

# How to Shift Black-and-White Thinking

“**T**HEY LET ME DOWN, so I am just done with them,” a client tells me about a situation. As I listen to their story, what’s missing from this one statement is that the situation being described is complicated.

What’s not being related about the situation are the layers of miscommunication and different perspectives and gray areas that are absolutely not one way or the other. Like most events in our lives, the situation was nuanced and certainly not something to terminate a friendship over without a conversation.

So, why was this situation so crystal clear and simple to my client, and yet not as clear to me?

The answer lies in what’s called *all-or-nothing* or *black-and-white* or *dichotomous* thinking. This kind of “one-way street” is very common for people with ADHD and other neurodivergent brains. You may have seen it in your own thinking or in your loved one’s thinking before.

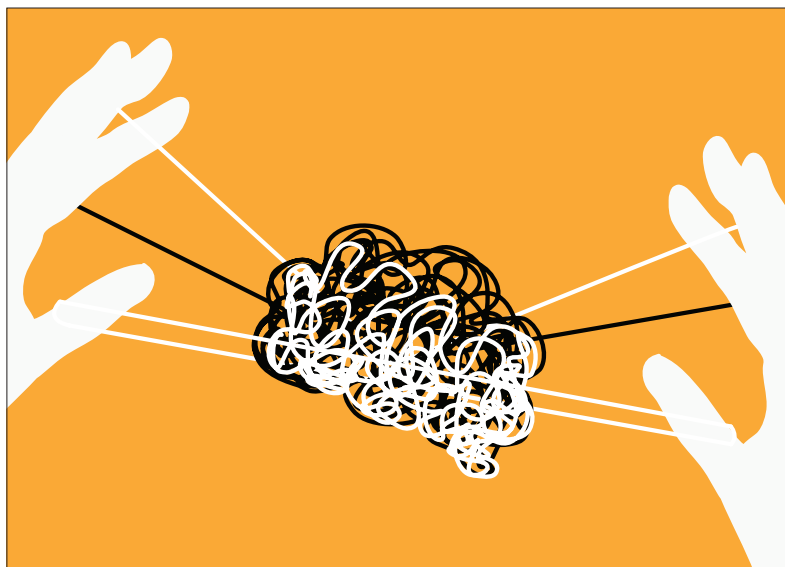
Thinking in this way can be painful and even harmful for children or adults with ADHD, because it closes doors or ends relationships—often before it’s the right time. When someone takes time to explore all the possible reasons for someone’s behavior, it quickly becomes clear that there’s often more going on. And that “friend or foe” may just be having a bad day, or a tough moment, and not something so egregious that it’s worth ending a friendship over.

Black-and-white thinking can affect many areas of a person’s life. For example, have you ever heard yourself thinking of things as “good or bad” or “right or wrong”? What about expressing your feelings in absolute statements like, “This was the worst day ever” or “I never get it right.”

When there is very little gray area, or middle ground, chances are your thinking has fallen into the extremes. Many people with ADHD miss the cue that most of life happens outside of the extremes—and that can affect friendship at a very deep level.

The truth is that every relationship encounters bumps in the road, and many times there are other reasons behind a comment, a missed text, or a person’s point of view. When you allow yourself to look for different perspectives, then you have a chance to see things from another person’s point of view, and that is very helpful for overcoming black-and-white thinking.

Where does black-and-white thinking come from? Black-and-white thinking patterns can arise from sensory issues, overstim-



ulation, feeling bombarded, stress, anxiety, and depression, all of which can lead people to have a greater intolerance for uncertainty.

Thinking in absolutes (black/white, right/wrong, etc.) helps a stressed or overstimulated brain make sense of the world. The challenge is that this kind of thinking is actually a *cognitive distortion*, or a view that reflects a misinterpretation of an event. When this kind of thinking goes on without your checking or affirming the truth, it can cause beliefs to develop that are inaccurate. In other words, a distorted view of the events.

Here are five strategies to help you shift black-and-white thinking.

## Challenge your inner voice.

Recognizing when your thinking moves into all-or-nothing or other extremes is the first step in trying to shift this pattern. Pay attention to the words you say to yourself and what words signal this black-and-white thinking pattern.

## Listen for words that are absolutes.

Notice when your inner voice uses the words *always*, *never*, *all*, *none*, and so forth. Also look for patterns in your speech that signal this kind of thinking is ongoing. It’s common for catastrophic thinking to follow these word patterns, and you can see the negative picture emerge once you start saying these kinds of words to yourself.

### Check your facts.

Examine what feels like facts to see if there are different possible perspectives or holes in your thinking. For example, if you say to yourself, “I am a total loser today; I didn’t make any of my goals,” ask one more question before accepting that feeling as a fact. Ask yourself, “What evidence or facts proves this comment to be true?” Listen for the facts and try to be open-minded. That’s the key to releasing the hold black-and-white thinking has on your life.

### Broaden your perspective.

This helps reduce the hold that binary thinking has on you. The world is not all black and white; there are *many* shades of gray. And when you examine your “facts,” a simple shift to add in the phrase “yes, and...” can open your mind up to other truths that coexist with your negative thoughts.

### Practice flexibility in your thinking.

When you find yourself stuck in black-and-white thinking, it’s easy to also feel trapped and that therefore it’s pointless to try

something new. This is exactly the moment to stretch yourself and see what you can do with your mindset. This doesn’t mean to mask or people-please; it’s about exploring your options before settling on the truth.

BLACK-AND-WHITE THINKING is extremely common for neurodivergent thinkers. It’s also an area of your life where, with practice, can feel more in your control. As you learn how to see new perspectives, you will find you need black-and-white thinking even less to be happy, just as you are. **A**



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A large graphic for Landmark College. At the top, the text "Find Your Learning ABILITY" is written in colorful, stylized fonts. Below this, a central lightbulb icon is surrounded by various symbols: a molecular structure, a green maze, red footprints, and a path of yellow arrows. The Landmark College logo, featuring a shield with a sun and the text "LANDMARK COLLEGE", is positioned below the lightbulb. At the bottom, a blue banner contains the text "DYSLEXIA • ADHD • AUTISM • EXECUTIVE FUNCTION CHALLENGES". The background of the graphic shows several pairs of legs and feet in various poses, suggesting a diverse group of students. Some are sitting on the floor with laptops, others are standing or sitting with books or papers.

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