International Multispecialty Journal of Health (IMJ Health)
ISSN: [2395-6291]
[Vol-12, Issue-8, August- 2026]
Website: www.imjhealth.org
Journal DOI: 10.25125/medical-journal

Thinking Time in Healthcare: Popular Promise, Limited Evidence — A Review of Online Discourse

Kaya Bhandari[1]; Mark Phillips[2*]; Goran Calic[3]; Alex Thabane[4]; Mohit Bhandari[5]

[1]Faculty of Health Sciences, Western University, London, Canada
[2,5]Department of Surgery, McMaster University, Hamilton Canada
[3]DeGroote School of Business, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada
[4]Department of Health Research Methods, Evidence, and Impact, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada
*Corresponding Author

Received:-31 July 2026/ Revised:- 12 August 2026/ Accepted: 21 August 2026/ Published: 31-08-2026

Abstract— *In healthcare, the importance of taking time to 'think deeply' about a challenge or an opportunity is especially important because decisions often require healthcare leaders to integrate uncertainty, competing priorities, patient values, and the best available evidence. Deliberate pauses for reflection, often called "thinking time," are widely promoted as a way to enhance creativity and productivity, yet most public guidance comes from blogs and online media rather than scientific research. This review examined how thinking time is portrayed in popular online discourse, with the aims of exploring how it is defined, what benefits and outcomes are emphasized, what daily durations are recommended, and what strategies are proposed for its implementation. We searched Google (2015–2025) for English-language blogs and articles explicitly discussing thinking time and extracted data on authorship, publication type, use of references, recommended durations, benefits, outcomes, and implementation strategies. One hundred articles were included. Most were published in the past five years, written by individuals with post-secondary education, and presented as personal blogs. Seventy percent provided no references, and few cited scientific sources. Benefits were most often linked to creativity and innovation. Recommended amounts were heterogeneous and were most often expressed weekly (commonly 30–120 minutes per week, or approximately 4-15 minutes each day); where daily figures were given they ranged from a few minutes to several hours. Strategies included time blocking, reducing distractions, journaling, reflection, collaboration, and walking. Online discourse strongly endorses thinking time despite limited scientific evidence, highlighting the need for rigorous research to test optimal protocols and outcomes.*

Keywords— Thinking Time, Creativity, Blogs, Review, Benefits of Thinking, Thinking Strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

In healthcare, the importance of taking time to 'think deeply' about a challenge or an opportunity is especially important because decisions often require healthcare leaders to integrate uncertainty, competing priorities, patient values, and the best available evidence. The challenge, of course, is time constraints and competing priorities for time. But this needn't be a competing priority; rather, it should be an integrated habit across healthcare. Thinking is a uniquely human process that we spend most of our daily lives doing. While it often takes the form of spontaneous and undirected thought, such as mind wandering or daydreaming, we also can engage in deliberate, goal-oriented thinking to generate ideas and solve problems [1,2]. John Dewey described this type of thought as "the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it" [3]. In contemporary discussions of creativity, productivity, and leadership, deliberately setting aside uninterrupted time for deliberate, goal-oriented thinking, often referred to as "thinking time", has increasingly been promoted as a strategy for improving clarity, innovation, and decision-making [4].

Deliberate thinking time may therefore serve as a safeguard against premature closure, cognitive overload, and reflexive decision-making in complex clinical environments.

The current scientific research appears to suggest the utility of thinking time for creativity and innovation. For example, walking, a common activity used to facilitate thinking time, has been associated with increased divergent thinking [5]. More, thinking time can reduce time pressure and provide the opportunity for thought incubation, both of which are associated with creativity [6,7]. However, despite these indications from the current literature and its frequent recommendation by academics, there is virtually no scientific evidence specifically on the topic of thinking time [8,9]. As a result, most people seeking advice on how to integrate thinking time in their daily lives often rely on online content in the form of online blogs, productivity websites, and articles; online blogs are increasingly a major source of information due to their easy accessibility and affordability, and are regularly used for educational purposes [10].

