

all-or-nothing thinking

9

for you to know

All-or-nothing thinking is the tendency to judge things in extreme or “black-and-white” categories. It is irrational, because in reality things are never completely one way or the other. Judging yourself in this way raises your anxiety level. You are always afraid that if you don’t achieve perfection (one extreme) you will be a complete failure (the other extreme).

Max was usually a straight-A student. He thought of himself as very intelligent. But if he received a B on a test or homework paper, he would think, “Now I’m a total failure.” He also thought he had great leadership skills, but when he lost the election for class vice president, he told himself, “Now I’m a zero.” When Max headed the committee for the class picnic and they ran out of hamburger rolls, Max said, “I’m worthless as a planner.”

This kind of all-or-nothing thinking caused Max to feel anxious before he took on any task because he was always afraid of not being able to achieve perfection (one extreme) and thus having to label himself as a failure (the other extreme).

activity 9 * all-or-nothing thinking

directions

Nothing in life is completely one extreme (black) or the other extreme (white). Real people and situations have different mixes of negative and positive. Reality exists in the gray area between black and white.

The boxes below show that there is a large gray area between the extremes of black and white. For each category listed, put a mark to show where your own realistic experience lies.

Grades

I get the lowest grade there ever have been. I get perfect grades.

Friends

I am a totally selfish friend. I am always a perfectly generous friend.

Family

I am a hateful family member. I am always a perfectly loving family member.

Talents

I have no skills or talents for anything. I am gifted at everything I try.

Attitude

I have the worst possible attitude. I am always perfectly positive and upbeat.

more to do

Describe what it felt like to rate your gray areas in these categories.

In which categories was it hardest to rate yourself in the gray area rather than the black or white extremes? Why did you choose those categories?

What do you think might be hard about giving up all-or-nothing thinking and seeing things more realistically?

Rewrite the all-or-nothing statements that Max told himself, replacing them with realistic gray-area statements:

“Now I’m a total failure.” _____

“Now I’m a zero.” _____

“I’m worthless as a planner.” _____

activity 9 * all-or-nothing thinking

Write three examples of all-or-nothing statements you have made about yourself. Then rewrite them, replacing them with realistic gray-area statements.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Tell which of the above statements makes you feel the most anxious, and why.
