker is likely to do, of course, so be aware and try to cut that self-doubt out of the equation before you begin.

Start by imagining a scene you find peaceful. Again, you don't need to overthink it—there's no perfect way to do this, just try to imagine a peaceful place, real or made-up. Once you have the general contours of this serene location, layer in specifics by answering these five questions:

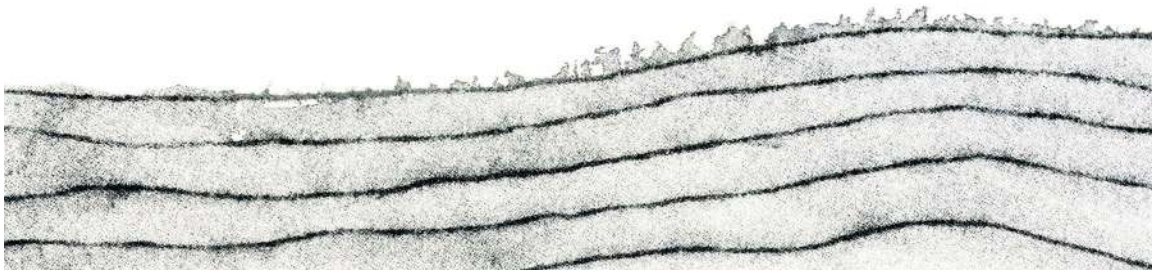
1. **What are your feet standing on?** For example, *"I'm standing on earth covered in a lush, green carpet of moss."*
2. **What does your place sound like?** *"I can hear the sound of birds singing, and there is the rustling of wind through tall trees."*
3. **What does your place smell like?** *"It smells damp and fresh, like overturned spring soil."*
4. **What does your place taste like?** *"I taste drops of rain."*
5. **What do you feel in your place?** *"The air is crisp on my skin. I feel the moss underfoot, the cool greenery soft under my toes."*

If you keep it simple and remain focused, with just a little practice this basic but powerful technique will help your parasympathetic nervous system calm your body and mind.

TRY: Bringing to mind a place you generally find peaceful. Then tune in to specific sensory details to deepen your focus and create a calmer state of mind.



Conjure a peaceful place.



Breathe differently.

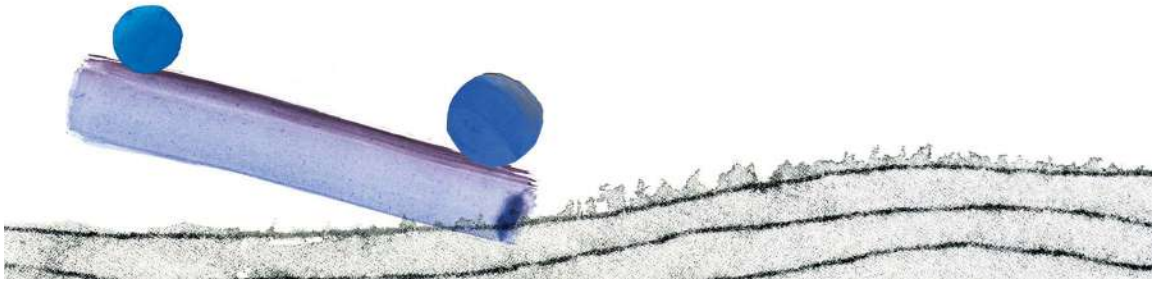
I remember my mom pleading with me when I was a teenager to take deep breaths when she saw I was stressed—which was often—*"Just try it, Meredith. Take in a deep breath and fill your lungs all the way. Just try."* I, of course, ignored her. What could my mom possibly know about what I needed?

Turns out, she knew a lot. Diaphragmatic breathing, aka deep belly breathing, is one of the best ways to boost your parasympathetic nervous system. There are thousands of breathing techniques, but photographer Martin Sekel, a fellow Beautiful Voyager who lives in Israel, shared this one from Andrew Weil, and it's now a trusted go-to. Weil calls it the 4-7-8 breathing method, and those numbers are all you need to remember to give it a try.

Exhale completely. Then breathe in through your nose to the count of 4, filling your lungs. Hold your breath for a count of 7. Exhale through your mouth to the count of 8. It doesn't matter how fast or slow you breathe as long as you are maintaining the same ratio in your counting, so focus on the numbers, not the breath.

You can do a breathing exercise like this as often as you like, but I find it particularly useful in crowded trains, on packed elevators, and after work presentations. If you concentrate and give it your full attention, you can make breathing a bridge back to your own equilibrium. Find the technique that works best for you, then use it to ride the wave.

TRY: Ratcheting down your fight-or-flight response by remembering the numbers 4-7-8. Break out this breathing exercise at any time or place.



Commute in the zone.

A happy commute is a short commute. But many of us don't get that kind.

A lot of us get the unpredictable kind instead: the noisy, crowded, unexpected-delays kind. It's a nervous system workout that many recovering overthinkers have learned to treat as an opportunity.

The key is small adjustments. Listen to music instead of trying to read or listening to audio books, for example. Reading can be very calming in many circumstances, but sometimes it just doesn't work with all that commuter commotion distracting you. Studies have shown that listening to music—particularly relaxing music—can reduce your heart rate variability. If this works for you, consider building a commute playlist, something to look forward to when you're coming and going.

You can even take this to the next level and try listening to binaural beats in your headphones. These are available on all the streaming music apps. Called "sound wave therapy," binaural beats are made up of two separate tones, one for each of your ears, yet as you listen to them, your brain perceives the two tones as one. The effect is likened to meditation.

If the music isn't doing it, consider piping a friend in through your ears. I often talk to my good friend on my commute, which makes it fly by. Sometimes a friend is music too.

TRY: Changing your morning commute habits to balance your nervous system—listen to music instead of reading.

Name your gratitude.

Research shows that the more grateful we are, the healthier we are. That's because gratitude breaks us out of negative thought patterns. Fellow Beautiful Voyager Andrea, a busy solo business owner who sometimes has trouble falling asleep at night, shared that she uses a gratitude practice from Judaism called "a hundred blessings a day." She describes how it works:

> *From the moment you wake up until the moment you go to sleep, take note of all of the day's enjoyable moments, from a morning kiss from your child to the sunshine on your face. Say a quick 'thank you' in your mind for a neighbor's smile or to the comfortable shoes you're wearing.*

At the end of the day, as you're falling asleep, instead of watching TV, take inventory of the day's thank-yous. Andrea learned that closing her eyes and thinking of everything she was thankful for allowed her to fall asleep more quickly, grateful and happy. Give it a try and see if it works for you, too.

TRY: Making a list of the many small things you're thankful for each day, then run through your list when you go to bed.

Stay put.

If overthinking is like competing in a logrolling contest, mindfulness is a stroll on solid ground. Mindfulness counteracts the spin, giving our bodies a respite so they can catch up. Instead of obsessing about the future and the past, mindfulness helps us focus on where we are in the moment.