Given that most of the information and recommendations on thinking time exist in the form of online articles, an understanding of the nature and content of the online discourse on thinking time is of interest, particularly for two reasons: to identify the most common recommendations being made to the general public on this topic, and subsequently inform future scientific research. A qualitative review approach is well suited to these objectives. Thinking time is loosely defined, and the available evidence is fragmented and largely non-scientific. Our aim was to map how the concept is portrayed across online sources and identify gaps for future research, rather than to answer a focused effectiveness question or appraise study quality, as a systematic review would. Framed by the population, concept, and context (PCC) elements used to structure the review questions, we examined publicly available online articles and blogs (population), discussing the concept of thinking time, including its definitions, benefits, recommended durations, and implementation strategies (concept), within popular English-language online discourse aimed at a general and professional readership (context). Within this framework, we explored four specific aims: (1) how thinking time is defined and justified, (2) what benefits and outcomes are emphasized, (3) what daily durations are recommended, and (4) what strategies are proposed to incorporate thinking time into daily routines. These aims were addressed through a structured search and extraction of 100 online articles published between 2015 and 2025.

II. METHODS

This qualitative scoping review was reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) [11]. This review was not registered, and no a priori protocol was published. We did not require ethics approval for this study as it involved only publicly available online content.

2.1 Definition of Thinking Time

For this review, we operationally defined "thinking time" as the intentional allocation of uninterrupted time for reflective, goal-directed thought, idea generation, or problem-solving. To our knowledge, no standardized scientific definition of "thinking time" exists; we therefore constructed this working definition to guide screening and charting.

2.2 Search Strategy & Eligibility Criteria

We searched the online web-page indexing database, Google, on July 22, 2025, to identify content related directly to "thinking time". We used the following broad search strings, combined with the Boolean operators [AND/OR], to maximize the sensitivity of the search:

- "what is thinking time"
- "meaning of thinking time"
- "define thinking time"
- "benefits of thinking time"
- "why is thinking time important"
- "impact of thinking time on creativity"

- "how to schedule thinking time"
- "tips for using thinking time effectively"
- "recommended amount of thinking time"
- "thinking time for leaders"
- "strategic thinking time business"
- "productivity and thinking time"
- "thinking time and creativity"
- "how reflection improves creative thinking"

We limited our search to English language articles published online within the last 10 years (2015-2025). All included articles fell within the eligibility window (2015-2025). For 8 articles a precise publication year could not be confirmed from the source; these were retained as eligible but recorded as 'year not determinable' and excluded from the year-distribution analysis (n=92).

We included online blogs and articles with an explicit focus on "thinking time", as previously defined. We included blogs and articles which provided any of the following insights associated with thinking time such as: (1) benefits, (2) outcomes and impacts, (3) recommendations for daily allotments of time to think, and (4) strategies to schedule thinking time. We excluded articles that mentioned thinking time only in passing without substantive discussion, or that focused on unrelated topics (e.g., time management in a general sense without reference to deliberate thinking).

2.3 Screening and Data Extraction

We performed title screening and full-text review independently and in duplicate by reviewers Kaya Bhandari (KB) and Mark Phillips (MP). Both reviewers had experience in qualitative research methods and literature review methodology. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion until a consensus was reached.

Screening proceeded sequentially by results page until the reviewers judged that results were no longer relevant to the review question, defined as a page on which no result met the eligibility criteria. By page 16, results predominantly comprised unrelated commercial and definitional content, and screening was suspended at this point (160 results screened). The stopping rule was applied consistently by both reviewers, who independently confirmed that subsequent pages contained no eligible content.

Data extraction was performed by one reviewer (KB) and independently verified for accuracy by a second reviewer (MP) for all 100 included articles. We created a custom data extraction template to extract study demographic data about the author (i.e., credentials, professional titles), data type (i.e., blog, social media, online news articles, magazine article), referencing of article (i.e., scientific articles, non-scientific research), recommended daily thinking time, benefits of thinking time, impact of thinking time, and scheduling thinking time. Response options were charted as nominal or ordinal categories with free text for comments.

2.4 Data Analysis

We reported the article characteristics using descriptive statistics; categorical outcomes were expressed as counts with percentages, and continuous outcomes as means with standard deviation. We performed a narrative synthesis of the literature, synthesizing the results across the included sources. We charted each recommendation in its originally stated cadence (e.g., per day or per week) rather than converting all values to a daily figure, to avoid distorting episodic recommendations. We also explored qualitatively the article "excerpts" related to themes which included: (1) recommendations and (2) impacts of thinking time. Data were presented narratively, as well as with constructed tables and figures. Consistent with scoping review methodology, we did not conduct a critical appraisal of individual sources of evidence [11].

