

3 SIGNS YOU'RE CREATING UNNECESSARY SUFFERING

(And What To Do About It)

A practical guide from The Science of Mental Freedom

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This isn't meant to be read once and filed away.

First read (10 minutes):

Read through all three signs. Notice which ones you recognize in your own experience.

Throughout the week: Return to whichever sign feels most active in your life right now. Try the practice for that sign multiple times. Brief moments of recognition are more valuable than lengthy analysis.

When you're stuck: If you catch yourself in one of these patterns during a difficult moment, flip back to that sign's practice. Even 30 seconds of recognition can shift your relationship to what's happening.

***The goal isn't perfection.** You won't catch these patterns every time. You'll forget. You'll get swept up in the narrator or the worry loop. That's normal. What matters is recognizing them slightly more often this week than last week.*

Small shifts compound. Catching one pattern once per day means you're conscious of your mind's activity instead of completely identified with it. That alone changes everything over time.

Now, the three signs.

WHY THESE THREE SIGNS MATTER

For decades, scientists and contemplatives have investigated the same question from different angles: Why does mental suffering persist even when actual circumstances are manageable?

What neuroscience is discovering: Your brain doesn't passively receive reality. It actively predicts what should happen based on past experience, then interprets what actually happens through those predictions. When prediction meets reality, your brain creates meaning - and that meaning often includes unnecessary suffering.

Scientists debate the exact mechanisms (predictive processing, embodied cognition, various competing models), but they agree on this: much of what you experience as "reality" is actually your brain's interpretation.

What ancient wisdom observed: Through careful attention to their own minds, contemplatives discovered the same pattern 2,500 years ago. The mind constantly adds layers of meaning, interpretation, and story to direct experience. Most suffering comes from these additions, not from circumstances themselves.

Different methods. Same discovery.

The three signs you're about to explore represent the most common ways your mind creates unnecessary suffering. We won't take sides in scientific debates or require you to accept ancient teachings. We'll simply show you what's happening in your own mind - something you can verify immediately through direct observation.

Not because suffering disappears completely - life includes genuine difficulty, loss, and challenge. Those remain.

But because you stop adding mental suffering on top of actual difficulty. You stop creating anxiety about your anxiety. Stories about what things mean. Endless mental spinning that exhausts without resolving.

What you gain: Clarity in the moment. Faster recovery from upsets. The freedom to fully engage with life - both its challenges and its genuine pleasures - without the mind's constant interference.

Each sign includes:

- What it looks like in daily life
- Why it happens (the mechanism behind it)
- What it costs you when it runs unchecked
- A simple practice to interrupt the pattern (recognition, not hours of daily meditation)
- A deeper question for reflection

SIGN 1: Your Mind Won't Stop Narrating

What It Looks Like

You're driving to work. The road is clear. The weather is fine. Nothing is wrong.

Yet your mind is running: *"Did I say the right thing in that meeting yesterday? Why did she look at me like that? I should have handled it differently. What if they think I'm incompetent? Maybe I need to send a follow-up email. But what if that makes it worse..."*

The mental narrator never stops. It judges, analyzes, predicts, rehashes. Even during pleasant moments - a good meal, time with family, a beautiful sunset - part of your attention is pulled away by internal commentary about the experience rather than the experience itself.

You might notice:

- Constant internal dialogue, even when nothing requires thinking
- Replaying past conversations or rehearsing future ones
- Judging your own performance in real-time ("I'm doing this wrong")
- Planning your response while someone else is still talking
- Feeling exhausted despite not actually accomplishing anything

Why It Happens

Neuroscientists have identified a network in your brain called the Default Mode Network (DMN). When you're not focused on a specific task, the DMN activates - creating the sense of a narrator, a "you" who's commenting on everything.

This isn't a flaw. The DMN serves important functions: self-reflection, planning, learning from the past. The problem arises when it runs constantly, treating every moment as something that needs mental commentary rather than direct experience.

Ancient contemplatives called this mental proliferation - the mind's tendency to elaborate endlessly on simple experiences. They noticed that suffering increases proportionally to how much the narrator dominates awareness.

The mechanism: Your brain evolved to predict and plan. But when prediction becomes constant, you're never actually present to what's happening. You're experiencing your thoughts about life rather than life itself.