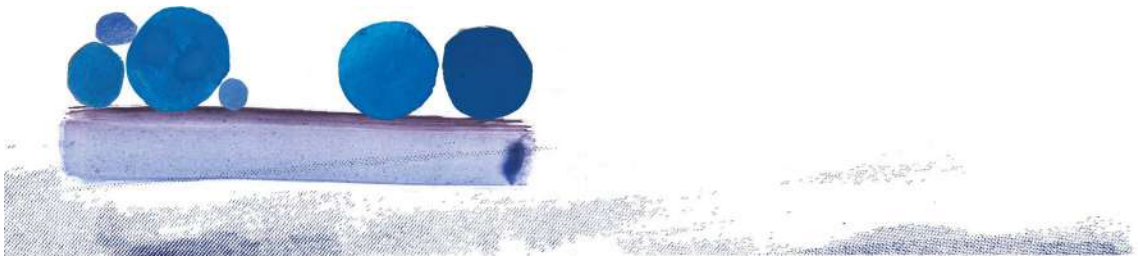
In the Beautiful Voyager community, we motivate each other to stay mindful and keep meditating by checking in with each other regularly and cheering on all progress. Building a daily mindfulness practice is a little like building an exercise habit: It's easier when you're surrounded by others on the same path.

As with other ideas shared in this book, the challenge here is to spot when you need to intercede with your established daily pattern. Migraines are my irrefutable sign. When a migraine starts to roll in, like thunderclouds on a clear day, I know that I need to stop what I'm doing and, in the words of Andy Puddicombe of Headspace, "*Find a comfortable seated position.*"

Meditation is all about learning to observe your mind as an outsider and watching its behavior with curiosity, not judgment. For overthinkers, meditation can truly be medicine, an opportunity to notice when your mind is trying to skip ahead or fold into itself.

I remember something a therapist once said to me: "*Depression is looking back with regret. Anxiety is looking ahead with fear. Freedom is being here and now.*"

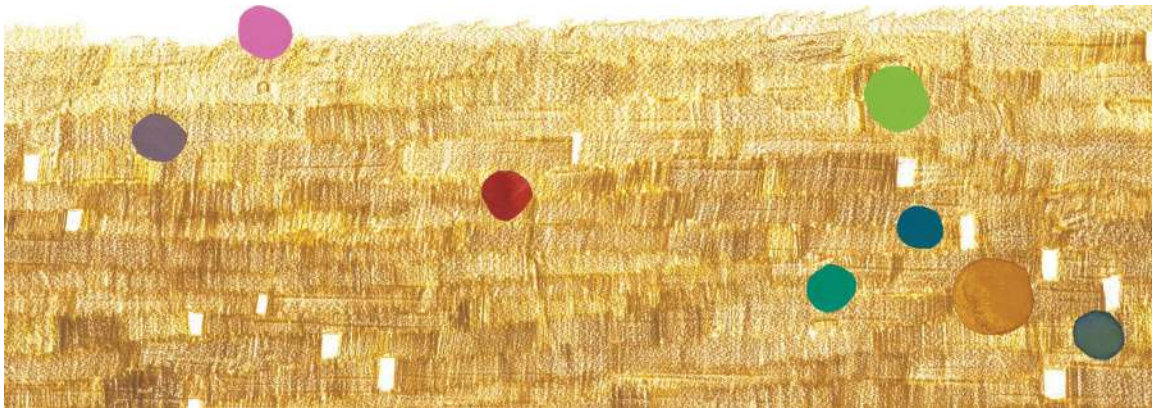
TRY: Noticing when your mind runs away from you. Use meditation to learn to focus on the present rather than the past or future.



CHAPTER 5

Nearly There, Dig Deeper

EACH chapter of this book builds on the ones before it. Just as it's difficult to begin exploring your internal landscape before you've loosened up enough to approach it with playfulness, you can't start digging deeper until you've gotten a basic sense of what you're working with. Try not to be hard on yourself when things get confusing. Many overthinkers are in a deep rut of constantly searching for answers, then, if they get them, asking more questions. As I've learned again and again, there's no external validation or prize for being right. You're building a relationship with yourself, and like all relationships, it takes time. In this way, self-exploration is like meditation—it gets easier only when you can learn to let go.



Be a red dot.

Many years ago in New York, I had a friend, Laura, who worked as a writer's assistant. One day she noticed that the writer's address book was full of round red and blue stickers next to people's names. Curious, she asked the author about the dots and learned that she put the people she knew into two fundamental categories: red stickers for people who brought energy into her life and blue stickers for those who sucked energy out of it.

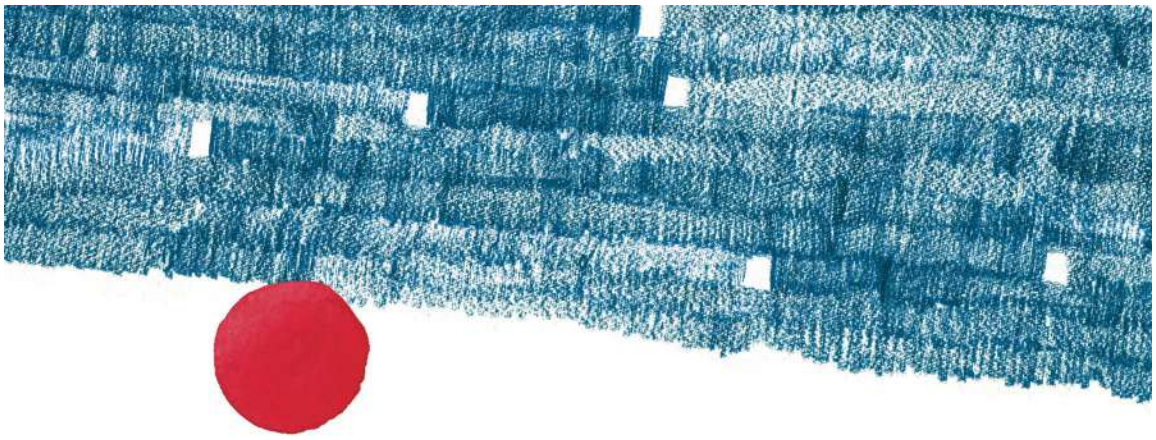
My friend and I discussed this idea in great overthinky depth. Did we have more red or blue dots in our world? Was there such a thing as a purple dot? Over time, we started to use the dot metaphor to measure our own impact on others as well as to spot trends in our friends and acquaintances. *"Let's aim to be red dots in other people's books,"* we said. *"Let's bring bright red energy to the world around us."*

I've since noticed I'm most able to be a red dot when I'm around other red dots. I get inspired by their energy and extroversion. I'm a bit more vulnerable and shaky around blue dots, with whom I have to work harder. Of course, even the reddest dot can have blue days; being human means being in flux, and perfect consistency is for robots. But it's still a helpful metaphor to remind me what to strive for and how my energy can affect other people and vice versa.

Like balancing your energy budget, there's no perfect science to this one. The key is paying attention, observing yourself with others, and figuring out how certain dynamics make you feel.

TRY: Noticing which circumstances bring out your positive energy and avoiding those which take it away. Protecting your head helps to set you up to be a red dot.

Be a red dot.



Build the “don’t compare” muscle.

Comparing yourself to others is a big problem for overthinkers. It’s the isolated feeling you can get after too much time spent on social media, thinking about your actual life versus the happy-seeming digital lives of others. It’s the nagging *“what’s he earning?”* question in your head when speaking with a work colleague. It’s the sinking feeling in your stomach that belies the smile you put on your face when hearing of a friend’s engagement.

This is so common that it may seem inescapable, but it *is* possible to avoid the comparison trap. Getting out starts with understanding that much of happiness is a function of setting realistic expectations for yourself and seeing that constant comparisons undermine your ability to set them. You can always find people who seemingly have more than you when you look at their carefully curated Instagram feed. Or maybe they *actually do* have something more than you do; maybe your colleague does make more money, and you aren’t close to getting engaged. Well, ask yourself, who made the circumstances of others the measure of your life? No one but you. You can feel happy or sad or indifferent about people who have something you want, but regardless, your life is not really going to change but how you *feel about it will*. So why bother comparing at all? There is good reason that almost every religion and creed counsels strongly against envy and coveting what others have.