III. RESULTS

3.1 Article Search

Our search yielded approximately 105,000 results. Applying our stopping rule, screening was suspended at page 16 (160 results screened); 60 were excluded as not focused on thinking time, leaving 100 included articles (Figure 1).

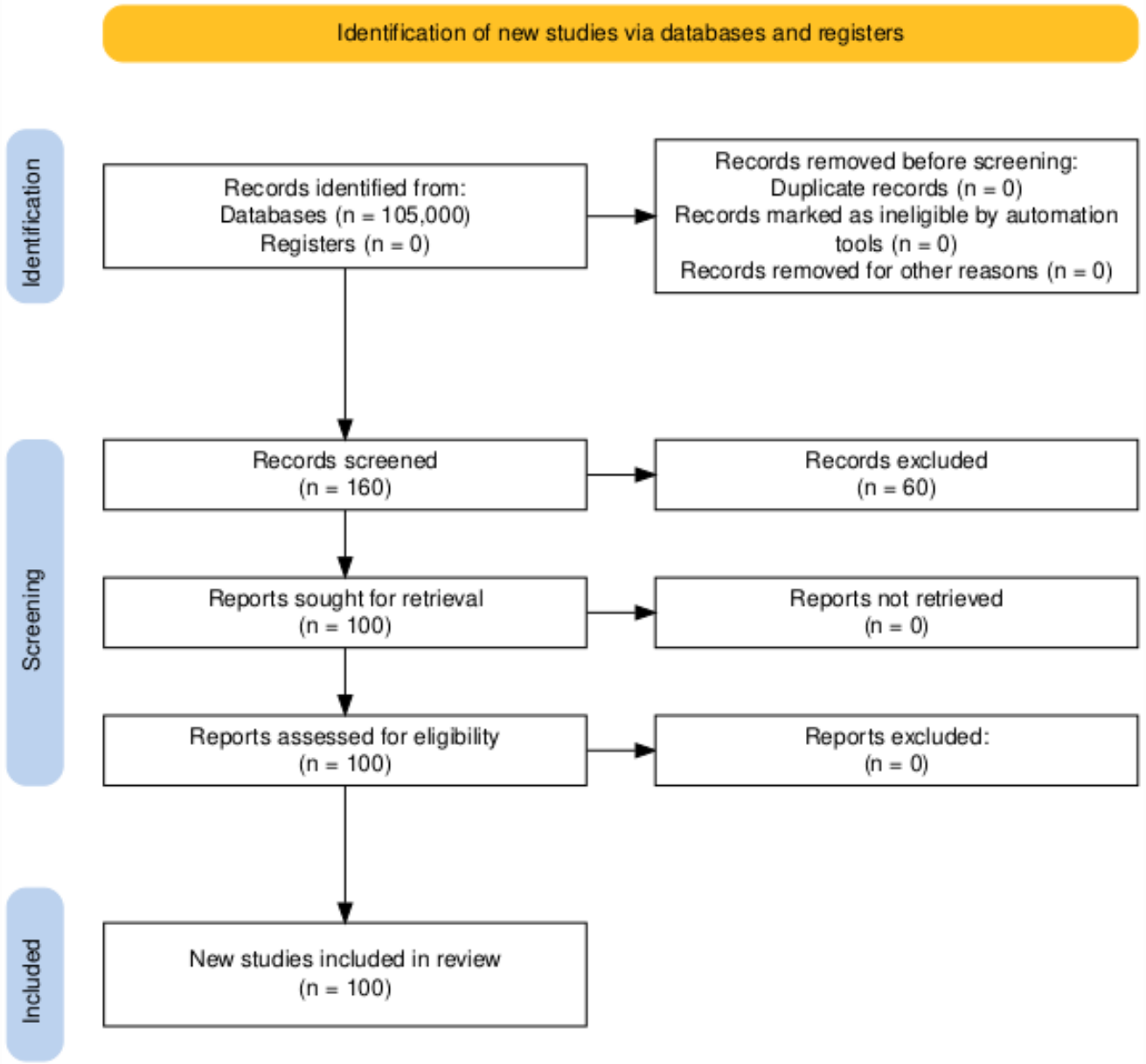

FIGURE 1: PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of the article identification, screening, and inclusion process.

