

## **Black and White Thinking**

**What is it:** A pattern of thinking in extremes that interferes with people's ability to be healthy emotionally and in relationships. It's also known as "All or Nothing Thinking"

### **Some Examples:**

Signs of Black and White thinking- using words like "Always" or "Never", "Perfect" "Worst" "Best" "Terrible" "Impossible" "Ruined" "Furious" Exaggerations, "Horribilizations" (Making someone or something out to be worse than it really is)

### **Why it messes us up:**

- Makes the problem worse than it already is
- Contributes to extreme emotions- our emotions and thoughts influence each other, when we have strong emotions we tend to think in extremes and when we think in extremes we tend to have strong emotions. We can reverse the cycle by intentionally choosing more moderate thoughts to focus on.
- Creates helplessness-If EVERYTHING is AWFUL then why bother trying to make things better.
- Blames circumstances-if my spouse is a Complete Jerk or my day was "The Worst Day EVER" then there's little that I can do to fix things
- Invites defensiveness from others- So if you say "You NEVER help with the DISHES!", instead of getting help you're more likely to get an argument. (the more extreme the statement the more likely the other person is to feel attacked)
- Black and white thinking contributes to depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses

**If it's so awful, why do we do it?** (Does it serve some function that needs to be replaced with something more helpful)

Black and white thinking is not something people do intentionally, instead it is something that we do habitually or without realizing it. When we exaggerate how bad things are it excuses us from action, creating the idea that we are helpless and therefore do not need to act. It helps us feel powerless, and thereby protect ourselves from feeling guilty or accountable- we use Black and White Thinking to blame instead of fix the problem. It also protects us from feeling vulnerable, tender, or from having to manage the uncertainty of many situations and people being nuanced, complicated, both good and bad. It also is simple. Simplicity is easier than dealing with the nuanced complexity of Reality.

The more extreme our thinking, the more likely we are to be depressed. Saying things like "I'm just a terrible person" or "She has it all together, she's such a saint" or "I am just a failure" are simplistic, extreme and feed massive emotions to grow. There is no perfect marriage, job or holiday-every experience is a complex combination of elements. If we want to improve our emotional control, we need to correct B&W thinking.

### **How to fix it:**

1. Notice that you are doing it-look out for signs of "All or Nothing Thinking"- and
2. Challenge your thoughts (are they really as true as they feel?)

3. Replace the extremes with moderate or inclusive views
4. Increase your willingness to accept ambiguity. No one is 100% good or bad, that requires us to hold both sides of a situation in our mind
5. Look for the middle truth, instead of either/or look for a way to say both/and (For example instead of “You NEVER Do the Dishes!” you could say “It bothers me when you don’t do the dishes on your dish night, I know that you are really busy with work, how can we solve this?”)
6. Remember: Life is beautiful, complicated, difficult, joyful, painful. We need to embrace all of these experiences truthfully. Think about this:

*Can someone love you and still be insensitive sometimes?*

*Can you be basically intelligent and still do something dumb?*

*Can part of my life be really hard, but other parts still be easy?*

*Can an experience be really hard, but still be beautiful in some way?*

Remember one of the main reasons people get depressed or anxious is how they perceive reality. When we are able to be more flexible and intentional and truthful in our perceptions we are often able to escape the extreme emotions and depression begins to lift. Depression often centers on one incessant thought like “I’m just not the sort of person other people like”

Intentionally challenging our negative or polarized thinking will often start to dissolve depression. Unfortunately this can be hard when we’ve been thinking that way for much of our life, it’s hard to even notice that we’re doing it. So challenging our thinking is often easier with the help of a close friend or therapist.

<http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/depression-learning-path/>