While logic is the ultimate answer to the comparison game, sometimes we can’t tap into it when we need it most. In those instances, we must take speedy deflective measures.

Remember way way back in the first chapter of this book, when you chose your own catchphrase for navigating stressful situations? (Mine is *“protect the head.”*) Quashing comparisons means taking that protection to the next level and adding a crash helmet—a simple

“Don’t compare!” spoken aloud, works for me. You may need something catchier like *“Me be me,”* or *“All of me is all I get.”* One I particularly like is *“You get what you get, and you don’t get upset!”* which is what a parent friend of mine tells his children when they complain that their friend got more dessert or a better birthday present. Yes, it can sound a little cheer campy, but do it anyway. Settle on a phrase that snaps you to attention. Shut the comparisons out and let your life be its own measure.

TRY: Creating a catchphrase like “Don’t compare” to enforce an important mental safe zone and accept yourself as you are.

Finding love despite the differences.

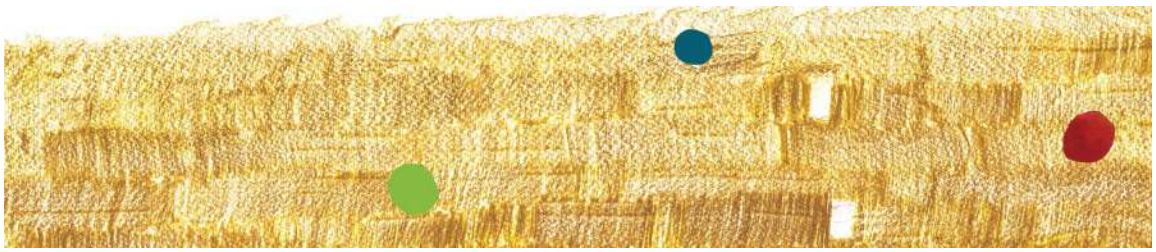
Remember the first time you realized how truly different your partner or roommate is from you? Maybe you fight differently. One of you gets angry, the other gets sad and quiet? One of you wants to win, and one of you just wants to be forgiven? In a moment of crisis, an overthinker can end up making matters worse.

The overthinker takes these kinds of differences and often magnifies them in their head. How can we possibly be compatible if we don't [fill-in-the-blank] the same? Sound familiar? Overthinkers need more than a word or phrase to shut off this *"our relationship is doomed"* motor. A simple statement of fact that cuts through the noise in your head and leaves no space for questioning can work. Here's the one I use with my husband:

> *We accept we're not the same. Despite our differences, we still want to be together.*

These two sentences have the power to remind me of the long game—all worthwhile relationships are marathons, not sprints!—which quickly mellows me out. And mellow mom is a win for the whole family. But it only works if both parties keep the phrase handy and remember to use it when misunderstandings arise. (Also, it has to be true!)

TRY: Creating a factual statement of truth about your differences with your loved one. Let it act as a guardrail the next time you're spinning out about small relationship problems.



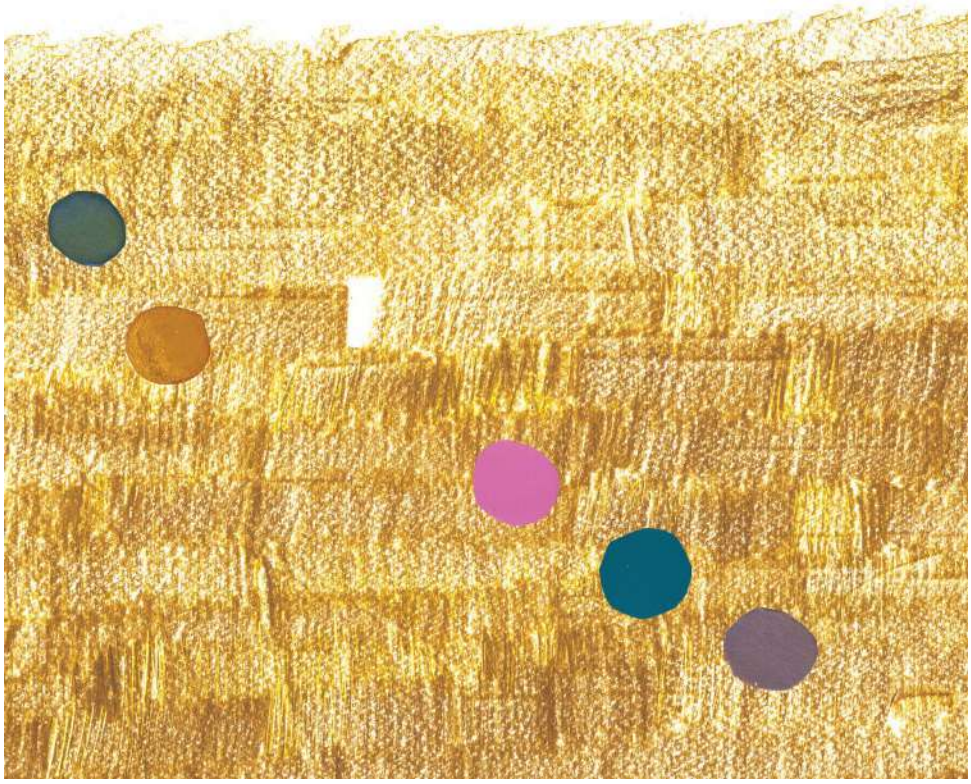
Escape the *Groundhog Day* loop.

Finding your internal compass isn't easy, especially if you're looping and looping around on the same habitual thought patterns with no exits in sight. Fellow Beautiful Voyager Sara calls this the "the *Groundhog Da*y loop," after the Bill Murray movie where he is cursed to repeat the same day over and over again—which he makes pretty hilarious, but in real life it's far less charming. She says she's extra-susceptible to this repetitive mind-set after an embarrassing or painful event. And sometimes, despite turning over the same thought endlessly, she even struggles to recognize this negative behavior.

So now she enlists the help of a trusted friend or loved one to spot the trap before she falls into it. She says, *"If you ever notice me complaining about the same thing again and again, tell me!"*

Groundhog Day thinking is an example of an extremely wise and useful Buddhist parable about avoiding the "second arrow," which goes like this: A person is traveling along the road and, out of nowhere, is struck by an arrow. The pain of the arrow is bad enough, but the person wonders so intensely about why the arrow hit him that he feels even worse. The lesson is that there is much in our lives that we cannot control, but we can control how we think about those things. Instead of thinking negative, repetitive, and probably unanswerable thoughts about how or why something bad happened to you, work to accept it, learn from it, and move on.

TRY: Listening to the people who know you to recognize your own repetitive thought patterns. By staying alert, you can dart out of the way before the second arrow hits.



