

unhelpful thinking styles

black & white thinking

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (eg, depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles". One of the things we have noticed is that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit. It is something that happens out of our awareness. However, when a person consistently and constantly uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress. One of these thinking styles is called "black & white thinking".

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When it comes to sports, you may have heard some people say something like "There are no prizes for second place" suggesting that there is only one winner and the rest are losers. It's almost as if being the second best in the world is nothing to be proud of. Similarly, the student who comes home with a report card with a B for Math and A's for everything else and thinks "I'm a failure." is using black and white thinking.



Perhaps you've said something similar to yourself, "If my partner and I don't always agree, then we have a bad relationship", or "If I'm not the best at what I do, then I'm worthless".

We call this all-or-nothing thinking, or black-and-white thinking because you will tend to see only one extreme or the other. With this thinking, you are either right or wrong, you are either good or bad - there are no in-betweens, no shades of grey, and no middle ground.

If you used this kind of thinking consistently, how do you think you'd start to feel?

When we judge ourselves, others, or the situation, based on these extremes, without seeing the shades of grey in-between, it can be very easy to feel negative emotions, such as disappointment, frustration, anger, and anxiety if we think that we, or others, are not clearly in the desired category of "good" or "right" and so on.

Can you think of a situation where you have used this thinking style?

Briefly describe the situation.	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?