What It Costs You

When the narrator runs unchecked:

- **You miss what's actually happening.** The conversation, the meal, the sunset - you're there physically but absent mentally.

- **Simple moments become complicated.** A quiet evening becomes an opportunity for worry. A neutral email becomes evidence of rejection.
 - **Recovery takes forever.** One critical comment can fuel internal dialogue for days.
 - **Relationships suffer.** People sense when you're not really present with them.
 - **Energy drains constantly.** The narrator exhausts you even when circumstances are calm.
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The Practice: 60-Second Observer Exercise

Right now, as you read this, notice:

Is there internal commentary running? Perhaps evaluating this guide? Planning what you'll do next? Wondering if this will work?

That's the narrator. And here's what's remarkable: **the part of you noticing the narrator isn't the narrator itself.**

There's awareness observing the mental commentary. This awareness doesn't judge, doesn't elaborate, doesn't need the narrator to function.

Several times today, pause for 60 seconds and simply notice:

- Is the narrator running?
- What's it saying?
- Can you observe it without engaging with it?

You don't need to stop the narrator (you can't, really). Just recognize it's happening. That recognition creates a gap - a moment where you're not completely identified with the mental commentary.

That gap is where freedom lives.

A Deeper Question

What would remain if the mental narrator stopped for just one minute? What would you experience without the constant internal dialogue?

You don't need to answer this intellectually. Just hold the question. Notice what arises when you're not filling silence with mental commentary.

SIGN 2: You're Arguing With What Already Is

What It Looks Like

It's raining on the day you planned an outdoor event. Traffic is heavy when you're already running late. Your teenager forgot to do their homework again. A colleague makes a decision you disagree with.

Your immediate internal response: *"This shouldn't be happening. Why does this always happen to me? This isn't fair. If only they had..."*

You're arguing with reality. Fighting what's already true. Resisting what can't be changed in this moment.

You might notice:

- Frequent use of "should" and "shouldn't" in your thinking
- Rehashing events that already happened, trying to make them different in your mind
- Feeling frustrated by things completely outside your control
- Spending energy wishing circumstances were different rather than responding to what actually is
- Physical tension in your body when reality doesn't match your preferences

Why It Happens

Neuroscientist Lisa Barrett's research reveals that your brain constantly generates predictions about what should happen based on past experience. When reality doesn't match the prediction, your brain experiences "prediction error" - a mismatch between expectation and actuality.

Small prediction errors are useful (they help you learn and adapt). But when your brain treats every mismatch as a threat or injustice, you create suffering on top of circumstances that are simply... what they are.

The rain isn't targeting you. Traffic isn't personal. Your teenager's brain is still developing executive function. Reality is neutral - it's just happening. But your mind adds a layer of interpretation: "This is wrong. This is unfair. This shouldn't be."

Ancient wisdom traditions noticed this pattern 2,500 years ago. They called it the "second arrow": Life shoots the first arrow (difficulty, discomfort, disappointment). You shoot the second arrow at yourself (resistance, complaint, the story that reality is wrong).

The first arrow is unavoidable. The second arrow is optional.

What It Costs You

When you argue with reality:

- **Energy drains into resistance.** Instead of responding skillfully to what is, you waste resources fighting what can't be changed.
 - **Simple difficulties become crises.** Minor inconveniences feel catastrophic because you've added "this shouldn't be happening" on top of them.
 - **Solutions become invisible.** When you're busy arguing that rain shouldn't exist, you can't see the simple option: grab an umbrella.
 - **Relationships deteriorate.** Other people sense your constant disagreement with how things are, including how they are.
 - **Recovery slows dramatically.** You can't move forward from difficulties while simultaneously insisting they shouldn't have happened.
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The Practice: The Reality Question + Feeling-Tone Recognition

Next time you notice yourself thinking "this shouldn't be happening," try this:

Step 1: Ask Byron Katie's powerful question:

"Can I absolutely know that's true? That this shouldn't be happening?"

It IS happening. Right now. So in what sense "shouldn't" it be? Your preference doesn't change what's actually occurring.

Step 2: Notice the feeling-tone underneath the story:

Beneath "this shouldn't be happening," there's usually just an unpleasant sensation. Frustration. Disappointment. Discomfort.

