

All Or Nothing Thinking



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Hi there. Welcome to the *Design Your Dream Life* podcast. My name is Natalie Bacon, and I'm an advanced certified mindfulness life coach as well as a wife and mom. If you're here to do the inner work and grow, I can help. Let's get started.

Hello, my friends. How are you? Welcome to the podcast. I'm so happy to be here with you today talking about all or nothing thinking. This topic is something I'm so excited to bring you because it's a practice, an awareness, a tool that I use in my everyday life that helps me make better decisions, that helps me be more connected to other people, that helps me set and work through challenges with my life and my family as well as with my own development and goals that I want to set. It also is something that I'm always using with my clients inside Grow You.

For that reason, I want to teach it here to you today. All or nothing thinking. It's really thinking that there are only two options. I like to think of a spectrum. It's either one end of the spectrum or the other end. There is no middle room for the gray. It's either everything is amazing or everything is terrible. This is also known as black or white thinking.

Google defines all or nothing thinking as a common cognitive distortion that results in seeing your world in black or white or in complete opposites. These thoughts may affect the way you feel and see the world around you because they're often not based in evidence. So what's happening is your brain wants to quickly create some certainty to feel better and to feel good. Your brain loves certainty because then it thinks that it can survive.

So your brain thinks that has a good reason for this. But in our modern world, it's actually pretty detrimental to think this way for many reasons that I'll share here in a minute, but I want to go through some examples first to really ground this. So here are some general examples.

It's either that something is perfect, or it's a disaster. It's something is either a success or a failure. You're either right, or you're wrong. Other people are either nice or they're mean. Whatever you did was either good or bad. What's happening in the world is either amazing and wonderful or it's

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horrible. Things are either fair, or they're unfair. People are either for you or against you. What you do is either moral or immoral. You're either smart, or you're dumb. Food is either healthy or unhealthy. Depending on your political party, the political party is either good or bad.

There's only two sides. One is right and one is wrong. With all of these examples, you can see that there's no gray. This is just a quick way for your brain to create certainty and ignores the complexities of life. Some of these I could see very easily and quickly, especially with success and failure and right and wrong and good or bad.

But the one that really stood out to me that I hadn't considered before was fair or unfair. I don't know about you, but to me, it just seems obvious that there are two options fair or unfair. As soon as I did work on this, I realized oh, those aren't the only two options. Those are two extremes of the spectrum. There are so many other options. Here are some more specific examples.

So when you think about your mother-in-law, is she either amazing or horrible? Or maybe it's your brother. Is he either really generous or really selfish? What about your kids? If you have more than one kid is one defiant and one sweet? Or one shy and one really extroverted? Think about your planning and your time management. Do you either plan everything or plan nothing? You either stick to your diet exactly or you binge eat. You only have people in your life who agree with your political views. You have the belief that you either can be a good mom or be good at your job, but not both.

All of these examples are all or nothing thinking. They ignore the complexities of relationships, of humans, of life, of the world. We fall into this trap again because it's easier to think this way. Your brain can very quickly lump everything into one category. Either everything is good or everything is bad. What she did was right or what she did was wrong. He's either selfish, or he's really generous. She's either smart, or she's dumb. It's a fast way to categorize what's happening, and it gives your brain so much clarity and certainty. Again, your brain loves certainty.

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Lumping things together to make sense of the world is a core function of the brain. This is really useful when we are learning streets and learning where to go. We don't want to have to slow down and think about every little thing all of the time. It would be entirely too exhausting to live.

Yet, when we apply this function of the brain that categorizes and lumps things together to make sense of the world into our decision making, into our judgments about other people, into our beliefs about the world or our kids. When we give ourselves only two options, we limit ourselves, we limit our relationships, we disconnect from them, and we disconnect from the world.

So for example, if you believe that you're right and the other person is wrong, you will disconnect from that person. Because your brain will want to protect what it believes is important for your survival, which is that you are right. This is where we get really defensive. When we slow it down and when we look at the details, there's probably a little bit of truth and a little bit of right and wrong in you and the other person. This just takes a lot more prefrontal cortex power to bring awareness to what's actually happening, and that there's no one to blame. There isn't a right and wrong. That it isn't just two sides.

