

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: write down each of the below pair of opposites on a piece of paper. Then, 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”.

1. black and white
2. large and small
3. up and down
4. left and right
5. fast and slow
6. easy and hard
7. young and old
8. loud and quiet
9. good and bad
10. near and far
11. pass and fail
12. happy and sad
13. clean and dirty
14. shy and outgoing
15. 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.