The sensation itself is manageable. It's the story about why the sensation shouldn't exist that creates suffering.

Step 3: Respond to what is:

"It's raining" → "I'll move the event indoors or reschedule"

"Traffic is heavy" → "I'll call ahead and let them know I'm delayed"

"Teenager forgot homework" → "What consequence makes sense here?"

Reality stops being an enemy when you stop fighting it.

A Deeper Question

What if reality is always kinder than your stories about reality? What if circumstances are just neutral, and suffering comes entirely from insisting they should be different?

Again, don't answer intellectually. Just notice: In this moment, what happens when you stop arguing with what already is?

SIGN 3: You Mistake Mental Activity for Progress

What It Looks Like

You lie awake at 2 AM "solving" a work problem. Or you spend your morning "planning" your day while never actually starting anything. Or you analyze a relationship issue from every possible angle without having the actual conversation that would resolve it.

Your mind is extraordinarily busy. Thinking, analyzing, planning, problem-solving. It feels productive. It feels like you're doing something.

But hours later, you're exhausted and nothing has actually changed. The problem remains unsolved. The day hasn't started. The conversation hasn't happened.

You might notice:

- Confusing worry with preparation ("I'm just being responsible")
- Replanning the same project repeatedly without executing
- Analyzing problems endlessly without taking action
- Feeling mentally exhausted despite accomplishing little
- Mistaking information consumption for understanding
- Reading about solutions rather than implementing them

Why It Happens

Your brain evolved a powerful capacity for abstract thinking - imagining scenarios, weighing options, planning ahead. This capacity built civilization. It's not the enemy.

The problem arises when thinking becomes a substitute for action, or worse, when anxiety disguises itself as useful planning.

Here's the mechanism: Anxiety creates an unpleasant sensation. Your brain, trying to resolve this discomfort, generates thoughts. "If I just think about this more thoroughly, I'll feel better. If I plan it perfectly, I'll eliminate the uncertainty."

But thinking about uncertainty doesn't eliminate it. Planning doesn't prevent all problems. And analyzing a difficult conversation doesn't make it less difficult - having it does.

Meanwhile, genuine mental work - the kind that actually produces insight and solutions - requires a different quality of attention. It's focused, time-limited, and produces concrete outputs. It doesn't spin endlessly without resolution.

Ancient contemplatives distinguished between useful thought (applied to workable concerns) and rumination (mental spinning that creates suffering without solving anything). Modern

psychology confirms this: productive thinking focuses on something specific and naturally reaches a conclusion.

What It Costs You

When mental activity substitutes for action:

- **Real problems don't get solved.** Thinking about the conversation doesn't equal having it.
 - **Exhaustion without accomplishment.** You feel like you've been working hard, but nothing tangible has changed.
 - **Decision paralysis.** The more you analyze, the less clear the right choice becomes.
 - **Opportunity loss.** While you're mentally preparing, life is happening without you.
 - **The anxiety intensifies.** Because on some level, you know thinking isn't actually addressing the situation.
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The Practice: Distinguish Worry from Workable Concern

Right now, bring to mind something you've been "working on" mentally:

Ask yourself three questions:

1. Is this a workable concern?

Can you take concrete action on it right now or soon? If yes, what's the next physical step?

2. If it's not workable right now, is there value in continuing to think about it?

Often the answer is no. The concern might be: "What if I get sick someday?" You can take reasonable health precautions, but mentally rehearsing illness serves no purpose.

3. Am I thinking, or am I worrying?

Thinking has a clear object, produces insight or a plan, and naturally reaches an endpoint.

Worrying loops without resolution, creates anxiety, and continues indefinitely without producing useful output.

The practice: When you catch yourself in mental spinning:

- If it's workable: Take one concrete action, however small. Movement breaks the loop.
- If it's not workable now: Acknowledge "I can't do anything about this right now" and consciously set it aside.
- If it's worry disguised as planning: Name it accurately. "This is anxiety, not useful thinking."

The shift: From exhausting mental activity to either genuine productive thinking or conscious rest. Both serve you. Spinning serves nothing.

If You're Stuck in the Loop:

You don't need to resolve the worry before taking action. You don't need perfect clarity before starting. You don't need the anxiety to disappear first.