3.2 Demographics

Most publications on thinking time were recent, with 71% published in the last five years, and largely authored by individuals with post-secondary degrees (University degrees) (Table 1). Half of authors self-identified as mentors or coaches (50%), with fewer from academic or executive backgrounds. Articles were overwhelmingly personal blogs (67%), with the majority (70%) providing no references to their blogs. Of 30 articles with references, only 30% cited scientific research articles. References were classed as scientific, non-scientific (blog/book/social media), or journal; three articles cited more than one type and were counted under each, so reference-type counts (n=32) exceed the number of referenced articles (n=30). Characteristics of all 100 included sources are provided in S1 Table.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS [N=100 ARTICLES]

Category	Articles Reporting (%)
Publication Year [n=92 with determinable year]	
5 years ago or less	71%
Greater than 5 years	29%
Academic Credentials	
MSc/PhD	42%
Undergraduate	35%
Highschool	3%
Unknown	14%
No author listed	6%
Career Title	
C-Suite Member	21%
Mentor/Coach	50%
Journalist	15%
Influencer/Blogger	3%
Unknown	4%
No Author Listed	6%
Other	1%
Classification of Article	
LinkedIn Post	5%
Personal Blog	67%
Podcast	4%
News Outlet	3%
Magazine	16%
Journal Publication Article	0%
Other	5%
References Provided	
Yes	30%
No	70%
Types of References [N= 30]	
Scientific	30%
Non-Scientific	70%
Thinking Time Benefits Included	
Yes	66%
No	34%
Thinking Time Strategy Recommendations Included	
Yes	82%
No	18%

3.3 Benefits and Recommended Thinking Time

Sixty-six articles provided insights on the benefits of thinking time while 27 articles provided recommended amounts of thinking time (Table 2). Suggested benefits included creativity and innovation (37 articles), problem-solving and decision-making (32 articles), and focus/productivity (28 articles). Recommended amounts were heterogeneous and were expressed on different cadences. Most quantified recommendations were framed weekly (16 articles), commonly 61–120 minutes per week; nine articles framed recommendations daily, ranging from a few minutes to several hours, and two used other framings. No single duration predominated.

TABLE 2
BENEFITS AND RECOMMENDED THINKING TIME

Types of Benefits [N=66, articles with 126 recommendations]	**Mentions**
Creativity	37
Problem Solving	32
Productivity	28
Emotional/Personal growth	19
Learning/Wisdom	10
Recommendation for Amount of Thinking Time [N=27 articles]	
Weekly cadence (subtotal)	16
<30 min/week	3
31-60 min/week	3
61-120 min/week	7
>120 min/week	3
Daily cadence (subtotal)	9
<20 min/day	5
21-60 min/day	2
>60 min/day	2
Other Framing (pomodoro, half a day)	2

3.4 Outcomes of Thinking Time

Blog authors often suggested positive outcomes from taking time to think. We identified 4 domains of outcomes from a regular practice of thinking time (Table 3). These included: (1) clarity, focus, and productivity (13 articles); (2) creativity and innovation (12 articles); (3) problem-solving/decision-making (10 articles); and (4) emotional, personal, and social growth (7 articles).

TABLE 3
OUTCOMES OF THINKING TIME

Category	**Mentions**	**Impacts of Thinking Time**
Creativity	12	Increased creativity & idea generation, Increased innovation - Generates innovative solutions, Increased creativity, problem solving, productivity, Greater insights, Increases business value and outputs
Problem Solving	10	Better decision making, Increased decision making, Increased navigation of complex challenges, Risk management & anticipating trends, Better team dynamics, Equips leaders with ideas, helps guide organizations
Productivity	13	20% productivity increase, Work performance increased by 23%, Increased productivity & insights, Improves effectiveness of meetings, Increases productivity (multiple mentions), Increased attention & focus, Better business outputs
Emotional, Social, and Personal Growth	7	Increased confidence & self-awareness, Increased calmness - Emotional well-being & self-compassion, Gives you fuller life (10% thinking time equals 90% life impact), Improved active listening, More self-compassion & balance