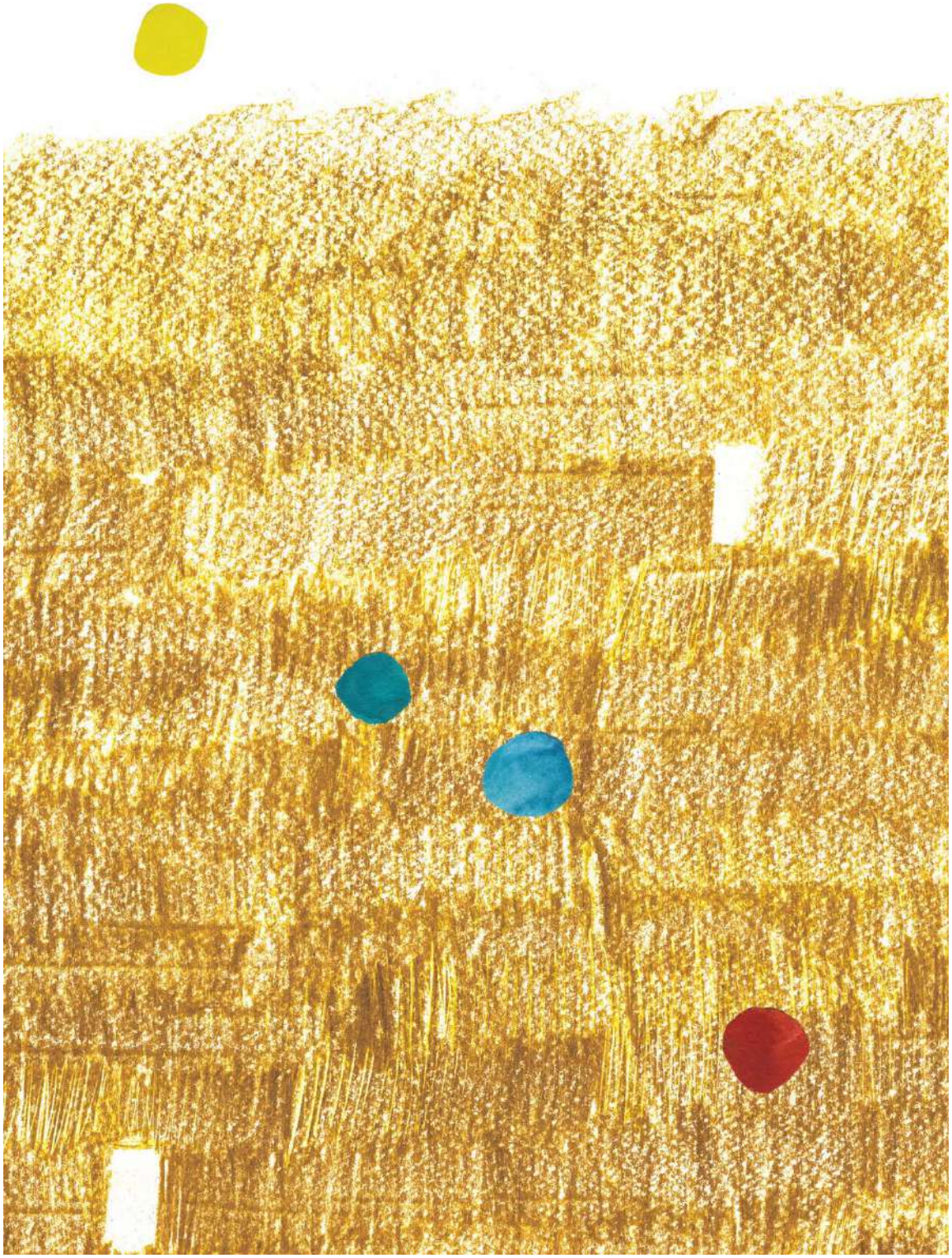
Become a body detective.

If you're an overthinker with physical symptoms, chances are you've already spent hours researching the human body, looking for answers to your constantly expanding list of aches. It can be helpful to break down this kind of body investigation into a more organized process.

When you next visit your doctor, mention that you're an overthinker and that you have a hunch that this trait is affecting your physical well-being. Tell your doctor you'd like to check your **adrenals** (which affect cortisol levels, for example) and **hormone** levels (affecting mood, blood pressure, and energy levels). Once you have a baseline in those areas, you can start exploring what's happening with your **neurotransmitters** (which is what SSRIs like Lexapro affect).

And while you're waiting for the lab results to come back, get more systematic about your own body detective work. Keep a daily journal and date-stamp your notes so you can go back and see if your symptoms are changing or if a pattern is forming. It's harder to overthink when the facts are laid bare before you.

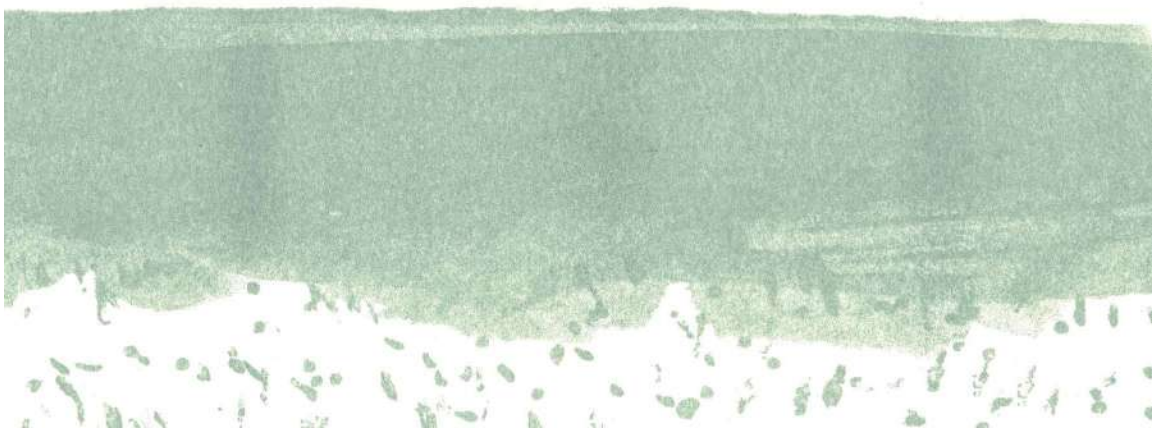
TRY: Approaching your own body the way a detective would. Follow leads and clues and be methodical about recording your symptoms.



CHAPTER 6

Put It All Together

THIS chapter takes the themes from all the prior ones—self-awareness, acceptance, and boundary-building—and threads them together into a final set of experiments meant to tap into the health-restoring powers of the overthinker. (Have I said enough how much I appreciate overthinkers? They are my favorite kind of people. I suppose this means I am my favorite kind of person…) Your active mind is a magnificent tool, and through experimentation you can continue to find out how best to forge a more peaceful relationship with it.



Finally ditch these common misconceptions.

Here's something I hear a lot: *"Overthinking, stress, and anxiety help me. They push me to get things done on time. If I'm stressed out about my messy house, I make sure it gets clean, fast. Worry helps me achieve more."*

At face value this makes sense, but my own experience and science come to a pretty firm conclusion on that: *nuh-uh*. Fear, excess cortisol, and adrenaline surging through your body do not help you achieve more. The truth is, though they feel motivating, these excess hormone surges are actually impediments—you're doing well *despite* them. Do not give your overactive fight-or-flight response the credit. Give yourself the credit, and then imagine how much more pleasant those achievements would have been had they been realized without all the hormonal mania.

Another misconception I hear: *"Overthinking helps me figure things out."*

My personal experience, amplified by so many Beautiful Voyagers, is nope. Overthinking can impair your problem-solving abilities and lead you to avoid or misconstrue your true feelings.

It's important to ditch these two powerful misconceptions *immediately*. Every positive tool in this book gets counteracted if you allow these two examples of what my dad hilariously used to call "stinkin' thinkin'" to stick around.

To get out of your head, you have to give up that codependent relationship with stress and overthinking.

TRY: Accepting that overthinking, stress, and anxiety aren't helping you get your work done, despite what you've believed in the past.

Tune in to hazardous surf warnings.