I see this come up a lot in coaching when I coach on weight and body and health. The belief that you're either healthy or unhealthy. If you really think about that, like what does that mean? There is so much gray, even in most types of food and drinks. The way that you incorporate it into your life will create a certain health for you. But then interpreting your body as either healthy or unhealthy really doesn't serve you because there is no test for that. It's just what your brain is interpreting whatever you are doing to your body and for your body.

So just notice, do you think that the options are only healthy or unhealthy, at a good weight or overweight? When you try to change your body or your weight or your eating habits, do you tend to go all in and do everything? Or do you tend to give up and do nothing? That's all or nothing thinking. It's thinking that this is either gonna work, or it's not going to work.

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The reality is there is so much gray. The reason that the brain doesn't like to find the gray is because it takes more effort. You have to use your prefrontal cortex to think slowly about things, to evaluate what's not working with the food that you're eating, to think about what to try next, to try other things to eat next, then to evaluate again.

This is more challenging, because it increases the complexity, and your brain doesn't really like that on default. Because it thinks that being really fast and efficient and creating just a lot of certainty is best for your survival. But when you know this, and you live in the modern world, you can identify it as oh, this is just all or nothing thinking that my brain is defaulting to.

I can actually override that with my prefrontal cortex. I can decide to slow down, use my prefrontal brain, live in the gray, which is where you will actually make the lifestyle changes and truly change your body and your weight or whatever it is that you want to change. But you're doing this from a place. This makes you so much more likely to succeed because you're not going to those extremes.

I was coaching someone recently where all or nothing thinking came up with respect to helping her child. She had kids who were getting ready to apply for college. She felt like she either needed to do everything for them or do nothing. Like those were her two options that her brain had come up with.

Either I need to bug them and bother them and try to get them to fill out the applications right away and really be on them for everything and every step of the way hold their hand, or the only other option was do nothing and let them do it all. She didn't like either because she felt anxious and worried when she was trying to do everything for them. She felt disconnected and sort of mad with the option of doing nothing.

So what I showed her was that this was just all or nothing thinking and that there were so many other options. There are always more options than two. It's just harder for your brain to find them. So you have to put your brain to work on that. First, you have to notice it. Am I giving myself only

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two options? Then you have to direct your brain to think about what other options exist.

Again, this is harder, but it will create so many possibilities that will help you show up in the way that you want to be. It takes more effort on your part as well as imagination. But like my client in this example, she was able to show up as the mom who she wanted to be helping her kids through the application processes for colleges, feeling really empowered and present, but not feeling controlling and anxious and also not feeling disconnected. Like she wasn't doing anything or like she was a bad mom. She was living in the gray.

The way to know that you are in all or nothing thinking is that you are quick to go to extremes. There are only going to be two options, and it's one or the other. That's it. That is a huge red flag that you are an all or nothing black and white thinking. Another sign that you might be in all or nothing thinking is that you really hate when people disagree with you. Or you don't want to be close to people who have different beliefs from yours. This is really interesting because it sort of threatens your identity in your group with your group think.

So if you just take politics. Is it hard for you to be friends with someone or respect someone or love someone who has different political beliefs from you? Why is that? Now, I'm not saying that you all of a sudden need to make lots of friends or love people who completely disagree with you. I just want you to notice if you really struggle to be connected to people who have different beliefs from you. It might be because you are in some all or nothing thinking. Thinking that your group is right there group is wrong, which is very disconnecting.

So when you are in all or nothing thinking, you will disconnect from people who disagree with you, and you will alienate people with different opinions and beliefs. That will make it hard for you to stay close to people. Even if people have the same beliefs as you and you're sort of in the same group as them, however you define that group. If you're in all or nothing thinking you will kind of be second guessing yourself. You will be questioning other

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people. You will find little ways to disconnect from other people within the group.

So it's really fascinating to watch your brain go to all or nothing thinking. Whenever I notice it, I just sort of watch my brain and slow it down and say okay, there's a thought error there. There are many other options. This is probably much more complex than my brain wants to acknowledge. It wants to create some certainty. The truth is that this is a very dynamic, complex issue. That's sort of how I get out ahead of it and just bring some attention to it.

I think that when you are in all or nothing thinking you have a lot of shame with yourself because you interpret any mistakes or failures as bad instead of seeing the grayness in them. So if you are setting a goal, let's say, you're more likely to self-sabotage, either take breaks or quit because there is no room for you to make a mistake or failure. Either you're on the wagon, or you're off the wagon. Either you're working on writing your book, or you're not. Either you're at the gym every day, or you're not going at all.

