

Reducing Your All-or-Nothing Thinking

Objective

To decrease all-or-nothing thinking by using the cognitive continuum tool.

You Should Know

If you make assumptions without considering the evidence, you might be engaging in all-or-nothing thinking – one of the most common cognitive distortions that prevents you from seeing things in “shades of gray.” The more you rely on all-or-nothing thinking to make decisions or to interpret events, the worse you tend to feel because you rarely experience “middle ground” mood states. To feel better and understand the world around you, it is important to recognize when you think in extremes. Think about a room with an on/off light switch compared to a room with a dimmer switch. If you do not have a “dimmer switch,” you might frequently negatively evaluate yourself or others – you are either a success or a failure, your performance was awesome or terrible, if something is not perfect it is a failure, and so on.

As an example, consider John, who was caught off guard by a question during a job interview. John failed to answer the question as well as he would have liked. If John views this experience through the lens of all-or-nothing thinking, he likely discounts his performance during the rest of the interview, and thinks it was “horrible” and a “waste of time.” He might feel disappointed or ashamed. All-or-nothing thinking leads John to believe that any performance less than 100% equates to 0%. It is easy to see how this can lead to harsh negative judgments, reducing self-esteem in the process.

In addition, this way of thinking disrupts behavior change or forming new habits, such as committing to a daily exercise routine or eating a healthy diet. If you think in all-or-nothing terms, it is likely one missed day will derail your efforts. All-or-nothing thinking will lead you to believe you have failed, and that you might as well give up.

So, what can you do? You can begin thinking in “shades of gray.” John could say, “I was thrown off by that one question, but the rest of the interview went well.” When you consider the middle ground and think in “shades of gray,” you will avoid thinking in extreme terms – decreasing self-judgment and harsh criticism of others.

The following are phrases you might think or say when you use all-or-nothing thinking. Check off any of the following phrases you commonly use:

_____ “This is the best...”

_____ “I hate...”

_____ “This is the worst...”

_____ “This is totally...”

_____ “I / you always...”

_____ “I / you never...”

_____ “Everything is...”

_____ “Everyone / no one...”

Thought: _____

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

Alternative: _____

Thought: _____

|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

Alternative: _____

Reflections on This Exercise

What were the most common “all-or-nothing” phrases you found yourself using? Explain.

How did this exercise help you see the middle ground or “shades of gray?” Explain.

After you completed this exercise, was it easier to catch yourself in all-or-nothing thinking? Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