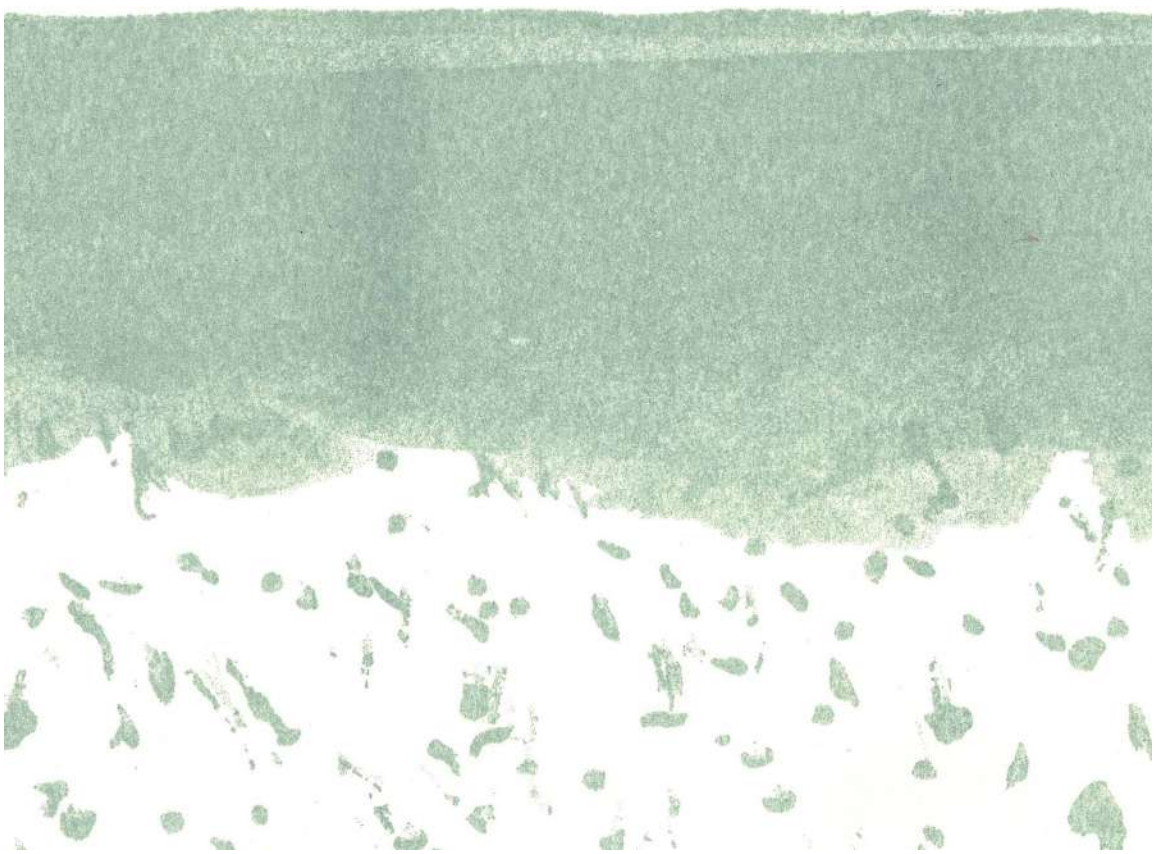
As we talked about in the beginning of this book, the hormone wave is a response to episodes of stress, anxiety, or overthinking. Next time the wave comes, try to figure out what triggered it.

Ask yourself: Did I just hang out with someone who almost always brings a wave with them? Is there something I need to confront in a difficult client? Am I worried about failing at something but haven't admitted it to myself? Is social media causing my adrenaline levels to spike in an unhealthy way?

What you discover is important information. It stimulates you to take action. If a person is a trigger for stress for you, consider cutting down the time you spend around them—or cut them completely out, if that's an option. If the conflict you're avoiding is making you shake, maybe it's time to just get it over with. If you're afraid of failing at something, ask yourself why, and then see if the answer really makes sense. If it does, then you have to ask yourself some more hard questions about your abilities, but if it doesn't, then dive in. In each case, the action will lead you straight into the wave and then out the other side. As accepting of the wave as you've become, the other side—the calm sea—is where you want to get.

It's important to note that hormones can flood your system hours after a stressful experience, so you've got to pay attention. By observing the general patterns of the tides, you'll be much better equipped for unusual surf conditions when they hit.

TRY: Exploring what led to the hormone wave to unlock your own personal patterns and take positive action.



Avoid avoidance.

When it comes to making big decisions, many of us think like gamblers. We think about how our actions may cost us in the short term while dreaming of a new job title, a different lover, a greener pasture. In San Francisco, where I live and work, you hear bombastic statements like: *“I had to eat ramen for three years to start my company, but look at me now.”*

A discussion about risk on Beautiful Voyager led some of us to change the equation around risk in decision-making. Fellow overthinker Clay Daly—father, husband, Floridian, and podcast host—captured it well:

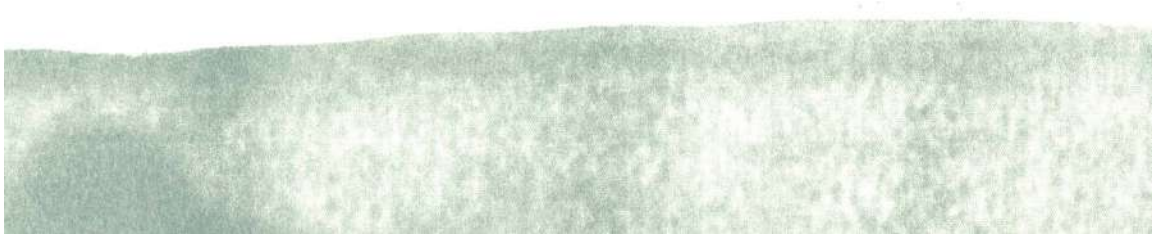
> *I was thinking about leaving a job in the medical field that I’d been at for a long time to join a startup. Though I was excited about the change, I was worried about gambling away my future. It felt risky to take an action like that. I’m risk-averse. Then a good friend said to me: “It might be just as risky, in a different way, to miss out on learning these new skills… and learning more about yourself.” He made me see risk in a new way. By not taking action, he argued, I was also taking a risk of becoming stagnant. Staying put might not be the easy choice it first seemed.*

Said another way: Burying your head in the sand or trying to punt important decisions that feel risky may lead to unintended consequences that are even riskier, just in a different way. The conclusion we came to: When making big decisions, think about the risk involved with sitting still as much as about the risk of leaping forward.

There’s no promise that everything will work out if you make

decisions this way—you don’t control the outcome of your decisions—but the more we all approach our decisions with a clear head, open eyes, and fearless heart, the better prepared we are for what might happen.

TRY: Weighing the risk of action like job instability against the risk of inaction like potential feelings of stagnancy.

