

All or nothing thinking and how to correct it.

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Epictetus famously said that “It is not events themselves that distress us; it is the view we take of those events”. All or nothing thinking causes us to view things in a way that causes us more distress than needs be, but can be corrected!

All or nothing thinking: missing out the middle ground.

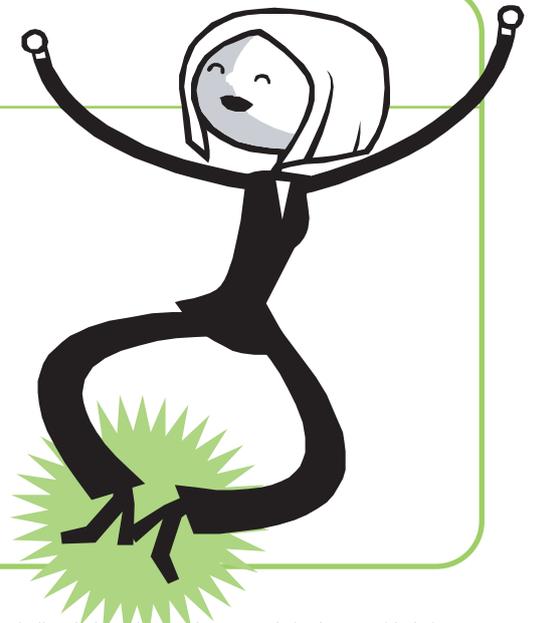
All or nothing thinking is exactly as it says; it is where you think in ‘black and white’ with no shades of grey. So, life may be ‘terrible’ or ‘wonderful’. You may be a ‘terrific’ parent or an ‘awful’ one. Your holiday may have been ‘perfect’ or ‘ruined’. With such extremes, one’s perception is bound to be inaccurate, which doesn’t matter half so much as the fact of it being distressing for us.

‘All or nothing thinking’ makes bad things worse.

You may go to the dentist and endure a certain amount of pain. Maybe it might be 7 on a 10-point scale. But if you think in all-or-none terms this is categorised as ‘agony’, which actually makes the pain seem worse. Similarly, it is common enough to have critical thoughts about your partner, but if you then categorise him or her as ‘terrible’ then it makes matters worse. Worse still, maybe, is where you categorise yourself as ‘terrible’ for having such thoughts. Maybe you’d prefer for things to be different, but ‘terrible’ is over-stating it.

And it can even turn good things bad.

One patient of 30 was distressed about various things, one of which was that they felt they were “ugly”. In fact it was plain for anyone to see that they were perfectly good looking and, strangely (unless you are familiar with all-or-nothing thinking), when asked to place themselves in an imaginary row of 100 people ranging from least good looking (1) to most good looking (100), they placed themselves at 70. Better looking than 70% of people, in other words. It was their all-or-nothing thinking that made them feel that, just because they weren’t the best looking person in the world then they must be “ugly”.



And it's not just a figure of speech; it's a way of thinking.

If you're not prone to all-or-nothing thinking, you may feel that these examples are just harmless exaggeration, just a way of talking. And for some people that may be the case, but the fact is that all-or-nothing thinking is one of the most common 'thinking errors' that psychologists observe. In other words, some people really do see their holiday as 'ruined' because they had three rainy days. They really do see themselves as having suffered 'agony' when in fact it was only moderate pain. And they really do see themselves as 'ugly' when in fact they are better looking than 70% of people.

Luckily, it can easily be corrected.

So if you're an all-or-none thinker, it's worth getting out of the habit, and it's easy to do. All you have to do is to start using a mental 10-point scale. So, if someone asks you how your week has been, when in fact it's been pretty bad, you say "Pretty bad – 3 out of 10!" When you're looking at the mirror thinking how awful you look you can correct yourself to "I'm looking 5 out of 10 today".

And it really does make a difference.

This kind of thinking change is a key component in cognitive behavioural therapy, recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence as one of the most effective psychological therapies. So it's worth getting good at it. What seems to happen is that graded thinking (a) makes one realise that things 'could be a lot worse' and (b) there is a suggestion that you could make things better if you want to.



In-session discussion.

1. What other examples of all-or-none thinking can you think of?
2. How would you convert the all-or-none thinking into 'graded' (out of 10) thinking?
3. Why do you think that correcting such thinking benefits people in the way that it has been found to?
4. How do you think it is possible to change a thinking habit like this for good? Can you think of anything that might help?

Out of session project.

Two things: (1) spot your 'all-or-none' thinking and (2) convert it into 'graded' ('out of 10') thinking.

Mythbuster:

It's best to think all or none ... that way you get a real clarity on things. Not so...

It may be clarity, but it's a clarity that is wrong; very few things in life are 'all or none'.