



Black And White Thinking

By Lyn Carman

Over the last few weeks during this time of COVID19 I have observed much 'all or nothing' thinking and the impact it can have on our lives. For many the world is black and white, either/or and made up of global generalisations. *'When you reduce life to black and white you never see the rainbows.'*

Yet, of course, the world is not a black or white place, our lives are full of shades of grey. By seeing the world in black and white – rather than the complex spectrum of colour it actually is – we buy into thinking and behaviour that is not resourceful for us and does not serve us to be our best selves.

At times we have all thought of the world in black and white terms. Perhaps refusing to see the flaws in our loved ones, or being overly critical of ourselves, the human brain's tendency to understand the world in absolutist, dualistic or dichotomous thinking has a profound effect on our relationships. You may hear some familiar thinking or language in these sentences:

"I'm right, you're wrong"

"It can only be black, it can't be white"

"I have never done that"

"He never listens"

"She is always so judgemental"

"Everything I do is terrible"

"No one else understands"

There is an inability to think flexibly and seek out the possibilities, to sit back and relax and take in all the information and consider it. Experiencing and turning a specific event into a global generalisation and see it as 'all' or 'nothing' – we are using dichotomous thinking and limiting ourselves to a reactive and generally unresourceful response. This tends to play out a lot on social media as we see reactive responses fired out and then someone else jumps on and adds fuel to the fire and someone else responds to them and on it goes – with very few taking a breath to gather the information and consider all options, or other perspectives. Jumping in reactively to a situation, before knowing all the facts and details creates even more uncertainty to an already stressful situation for many, feeding a mob mentality, with individuals no longer needing to take any responsibility.

Initially black and white thinking may make it easier to separate out good from bad, right from wrong. Yet this kind of thinking can be exhausting and feeling like we are on a roller coaster. On a deeper level, simplifying things into easy, binary terms steals much of the complexity that makes life and relationships so rich.

Absolutism or black and white thinking is a developmental stage we go through as children, which I am sure you may be able to recognise if you have observed a child in this stage. The child does not yet have the cognitive ability to recognise the subtleties of the grey, it's all black and white with them unable to think through possibilities. ie I see this, and this, means that – I want blah therefore I must get blah, or nothing. This is the space where tantrums occur. Cognitively they cannot be any other way at that time because that is where they are in their developmental stage.

While having compassion for those who are stuck in this pattern of thinking and responding, being able to see the unresourceful impact this has on self and others will support us to elevate our responses by sitting back, gathering all the information and considering the possibilities.

Becoming aware and taking notice of 'all or nothing' thinking is the first step to being open and more relaxed about events such as our Level restrictions during COVID19. Thinking of how there are always other possibilities, other versions, other opportunities we can become aware of. A simple exercise involves thinking of binary or extreme words you might use to describe a person, relationship, or situation and becoming aware of ours and others language, how often we use global terms such as – all, every, never etc. This absolute language is rarely true – think of the teenager when they say “**Everyone** else is allowed to go to the party, I’m **always** the only one who’s not allowed” or closer to our situation “If I can’t do it this way, then I can’t do it at **all**”. Then imagine more open subtle and nuanced ways to describe situations. It can also help to actively cultivate empathy. Black and white thinking also tends to be more pessimistic. Therefore, thinking more positively may move us away from – its either/or – and allow the shades of grey and moving us towards possibility.

Thinking with balance and all the complex colours of the rainbow means a richer and more flexible life lived for self and inspires others to do the same, raising the level of the conversation and our experiences. Nothing in life is black or white there is always opportunity to see a rainbow.