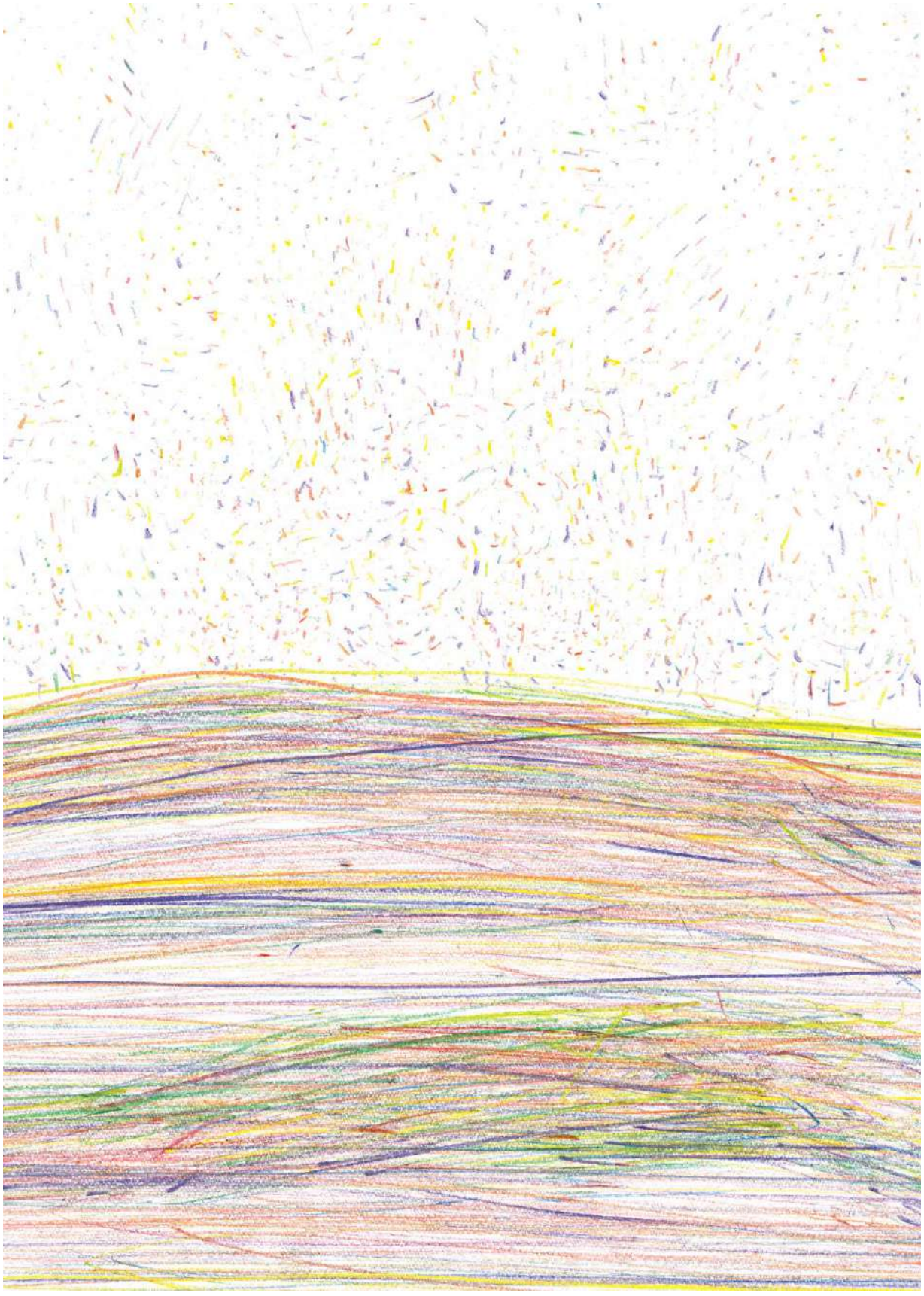


Take your surfing to the next level.

Placid seas with nary a wave in sight. Bravo. Now put a pin in it. By that I mean remember the circumstances that led to this moment. Maybe you saw an old friend for a dinner or hung out with your neighbor's dog. Maybe you took a social media break or did a news fast. Maybe you started knitting or calling your mom every other Sunday—which could either be more or less than you usually talk to her!

A wave-free hour, day, or week is a gift you can keep giving yourself—if you can figure out its source—or many sources.

TRY: Paying attention to the absence of a hormone wave and figuring out what caused that calm sea.



BONUS CHAPTER: READ IN DECEMBER

End-of-Year Catastrophizing

IF you skipped to this part of the book, the year is coming to a close—or else you're *very* into early preparation. It's a time for all kinds of deep, complicated feelings for many people. For overthinkers it can be a time of especially deep worry.

I've avoided clinical psych-speak for most of this book, but year-end is a confusing enough time that it merits dipping a toe into these turgid waters. The word *catastrophizing* in this section's title is an example of a cognitive distortion, a useful psychological concept to remember when the holidays are hitting and the calendar page is about to flip. To recognize that distorted thinking is happening, you need to understand what it is and how it works.

Cognitive distortions are like glasses with the wrong prescription that your mind tricks you into looking through on a bad day. They change the appearance of things, making the real shape of the world around you look worse than it actually is. They're fun house mirrors that can lead you to forget how things actually look. Here's a rundown of ten cognitive distortions that often cloud end-of-year visions:

1. **Catastrophizing:** *"It's never going to end. It's never going to get better. I can't. Why can't I ever do things the right way? I might as well give up."* If thoughts like these come after your mom calls to say hello but doesn't mention the gift you gave her, you're definitely catastrophizing. It's essentially turning something small into something not just huge, but possibly world-ending. It can

happen at any time, but especially when expectations are high, which is why it's a common December visitor.

2. **Black-and-White Thinking:** *"This year was the worst. I have to make next year the best."* This is similar to catastrophizing and can indeed lead to it. Its hallmark is, as the name implies, seeing situations as either completely good or bad, nothing in-between. When this distortive lens takes over, you miss out on the Technicolor variety of life. You're forever stuck in pre-Oz Kansas.

3. **Overgeneralization:** *"I spent too much on presents this year—I* always *do this, I'm so horrible with money!"* Maybe you are—but probably not. Making sweeping global statements from a small subset of data is something every single overthinker in the world does (see how I did that?).

4. **Labeling:** *"I am a failure when it comes to dating."* A subset of overgeneralization, labeling is when you take one personal trait and blow it up to be your entire self. It's like looking at one cloud in a blue sky and saying the day is overcast.

5. **Personalization:** *"It's all my fault my girlfriend and I broke up this year."* When you erroneously take the blame for an event caused by many factors, you are exaggerating your role in a problem.

6. **Mind Reading:** *"I know my boss is hoping I'll be more assertive next year."* You can't really know what others are thinking—unless they tell you—but looking through the lens of this little number allows you to believe that you can see into people's minds. Even Superwoman couldn't do that!

7. **Fortune-Telling:** *"More and more of my friends will move away next year, leaving me alone."* Are you psychic? Is your crystal ball as clear as Windexed glass? You cannot project the future.

8. **Control Fallacy:** *"My company is being reorganized and overhauled, and it's my fault. If only I had done something*

differently, I and all my colleagues would still have jobs." You can no more control how others behave than you can the weather.

9. **Fallacy of Change:** *"My New Year's resolution is to get my family to stop treating me like a child. Then I'll finally be happy."* You're not unhappy because of your family, so thinking you can get others to change—so you can—is like waiting on a train where there are no tracks.

10. **Emotional Reasoning:** *"I feel like this past year was a waste of time—nothing good happened."* Feelings come and go, but not with this skewed distortion. The emotional reasoner seeks to summarize something concrete with words like *never*, *nothing*, and *nobody*.

Your job, at this time of year, is to behave a little like a submarine periscope, constantly swiveling to check for torpedos, aka cognitive distortions. Just recognizing them for what they are explodes them before they hit.

If you miss a distortion and it lands, your brain may take you on the wild ride that is catastrophizing, i.e., magnifying the distortion until it blocks all light and becomes an "end of days" catastrophe from which you will never emerge the same. (Yeah, it's hyperbolic to describe let alone to live through.)

