



## **Black And White Thinking It's A Grey Area**

*By Lyn Carman*

Have you ever thought, 'it just has to be this way no matter what'...you know, when you are just locked into a way of doing something that you haven't questioned? Have you become aware of the inflexibility you may have over how something must be no matter what it is, no matter how big or how small? Maybe you can relate to this or perhaps you know someone who thinks this way.

Black and white or dichotomous thinking is a pattern of thinking which has people believing in absolutes, a binary outlook, where things in life are either 'this' or 'that', and nothing in between. It is rigid; right or wrong, all or nothing, heaven and hell, good or bad, open or closed, difficult or easy, free or stuck, success or failure. When we judge ourselves, others, or the experience, based on these extremes, without seeing the shades of grey in-between, it can be easy to feel negative emotions, such as disappointment, frustration, anger, and anxiety if we think we have fallen on the "wrong" or "bad" side.

American psychologists Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor in 1984, described how humans seek the simplest solution which is easier than dealing with the real complexities of life – the term they used was the 'cognitive miser' the least effortful way of thinking.

Subtleties and complexity are costly – it consumes time and energy – so wherever possible we try to cut corners. But there's a downside to cutting corners; the time and energy saved through black and white thinking has a price. For the little things – like how to set the table – then it's probably not going to create too many issues in life or set you up for too many falls. But when it involves the more significant things – like making decisions about your career, raising children, negotiating relationships or your beliefs about how everyone should behave – a fixed mindset can be problematic.

Sometimes it can be like being in a bubble, addicted to simple, straightforward, black and white thinking. The complexity and ambiguity of life can be unimaginably scary and unmanageable and its in these moments we choose to play it safe, keep hidden, play it down and don't stand out – best not to even try to step out of our comfort zone. We hear absolutism often when we hear its language of extreme and catastrophising – 'all', 'everything', 'every time', 'everyone', 'never', 'no one', 'forever', 'always' 'worst' 'disaster' I.e., 'Today has been the worst day ever' 'I'm never going to be any good at it'

The good news is we can all learn to adopt a healthier more helpful way of thinking, for some this may come easily, for some it may be a real challenge and others may need to find support to help them overcome some long-standing patterns of thinking.

A grounded, helpful and thoughtful self is everything rigidity is not, its adaptability and being able to see a moment for what it is – not how it should be. As the saying goes – the only constant is change. Being able to welcome questions as a powerful source of new perspective, seeking moments of learning, growing and freeing up stagnant thoughts. Being able to adapt to a moment, to a person, to the whatever the situation requires, instead of going into auto pilot and reacting to a situation based on old patterns.

So how can we go ahead right now and begin to change our outlook? Let's look at some common techniques.

- **Ask 'Is it true?'** this is a terrific question and commands a terrific answer. Catching the thought in the middle of thinking and ask, 'is this true' and go wild with the possibilities. Was it really the worst day every today? – it's unlikely – there may have been some low points, and perhaps even some mistakes where made, though there was probably some great points too.
- **Listen for the tell-tale words**, the extreme language as above ie, 'always and never', these are signals to pay attention to. Replace them with 'sometimes and maybe' Along with absolute sentences like 'I'm dying' – when you worked really hard and now your tired. We all say things in jest, though going to the worst exaggerated end of the spectrum does matter.
- **Reframing thoughts** – considering other alternatives, another viewpoint which may not have yet been considered. Being more open to other options.
- **Replace 'or' with 'and'** An experience can be good and bad – rather than labelling an experience as either good or bad, trying to find both qualities.
- **Embrace mistakes** – This can be tricky, especially for the perfectionists out there. (Which is of course another extreme thought process) 'I failed at that' – replace with 'well I didn't do so well at that, but I did do well in the other part, and what I learned from that was....'

- **Listing out facts vs. assumptions vs. possibilities** Writing down what is known to be fact, what is thought to be known or what is assumed could be true. Then, write down what could possibly be true. Go wild with these possibilities.
- **Taking time and being gentle** these are sometime long-standing patterns of thinking. Some days are easier than others. Challenging all or nothing beliefs there may be even around this process.

Black and white thinking can give us a level of certainty and security. But it can also cut us off from the complexity and richness of life. Grey area thinking means a richer life.

'Allowing ourselves to venture into uncertainty is, paradoxically, a way to see more clearly: not in black and white or even grey, but in complex, dazzling rainbow.' – Reina Gattuso

*The mind that perceives the limitation is the limitation - Buddha*