Here's the key insight: You can keep the worry running in the background AND still take one small physical step forward. The worry doesn't prevent action - only believing you need to resolve the worry first prevents action.

Try this: "I'm worried about X, AND I'm going to [make the phone call / send the email / have the conversation / start the first task] anyway."

Movement often dissolves worry more effectively than thinking ever does. Not because you've solved the problem, but because taking action shifts you from mental spinning to actual engagement with reality.

The worry might persist. That's okay. Take the step anyway.

A Deeper Question

What if you already know what to do, and thinking more is just avoiding action? What would happen if you stopped analyzing and simply took the next small step?

Sometimes the answer emerges not through more thinking, but through doing the thing you've been mentally preparing for.

Where This Leads

If you've recognized even one of these three signs in your own experience, you've taken the first step toward mental freedom.

Recognition is everything. Once you can see these patterns operating, they begin to lose their automatic grip. The narrator becomes observable rather than invisible. Arguments with reality become conscious choices rather than reflexive responses. Mental spinning reveals itself as spinning rather than progress.

But recognition is just the beginning.

The Deeper Understanding

These three signs are symptoms of a more fundamental mechanism - the way your mind automatically constructs suffering from neutral information. Understanding this mechanism changes everything.

The Science of Mental Freedom

(Book Launch Q1 2026) reveals:

- **Why** your mind creates these patterns in the first place (the neuroscience and psychology behind mental construction)
- **How** to recognize construction happening before it becomes full-blown suffering. For example, you'll learn to catch the moment your brain turns a neutral email into evidence of criticism - before the full emotional reaction cascades.
- **What** ancient wisdom and modern research both discovered about reducing unnecessary suffering
- **Practices that work** during actual stress - not just during calm moments, but in the middle of difficult conversations, work pressure, and genuine challenges

Most importantly: You'll discover how to prevent falling into these traps in the first place, without requiring hours of daily practice. Just brief moments of recognition integrated into your actual life.

This isn't about becoming perfectly peaceful or eliminating all difficulty. It's about stopping the mental suffering you add on top of life's genuine challenges - so you can respond with clarity rather than react from confusion. You'll discover how to live with more joy, deeper presence with people you love, and natural peace that doesn't depend on perfect circumstances.

What You Get Starting Now

You don't have to wait until Q1 2026 to benefit from this work.

When you connect on LinkedIn or join the email list, you'll receive:

Regular practical insights - Brief, immediately applicable ideas about mental clarity, decision-making under pressure, and reducing unnecessary stress. No fluff. No meditation requirements. Just what actually works in real life

Real-world applications - How to use these principles during difficult conversations, high-stakes decisions, team conflicts, and the daily pressures of life - at work and at home.

Early access - First look at additional chapters, practices, and tools as the book launch approaches. Plus opportunities to engage with this work before it's publicly available.

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I share insights, reflections, and practical approaches to consciousness and mental clarity. No fluff, no mysticism - just what actually works.

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One Final Practice

Right now, before you close this guide:

Pause for just 30 seconds.

Notice if any of the three signs are active in this moment.

The narrator commenting on what you just read?

Resistance to something in your current circumstances?

Mental spinning about what comes next?

Just notice. No need to fix anything.

That simple act of noticing - that's the beginning of freedom.

Mohan Mark Amaratunga, PhD is a retired life sciences R&D executive who has spent 50 years investigating consciousness and mental suffering.

Raised in a secular family in culturally Buddhist Sri Lanka, he began exploring existential questions at age nine. That childhood investigation never stopped. It evolved into systematic inquiry, combining rigorous scientific training (PhD in biochemistry) with decades of direct contemplative practice.

After 40 years in the United States, including decades in life sciences R&D leadership, he understands the cost of mental clutter in high-pressure environments. These insights didn't make him immune to suffering - they emerged from navigating it, often imperfectly, through real-world challenges.

This guide distills 40 years of investigation into practices you can begin applying immediately. What took decades to discover can be verified by you in minutes.

The Science of Mental Freedom invites you to explore your own mind as the primary laboratory, leading to what Mohan calls "mental freedom": the capacity to live with clarity, authenticity, and significantly less unnecessary suffering.

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