To disarm your catastrophizing mind, do some quick self-surveying and take evasive action (much of it teased out in the previous chapters):

Are you worried you're disappointing others? (You can't always please the people you want to—chapter 1). If you're falling apart, then the person you need to please—at least right now—is yourself.

Are you experiencing more dizziness, nausea, or migraines than usual? (Become a body detective in the New Year—chapter 5.) The more systematic you can be in your

investigations, the more you'll set yourself up for success.

Are you floating in a sea of ambivalence? (Write your way into self-knowledge—chapter 3). Get clear on what is actually going on—not the surface details, but all the details.

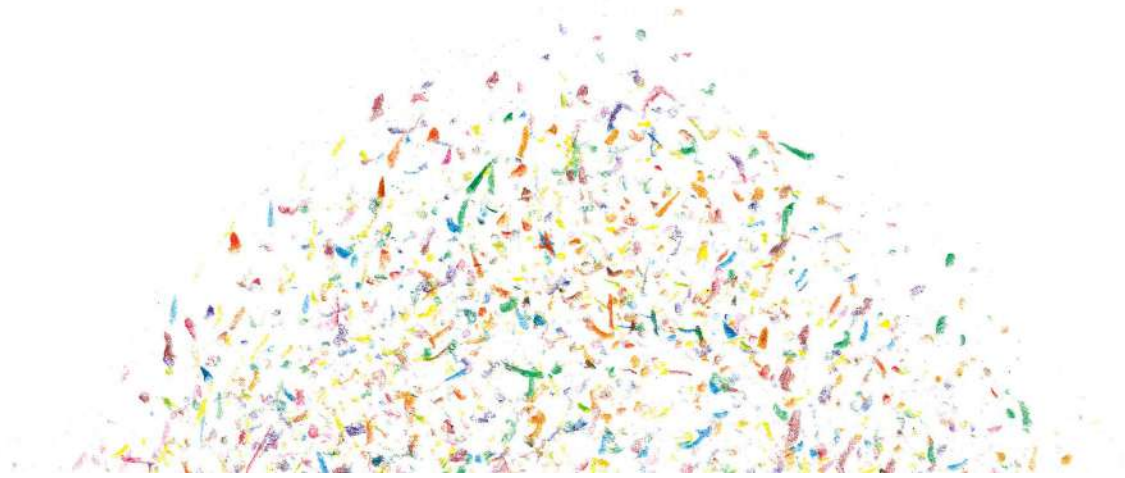
Are you comparing your accomplishments to other people? (Use don't compare!—chapter 5). There's only you. You will have to be enough.

Are you exhausting yourself trying to solve this year's problems before next year starts? (Beware the *Groundhog Day* loop—chapter 5). Fixating on past mistakes can be a trap. You're allowed to look ahead without having everything else figured out.

Are you overwhelmed by the thought of a new year? (Try staying put in the here and now—chapter 4). You don't really need to tackle it all right now.

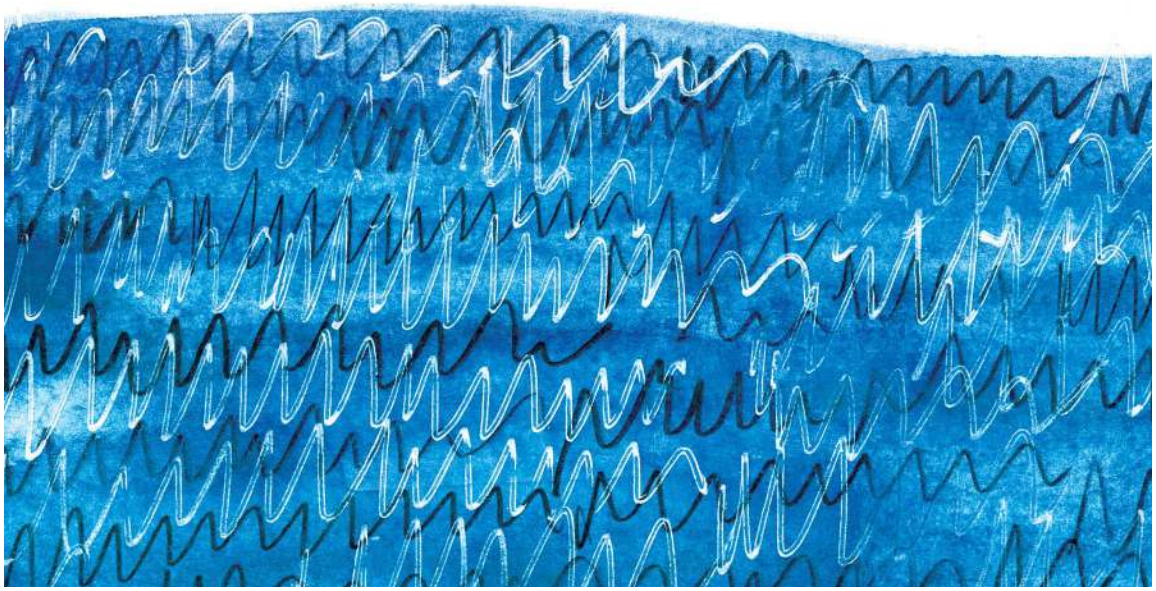
Do you find yourself wanting to stop time and bury your head in the sand? (Try avoiding avoidance—chapter 6). Avoidance comes with its own risks, and realizing that can help you face your fears.

Use every weapon in your ever-growing arsenal to come through the year-end transition feeling like yourself.



ONE FINAL THOUGHT: IT'S NEVER TOO LATE.

Wash, Rinse, Repeat.



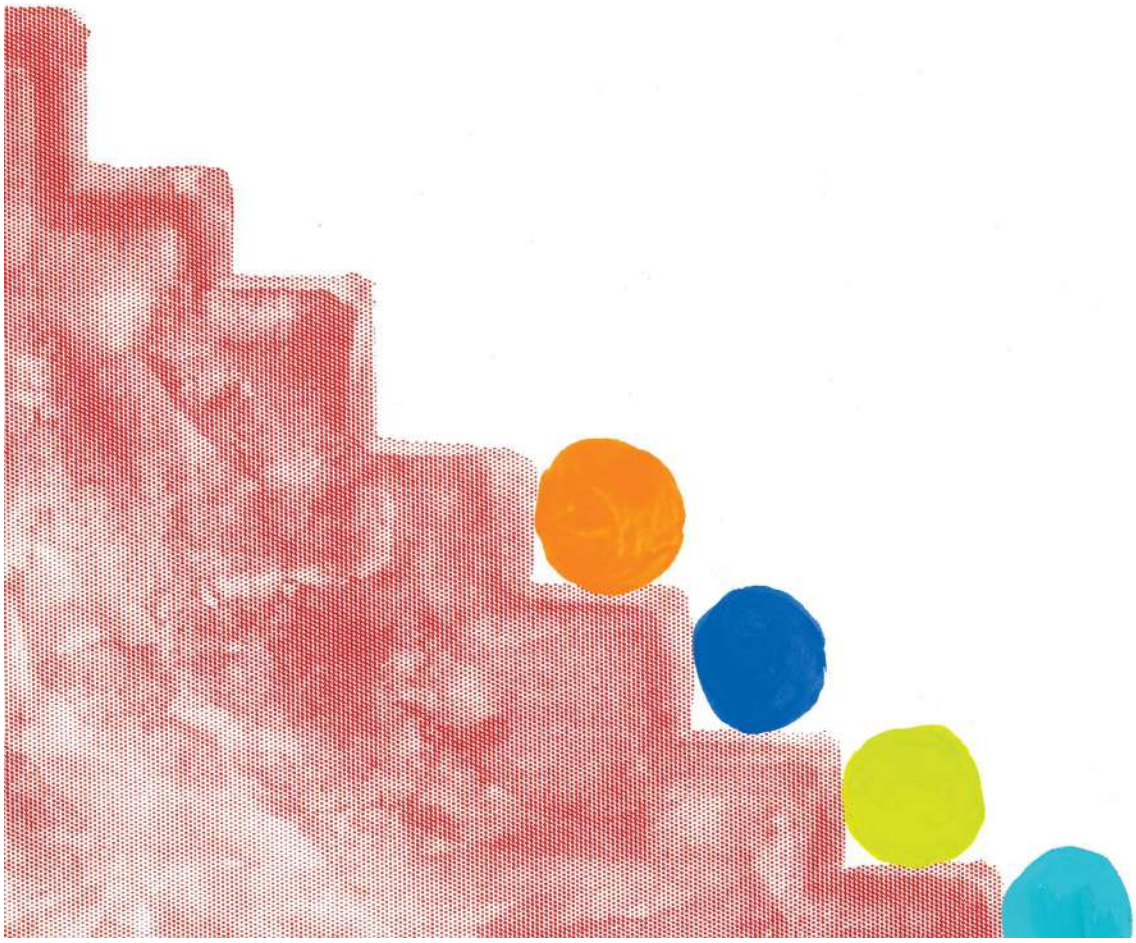
IF you could turn all the ideas in the preceding pages into building materials, you could construct a cozy home and call it the Virtuous Cycle Getaway. With walls built of self-awareness, rooms made of self-acceptance and boundaries, and colorful art and furnishings made of playfulness, the Getaway gets more comfortable every day. Said in a less real estate-y way: if an experiment in this book works, it can build on itself, creating positive momentum along the way.