3.5 Creating Thinking Time: Recommendations

Eighty-two articles provided recommendations for developing daily routines to think. Overall, themes across blogs suggested 5 strategies to create time (Table 4). These included:

1) **Time blocking (34 articles):** Scheduling regular sessions, shortening meetings, and making the practice a habit.
2) **Reducing distractions (28 articles):** Creating quiet spaces, using methods like Pomodoro, and improving sleep and routines.
3) **Journaling and writing (22 articles):** Using prompts, keeping notes, and mind-storming.
4) **Mindset, reflection and collaboration (18 articles):** Engaging with other thinkers to broaden perspectives, meditation, and asking reflective questions.
5) **Walking, breaks, and physical resets (15 articles):** Stepping away from work, taking walks, and physical activity to stimulate thinking.

TABLE 4
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING THINKING TIME

Category	Mentions	Examples of Recommendations (exact wording quotes)
Time Blocking	34	"schedule 30 mins weekly, block time out calendar" • "schedule time in daily, weekly, and monthly calendar" • "block time on calendar, shorter work meetings" • "regularly schedule brainstorming sessions" • "schedule time, remove distractions, ask yourself questions" • "block out time, make it a habit"
Reduce Distractions	28	"remove distractions, *pomodoro method, engage success partners" • "eliminate distractions, find quiet place, write thoughts down" • "quiet place, calendar space" • "distraction free environment, better sleep and eating habits" • "set aside quiet space, block out time" • "no distractions, write things down, set a timer"
Journaling and Writing	22	"keep notepad handy" • "journal, use prompts, mind storming" • "create own question library" • "jot down notes, turn off notifications, block out time to think" • "ask the harder questions, sit with discomfort, slow down, question things" • "clear calendar, remove distractions, journal, don't evaluate thoughts, create questions"
Walking and Physical Reset	15	"take a walk" • "getting away from desk, question sets, walking, coaching sessions" • "walking" • "set aside time, take frequent breaks" • "getting out of office, stepping outside comfort zone" • "brainstorm in morning, go for walk, eliminate distractions"
Mindset, Reflection, Collaboration	18	"set clear objectives, choose right environment, schedule thinking sessions, prioritize tasks, delegate" • "consistency, solitude, find unasked questions" • "ask why, plan your work around it, get rid of distractions" • "reflect, use whole of brain, encourage others, broaden horizons" • "surround yourself with thinkers" • "meditation, use subconscious mind, make time, put first things first"

IV. DISCUSSION

This review examined how "thinking time" is portrayed across online sources. We identified 100 online articles and blogs on thinking time, most of which were authored by individuals with at least a post-secondary education. An overwhelming finding was the lack of scientific research supporting most of the recommendations on thinking time. Authors often cited common benefits of thinking time as improved creativity and innovation, problem-solving and decision-making, and focus and productivity. Rather than a single protocol, authors endorsed varied formats, most commonly a protected weekly block in the range of 30–120 minutes, supported by tactics such as time blocking, journaling, and distraction reduction. These findings may serve as hypotheses for confirmation with future high quality studies.

Our results are particularly relevant to healthcare providers at all levels (consultants and trainees), who often work in environments characterized by time pressure, competing demands, diagnostic uncertainty, and frequent interruptions. Although the evidence base remains limited, the key themes identified in this review suggest practical, low-burden ways for providers to institute thinking time into daily practice: reserving brief protected periods in the calendar, reducing distractions during complex decision-making, using journaling or structured prompts to clarify problems, taking walking breaks or physical resets between cognitively demanding tasks, and engaging colleagues in reflective discussion. Our findings also extend beyond healthcare providers to leaders in almost any discipline. The currency of this generation is "ideas" and particularly in an attention economy competing for our time, the greatest opportunity to advance creative problem-solving is taking moments to slow down and think.

Although recommendations were heterogeneous, many authors favoured brief, deliberate sessions. Similar findings have been noted in the scientific literature in support of short and deliberate interventions: a randomized trial of 72 students found that students who took a 5-minute unstructured break between complex tasks solved more problems than those without breaks [12]. While this doesn't specifically address "thinking time", it does provide support for small time intervals having significant impact on outcomes. In another trial, 300 participants from 91 countries were randomized to 10 minutes a day of mindfulness practice versus no such practices. A short period of daily mindfulness led to lower self-reports of depression and anxiety symptoms [13]. Taken together, there is evidence that thinking time needn't be long or overwhelming and can be effectively instituted in short periods of time throughout the day, facilitated by journaling or other tactics.

