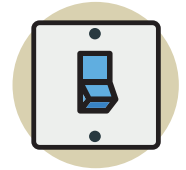


Whenever we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we’ve often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we’re not even aware we’ve had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated, biased, distorted, or unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

All-or-nothing thinking (or black and white thinking) describes a polarized style of thinking in extremes. We all do it sometimes, because it is a very quick way of making sense of the world. However, if you are in the habit of ‘buying into’ these all-or-nothing thoughts, you might fail to see the middle ground. If you think in all or nothing terms you may also act in equivalently extreme ways and veer between complete abstinence and ‘binges’, or between extreme effort and none at all.



Thinking in extremes

Acting in extremes



All or nothing thinking is common across a wide range of problems.

- Perfectionism
- Depression
- Eating Disorders
- Borderline personality disorder
- Burnout

Overcoming all-or-nothing thinking

Noticing and labeling

The first step in overcoming your all-or-nothing thoughts (and actions) is to catch them. Practice self-monitoring so that you get better at catching your all-or-nothing thoughts as they happen. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- “There’s another ‘all-or-nothing’ thought.”
- “I’m having an ‘all-or-nothing’ thought again.”



Put your judgment on a scale

When you judge yourself in all-or-nothing terms, remind yourself that it doesn’t have to be one or the other. Try putting your judgement on a scale instead.



Pay attention to shades of grey

Train your brain to notice when you fall between the extremes of ‘all’ and ‘nothing’. With practice, this will help you to judge yourself or your performance more flexibly.

- Write a note to record every time when you did ‘OK’ instead of brilliantly or terribly.



Evaluate your thinking

Remember that there are lots of ways of judging any situation. Practice putting your thoughts in perspective by asking yourself these questions:

- “What would I say to a friend who was thinking in this way?”
- “What’s the evidence that this thought is true?”
- “What’s unhelpful about thinking in this way?”
- “What’s a more helpful way of thinking about this?”