If you're someone who takes their time moving in, let me suggest that this is a good moment to sideline that habit and start packing. Here are some reasons to book the moving van now:

- When you begin the virtuous cycle of self-awareness, you study your personal wave patterns; buried within them is the treasure you earn for passing through.
- When you begin the virtuous cycle of self-acceptance, you remember that what sets you apart also makes you special and strong.
- When you begin a virtuous cycle of setting boundaries, you teach your brain to back off and then reframe the beliefs that have been causing you pain.
- When you begin a virtuous cycle of play, you are able to let go of future expectations and live increasingly in the moment.

It’s never too late to kick off a virtuous cycle.

Epilogue



IN my twenties and thirties, when therapists would ask me how I was feeling, I'd fill the space with entertaining stories, theories, and observations. I'd tell them that moving from New York to Seattle felt like a Goldilocks situation, where I'd gone from "too hard" to "too soft," and that I needed to find "just right." I'd make them laugh at my tales of first dates gone wrong, describing myself kissing a patchouli-drenched frog in the hopes that I'd transform him into a regular-

smelling prince. I loved it when my therapists would confirm that I was well-adjusted and normal. Funny even! I loved their empathy for job situations gone wrong or heartrending breakups. Most of all, I loved their approval of my decisions. It wasn't conscious at the time, but I knew how to get their approval, and did it, again and again.

Unfortunately for me, I spent those years in therapy stuck inside myself without even knowing it, overthinking my answers to their questions and never realizing how much people-pleasing I was doing in my responses to them. I saw five different therapists over that time. Not one of them spotted that I had something larger going on, a pattern with a diagnosis.

That eventual diagnosis—generalized anxiety disorder—by a wise neurologist, felt like being handed the keys to my brain. I'd suspected the fainting spells, nausea, and thirty-nine years of migraines were unusual, but no one was ever able to tell me why until that moment. Through my diagnosis, I learned my body was undergoing a physiological response, a reaction to an excess of the wrong kind of hormones.

Many of us are trapped in surface-level thinking and data gathering. I was for over twenty years. I spent money I didn't have on medical appointments I thought I needed. My singular focus, to get rid of my pain, led me into debt and caused me to miss a deeper point. I hadn't yet learned the first lesson of every Star Wars movie: Nothing external can bestow a sense of control on you. The only answers lie within.

I created the Beautiful Voyager site so that overthinkers like me wouldn't have to wait thirty-nine years to figure themselves out. There is so much good stuff that comes from knowing why you are the way you are, and no time should be wasted getting to that revelation.

To be clear, not all overthinkers have anxiety disorders. Here's a basic test: If you're an overthinker experiencing physical pain like migraines, nausea, tingling in your limbs, or skin conditions like eczema, it's worth a visit to the doctor to determine if your thinking is a factor.

But, no matter what the answer is, you have tools.

Maybe this book is just your jumping-off point.

Maybe the next stop is a therapist. There is a specific type of therapy that is proven to work well for anxiety disorders. It's called cognitive behavioral therapy, and it functions to rewire your thinking, dampening cognitive distortions.

Maybe you already see a therapist and what you need now is to feel less alone with your brain. That's what places like the Beautiful Voyager are all about: sharing the experience with like-minded souls.

Maybe you need it all. Greed is good when it comes to loosening this knot. There is no approach that works for everyone, so the only way you can figure out what will work is by experimenting with an open mind.

Wherever you are, hang in there. I love to say, *"My favorite people are Beautiful Voyagers."* We are a fierce lot, curious and courageous, sensitive and strong, bold and brave. I believe in you, fellow Beautiful Voyager. You're gonna do great things.

Acknowledgments

FOR joining with me to make this book happen, thank you agent Danielle Svetcov, artist Leah Rosenberg, designers Sasha Wizansky and Jenna McBride, writer Gabi Moskowitz, and editor Shannon Connors Fabricant. For being my lifelong book friends, thank you Vadim Rutman, Anika Streitfeld, Panio Gianopoulos, and Kate Nitze. For reading this book in its first form, thank you Gordon Young, Sarah Burt, Leslie Dotson Van Every, and Alex Solarte. For putting up with my gawky years on this subject and believing in me anyway, thank you Nancy Arthur, Matt Arthur, John Arthur, Meaghan Rady, Molly Ringwald, and Nell Waters. For giving me the keys to my brain, Dr. Marina Kasavin. Thank you to everyone who shared their experiences here to help others. For how much you care, and the creativity you bring to the world around you, this book is truly for you, fellow Beautiful Voyagers.

Finally, for Michael and Alice. Thank you for making me laugh

every day.

RUNNING
PRESS

Colophon

THE art in this book is made by Leah Rosenberg, whose process often involves color, form, and layers. Each artwork is a three-step endeavor. First she makes a monochrome painting using gouache and watercolor. Next, she scans the painting through a Risograph machine, which acts like a photocopier, but instead of toner uses ink, as in screen printing, resulting in a bit more texture and a richer color. Finally, she returns to her palette to hand paint another layer on the Risograph print for an extra pop of color.

MEREDITH SKRZYPEK ARTHUR, a San Francisco–based writer and video producer, has experienced work stress in all of its incarnations and lived to tell this tale. An early pioneer of “getting people to talk about mental health in a normal way,” Meredith created the website Beautiful Voyager in 2015 for overthinkers, perfectionists, and people pleasers. She also edits Invisible Illness, the largest mental health publication on Medium.

LEAH ROSENBERG focuses on the emotional and psychological impact of color in our lives through painting, sculpture, printmaking, food, and performance. Her mural, *Everywhere A Color*, can be found in the International Terminal at SFO. Her most recent book is *The Color Collector’s Handbook* (Chronicle Books). Leah was also the creative director for Color Factory in SF (2017) and NYC (2018).