One challenge within this area of analysis is that benefits of thinking time, as well as thinking time itself, can be subjective and ill-defined. For example, creativity is one of the most commonly reported benefits of thinking time yet is notoriously hard to measure. While some efforts have been made to define it, adequately measuring the ability of thinking time interventions to improve creativity is likely to be a challenge [14,15]. This is further compounded by the fact that online articles are unscientific in nature and are likely to be based largely on personal experience, as evidenced by the predominance of personal blogs in our sample. A true understanding of the benefits of thinking time will likely require a thoughtful scientific approach, not only to the measurement of outcomes but to the conceptualization of thinking time itself.

4.1 Limitations

This review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings:

1) **Anecdotal evidence base:** We relied on anecdotal evidence from online sources, which limited our ability to draw causal conclusions or assess the validity of recommended practices.
2) **Language and geographic limitations:** We focused on English-language, publicly accessible articles, which may exclude non-English articles or content not indexed by Google.
3) **Stopping rule:** Our screening stopped at page 16 based on a judgment that results were no longer relevant. While this was done consistently by both reviewers, it may have excluded relevant content.
4) **No quality appraisal:** Consistent with scoping review methodology, we did not conduct a critical appraisal of individual sources of evidence.
5) **Source verification:** For 8 articles, a precise publication year could not be confirmed, potentially affecting the temporal analysis.
6) **Generalizability:** The findings may not be generalizable to all online discourse on thinking time, particularly content on platforms not indexed by Google or in other languages.
7) **Potential bias:** Online sources may be subject to commercial interests, self-promotion, and confirmation bias, which we could not systematically assess.
8) **No protocol registration:** This review was not registered and no a priori protocol was published, which may introduce reporting bias.

Despite these limitations, the review provides a systematic mapping of the fragmented online discourse on thinking time and identifies clear hypotheses for future research.

4.2 Future Research Directions

There are opportunities for future research with several hypotheses which can be tested in well-designed studies. Future research should aim to rigorously evaluate the cognitive and emotional outcomes of structured thinking time with particular attention to its role in enhancing creativity and decision-making. Specifically:

1) **Investigating definitions:** Explore how thinking time is conceptualized across different contexts and populations.
2) **Optimal durations:** Conduct dose-response studies to identify the minimum effective duration and optimal frequency of thinking time.
3) **Formats and modalities:** Compare different formats (e.g., journaling vs. walking vs. meditation) to identify which are most effective for different outcomes.
4) **Contextual factors:** Examine how workplace, academic, and clinical settings influence the effectiveness of thinking time.
5) **Longitudinal studies:** Evaluate the long-term cognitive and emotional outcomes of sustained thinking time practice.
6) **Randomized controlled trials:** Conduct RCTs to establish causal relationships between thinking time and outcomes.
7) **Implementation science:** Study the barriers and facilitators to implementing thinking time in healthcare and other high-pressure settings.

Ultimately, bridging the gap between anecdotal enthusiasm and scientific rigor will be essential to legitimizing thinking time as a purposeful and measurable practice.

V. CONCLUSION

Popular online discourse consistently frames thinking time as beneficial for stimulating creativity and innovation. Rather than converging on a single protocol, authors recommended a wide range of formats, most often a deliberately set-aside weekly block of roughly 30–120 minutes, with daily recommendations ranging approximately from 4-15 minutes. Strategies for implementation included time blocking, reducing distractions, journaling, walking, and collaboration. These findings highlight the potential of structured thinking time, yet underscore the lack of scientific evidence on the topic.

The review suggests that healthcare providers and leaders, who work in environments characterized by time pressure and complex decision-making, may benefit from incorporating brief, deliberate thinking sessions into their routines. However, rigorous research is needed to establish optimal protocols, validate claimed benefits, and develop evidence-based guidelines. Future studies should investigate definitions, optimal durations, formats, and contextual factors to bridge the gap between popular enthusiasm and scientific evidence.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors report any conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be available upon request from the corresponding author.

DECLARATION OF FUNDING

No funding was received for this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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