So I think that all or nothing thinking really does lead to self-sabotage when you set goals. It may even prevent you from setting goals at all because you might not want to put yourself outside of your comfort zone because you think that you'll either win or you'll lose, and losing sounds terrible to you. When really you could see it as gray, as growth, as an opportunity, as a way for you to evolve. Take out the winning and the losing.

I think that too you stay stuck in problems longer because you don't come up with new solutions. If there's only two choices, what if you don't like either of those choices? So then you end up staying stuck in that problem? Either we stay in this house or we move closer to one of our families, and you don't like either of those options.

So then you just stay stuck. Instead of seeing that those two options are just two out of hundreds of different options and using that prefrontal cortex to come up with other options. There will be many, many, many options

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with pros and cons. But again, it's just a slower thought process, and it adds complexity, which is why your brain will not go to the gray on default.

So I think the best way to kind of overcome and work through all or nothing thinking, it's the way that I've found to be the most powerful in my life, is simply just to notice it. Notice when you believe there are only two choices. Notice when you're believing either or. Either your child is behind, or they're ahead. Notice that. It's just a thought pattern, and it won't serve you. Notice when you think that something is either right or wrong.

I think we do this often with our kids. We want to rush to thinking that something's either really wrong, or everything's going great. Instead, there is some gray. I noticed this myself when I am just paying attention to RJ's health. So if he is pulling on his ears a lot, either he has an ear infection, or he's totally fine. Instead, it's noticing oh, there's some ear pulling. I'm going to watch it. I'm going to see what it might be. I'm going to talk to the pediatrician. I'm going to notice if it's teething and kind of live in that gray.

Even just saying it out loud, it sounds so simple. Yet my mind's like yeah, but I would really just prefer to know. Like, I just want to know. So just watch your brain do that. When you become the watcher of your thoughts and you see that these are just thoughts, you can interrupt it. Notice whenever you give yourself or others just two options. There's either a winner or loser. It's right or wrong, good or bad.

Noticing this thought pattern is the key to kind of unwinding it because you can see its impact on your life. It doesn't feel good to be an all or nothing thinking. It doesn't create good actions from that place, right? If you think of the weight loss example, it's I'm either going to the gym every day. And that's the only way for me to achieve my health goals, or I'm binge eating and not going to the gym at all. Sort of creates this scarcity mindset when really in the gray is the lifestyle change that will be imperfect because we are imperfect humans and making peace with that. But that only comes from noticing first the all or nothing thinking.

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So pay attention this week, maybe even this month, to all of the times that your brain tries to go to only two choices, one or the other. Just watch it and notice how it feels. Notice how you act. Ask yourself is this really helpful for me to only think this way. What other options are there? Also notice how your brain won't really like that because your brain likes groups. It likes to say oh, that group's bad. This group's good. Your brain really likes that because it creates certainty.

If there are good things and bad things of all the groups, of all the different places we could live, it almost feels overwhelming to our brain. But instead, if you can bring that prefrontal cortex online and think through things slowly in a way that helps you show up as the person you want to be with connection, with respecting others, with finding the lessons, with continuing to preserve your through failures or mistakes. This can be really, really helpful.

So if you have a belief that you can either be a good mom or good at your job, just take that one example and question it. What if you're a good mom, and you're good at your job, and sometimes there are different priorities. Sometimes kids get sick. Sometimes you miss a deadline. Sometimes XYZ happens in your family. That's just part of the human experience and what it means to have relationships, to have kids, to have a job, and that nothing has gone wrong. It doesn't mean that you're good or you're bad or you're doing a good job or you're doing a bad job at any of it. It just is.

Really practice these new thoughts. It's a little bit challenging at first. It's simple, but simple doesn't always mean easy, but it's so worth it because you will stop bouncing back from extremes. You will stop beating yourself up. You will stop thinking that there's some unobtainable standard that you need to reach that just exists out there. That your kids never get sick, that you never get sick, that you go to the gym all of the time, that you perfectly do all of your work, that you perfectly take care of all your kids, that they perfectly make all the choices that you want. No, that's just not the way of it. Really making peace with that is so helpful.

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I think a great first step is just to notice when you are in all or nothing thinking. All right, my friend, that's what I have for you this week. I will talk with you next week. Take care.

If you loved this podcast I invite you to check out Grow You my mindfulness community for moms where we do the inner work together. Head on over to nataliebacon.com/coaching to learn more.