



All or Nothing Thinking

Brief Video Introduction - <https://youtube.com/shorts/R9gd3iQvMd8?si=Or IzM6rSe9Dr2J6>

Review and discuss the following stories and questions:

Lenny has been substance free (by choice) for four months. He attends treatment every week, has rebuilt trust with his family, and recently started working again. Some days he feels proud of how far he's come.

But this week he drove past a place where he used to buy drugs and had a strong craving. He even felt like he stayed around too long fantasizing about the "good old days" when he was getting high. He felt discouraged and wondered, "Maybe I'm not really recovering if I still have these kinds of thoughts and cravings."

Discussion:

- Is Lenny making progress?
 - Is Lenny still struggling?
 - Can both be true?
-

Sarah has been working hard to manage her anxiety. A year ago, she avoided almost every social situation. Today she attends family gatherings, goes to work regularly, and has learned coping skills that help.

Before giving a presentation at work, she still feels nervous and her heart races. She catches herself thinking, "I guess I'm not getting any better."

Discussion:

- Has Sarah made progress?
 - Is she still anxious?
 - Can both be true?
-

Jamie has struggled with depression for years. He has started therapy, takes his medication consistently, and has begun exercising several days a week. Compared to six months ago, he spends less time in bed and feels more connected to his family.

Even so, there are mornings when getting out of bed still feels difficult.

He wonders, "If I still have days like this, maybe nothing has really changed."

Discussion:

- Has Jamie made progress?
 - Is depression still affecting him?
 - Can both be true?
-



Discussion: What do these three people have in common?

Each of them is experiencing two truths at the same time.

They are making progress **and** still facing challenges.

Unfortunately, our minds may try to force us to choose only one. We might tell ourselves things like:

- "If I'm still anxious, I must not be getting better."
- "If I made a mistake, I've failed."
- "If recovery is still hard today, I haven't truly made progress."

This is called **all or nothing thinking**

The truth is that life is often much more complicated. Many seemingly opposite things can be true together.

All-or-nothing thinking (also called black-and-white thinking or dichotomous thinking) is one of the most well-known cognitive distortions in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

Research and studies have found that it is associated with a variety of mental health conditions, including Depression, Anxiety Disorders, Eating Disorders, and personality disorders. It has also been studied in substance use, where rigid, extreme thinking ("I've already blown it," "I'm either sober or a failure") can increase shame, reduce coping, and contribute to relapse.

One reason modern relapse prevention emphasizes viewing a lapse as a learning opportunity rather than proof of failure is to counter this all-or-nothing mindset. *This idea also aligns with Aaron T. Beck's cognitive theory and Judith S. Beck's CBT work, as well as relapse prevention models developed by G. Alan Marlatt.*

Discuss:

- Were you able to personally relate or identify with any of the opening stories? If so, which one(s)?
- What does "all or nothing thinking" mean to you personally?
- How can "all or nothing thinking" impact progress when working with substance use and/or mental health issues?

The House of Cards

Have you ever built a house of cards? One small mistake can make the entire thing collapse. Sometimes we think recovery works the same way - that one setback means everything is ruined. But recovery isn't a house of cards. One mistake doesn't erase your progress, your growth, or everything you've learned along the way.

Progress remains. We can (and should) keep building and growing even in the face of mistakes



Group Exercise – All or Nothing Thinking: Seeing Life in Extremes

Directions: Do **not** hand out this worksheet. The facilitator should read one or more of the **All-or-Nothing Thoughts** in the first column and invite participants to identify a more balanced way of thinking. Encourage the group to discuss their ideas before revealing the suggested response in the second column. The examples in the second column are intended as discussion guides and are not the only correct answers.

All or Nothing Thought

"If I had a lapse, all my recovery is ruined."
"If I still have cravings, I'm not getting better."
"I made one mistake. I'm a failure."
"If I can't do it perfectly, I shouldn't do it at all."
"I'm either recovering or I'm hopeless."
"If someone criticizes me, they must not like me."
"I missed one day. I might as well quit."
"If I feel anxious, I can't handle this."
"If I need help, I'm weak."
"If my depression came back today, treatment isn't working."
"If one person rejects me, nobody likes me."
"Someone is upset with me, they'll never forgive me."
"If I'm not happy, something is wrong."
"If I don't trust someone completely, I can't trust them at all."
"Everything always goes wrong for me."
"Nothing will ever change."
"I relapsed, so I'm back where I started."
"If today was hard, this whole week is ruined."
"I'm either mentally healthy or mentally ill."
"If recovery isn't easy, maybe it's not worth it."

A More Balanced Perspective

A lapse is a setback, not the end of recovery.
Recovery and cravings can exist at the same time.
Everyone makes mistakes while learning and growing.
Progress is more important than perfection.
Recovery is a process with ups and downs.
People can care about you and still give feedback.
One bad day doesn't erase your commitment.
You can feel anxious and still cope effectively.
Asking for help is often a sign of strength.
Symptoms can return while progress continues.
One person's opinion doesn't define your worth.
Relationships can be damaged and still heal.
No one feels happy all the time.
Trust can grow over time.
Some things go wrong, and some things go well.
Change often happens gradually.
You still have the knowledge and skills you've gained.
One difficult day doesn't define the week.
Mental health exists on a continuum.
Recovery can be difficult and worthwhile at the same time.

Closing Discussion

- Which of these thoughts have you experienced before? Can you think of any others?
- What situations are most likely to trigger this type of thinking?
- How can all or nothing thinking negatively impact your progress (if you are not careful)?
- What is one situation in your life right now where you will practice more balanced thinking?
- What is one small step you can take or one small thing you can do instead of giving up?