Cognitive Distortion: Black-and-White Thinking

Below, you'll find several pairs of opposites. Some of them are grade-school simple; some are a little more complex. However, these are words that you probably use on a daily basis.

Here's the challenge: for each of the pair of opposites below, write down a word — a SINGLE word — that accurately describes the middle ground between the pair of opposites. Example: hot and cold. A good answer here would be "warm", "lukewarm", or "temperate".

Opposite Pair	Middle Ground
black and white	
large and small	
up and down	
left and right	
fast and slow	
easy and hard	
young and old	
loud and quiet	
good and bad	
near and far	
pass and fail	
happy and sad	
clean and dirty	
shy and outgoing	
calm and anxious	

Got your list? Take a good look at all of the words you've written down. Do they have anything in common? Did you have trouble nearing the end of the activity?

Take a look at the word list again. Each of the above pairs of opposites (and many, many more) can induce dichotomous thinking. It's commonly referred to as "black and white" thinking and it can have negative effects on the way we see ourselves or the situations that we are using language to describe.

How can you decrease your black and white thinking? The answer is pretty simple: remember to add shades of gray.

TO DO: Try to catch yourself using this type of black-and-white thinking for the next few days. Jot down the situation in which you used an exaggerated word; then, take a step back, assess your word choice, and improve your story with a gray-colored word. Catching yourself using dichotomous thinking (and correcting yourself) can transform an unrealistic thought into a more truthful (and probably less stress-inducing) one and helps you view the world through a more accurate lens.