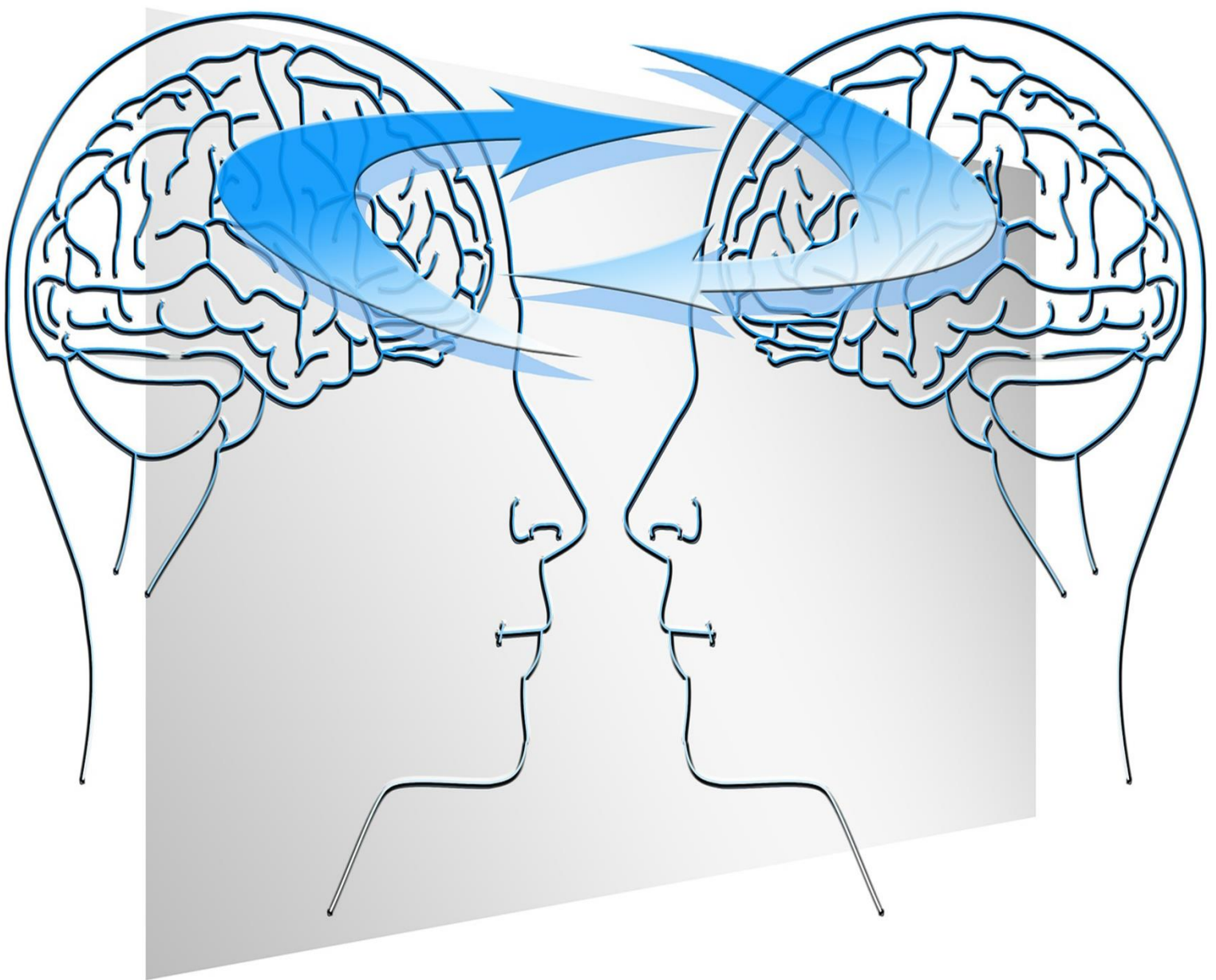


HOW TO STOP POLARIZING SELF-TALK

AND

SEE ALL THE SHADES OF GRAY IN YOUR LIFE

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Let Go Of Black And White, All Or Nothing Thinking

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Introduction

The majority of life events don't fall into the category of absolutely wonderful nor do they fall into the completely disastrous category. That isn't how life works. Life can be good, and it can be bad, but many people can't help themselves from thinking in absolutes.

Black and white thinking is the type of all, or nothing thought pattern that allows your body to slip into fight or flight mode. We still need that response because there is danger we face in real life. However, many of us are in a constant fight or flight response battle when faced with stress that is not a threat to life.

Polarizing self-talk is emotionally arousing. It creates the perfect recipe for depression and anxiety. Polarizing self-talk is incredibly common in people who suffer from depression, but it isn't exclusively an issue of depression.

When humans are faced with difficult situations, we have to make snap decisions. There is no time for maybe, it's time for action. No matter what decision you make, you will be hit with an emotional response that allows you to flee (or fight) the best you can.

The problem is that the majority of situations that we find ourselves in are not life-threatening. So, what of the life events that fall in the middle ground? It's difficult to process those when you haven't made any room for life's shades of gray.

What Is Polarizing Self-Talk?

Polarizing thinking is seeing the world in black and white, all or nothing. There are many people who think this way and see it as a badge of honor. However, most of us recognize that it can be damaging to our overall happiness and health. The more we allow polarized self-talk to take root, the more at risk we are to get caught in the trap of negative thinking.

I'm a failure.

I'm an awful person, but (insert name) is just perfect.

My life is a disaster.

A failure doesn't make a person a failure.

Just because someone else appears perfect doesn't mean they are, and it certainly doesn't make you an awful person.

Your life is not a disaster, even though it may feel as though you're losing grip.

To live a healthy life, a balance of emotions is important. It isn't about being happy all the time, it's about striking a healthy balance.

You can't lead an emotionally healthy life when you allow the highs of emotional stimulation to sucker you in. Nor can you achieve emotional health if you live in the lows when there is no emotional stimulation. That's what polarizing self-talk does to you, though. It forces you to live in those false highs and lows.

Polarizing thoughts are damaging to you both emotionally and physically. If you're unsure as to whether your self-talk is polarizing, then you have to challenge yourself. There are common words that people use, aloud and internally, when they are caught in the polarizing self-talk cycle. So, when you know how to spot them, you have a better chance at tackling the problem.

Look out for words like *always, perfect, awful, never, terrible, impossible, furious, ruined, disastrous.*

This, of course, is not an exhaustive list. However, it's a good start. The biggest problem with polarizing self-talk is it's emotionally rewarding – it's exciting. That feeling is only temporary. It's easy to slip into this type of thinking and talk when you're angry, disappointed or excited.

How can you even begin to introduce shades of gray?

For example, when a child fails a test, it's easy for them to slip into thinking they're just plain stupid. However, a parent should be standing by to say *as disappointing as it is, you can get better for the next test and look at how great you are at other subjects*. The first thought is all or nothing, it's polarizing self-talk. The second statement, however, encourages someone to think differently. Life is full of shades of gray.

We are all guilty of making untrue statements about ourselves. Just because your self-talk is whispering them in your ear, doesn't make them true.

- Can I do something stupid and still be an intelligent person?
- Can I get angry with someone I care about, but love them at the same time?
- Can my partner be insensitive, but still love me?
- Can certain areas of my life be enjoyable and easy, while other areas are difficult?
- Can the future be easier despite going through difficulty now?
- Can an experience, such as vacation or social situations, be awful while also being great?

Consider the questions above. When you're less rigid in your thinking, it avoids polarizing thinking and allows you to express the negative while also embracing the positive. Two things can be true at once. You can be happy about something while being sad about another. You can recognize disappointment while celebrating success.

Using questions like this will remind you of this and help you stop polarizing self-talk in its tracks.

The Negative Effects of Self-Talk

We have all bore witness to the repercussions stemming from unyielding governments the world over. They act in all or nothing ways, embracing black and white thinking. It's plain as day to see.

What we often overlook, though, is the polarizing self-talk that is exacerbating the battles raging within ourselves. We are all guilty of peppering exaggerations into our conversations. We do this to make a statement or o make a story more interesting. However, when you proclaim a small mishap as an irreparable disaster regularly, this is a problem.

Polarizing self-talk limits possibility.

For example, if you are single and haven't been on a date in a while it's easy to tell yourself that you will be alone forever. For a woman who has been laid off and struggling to get an interview, it's easy for her to believe she'll never work again. These thoughts eliminate possibility and they prevent you from solving problems. Polarizing self-talk makes life feel untenable.

It can be difficult to think rationally when we're dealing with deep emotions. How can you think logically or reasonably when your emotions are in a state of imbalance?

How to Stop Polarizing Self-Talk & Engage in Positive Self-Talk

While for some, there are underlying emotional issues or disorders that could be causing your polarizing self-talk. The rest of us, however, simply require an emotional rebalance. Some people may find a therapist helpful, while others may find use in the techniques we provide below.

- **Re-framing Your Thoughts**

Polarizing self-talk is qualified by immediacy. You should allow yourself time. Take a few moments, breathe deep, and challenge polarizing thoughts as they pop up. If you are denigrating your abilities, affirm your skills and attributes. You can take a thought like *I have no skills; I'm worthless*, to *I'm not great at accounting, but I am excellent at organizing*. The latter is a realistic thought, it provides you with self-loving, and it helps you eliminate polarizing self-talk.

- **Finding the Middle Ground**

Life is challenging. People are challenging. It's difficult, it can be hard to deal with. However, with the bad comes the good. It's rare that someone or something is so horrible that you can't deal with it. Change is not impossible. It's important to search for shades of gray and to remind yourself that difficulty is only temporary.

Talk to others about the shades of gray you've found and help limit the emotional intensity that causes polarizing self-talk.

- **Goodbye to Ever & Never**

It's easier to banish the absolutes from your self-talk when you learn to temper your expectations and thoughts. It's about taking it from *everybody hates me* to *sure, I don't get along with my next-door neighbor, but I get on well with the people across the street*. Or, *I'm never going to be happy* to *I'm unhappy right now, but I'm doing the best with what I have*. Realistic thinking allows you to create a framework that makes the future feel possible.

Polarizing self-talk isn't something that manifests overnight. Therefore, you cannot banish it overnight. Allow yourself the time and space necessary to identify the sources of your polarizing self-talk and eliminate them.

When you feel anxious, depressed or stressed, then it's important that you observe your self-talk. What are you saying and why are you saying it?

The way you challenge this thinking is important, and there are several ways you can tackle it.

- Identify the distortions and label them.
- Examine whether there is evidence to tell you this distortion in your thoughts is true.
- Test using the double-standard method, i.e.: would you say these things to a friend dealing with a similar situation?
- Make an effort to think in shades of gray. If you find yourself thinking polarizing thoughts, take a moment to inject some middle ground.
- Ask others whether they believe your polarizing self-talk is valid.
- Define the terms you use to label yourself. Do you always fit into these?
- Stop using should and think in terms of preference. Rather than saying *you should* say *I'd prefer*, or *I'd like*.
- Ask what other factors may be contributing to the problem.
- Compare the pros and cons of believing your polarizing self-talk to be true.

As an example, imagine you're a student. You have been a straight-A student for as long as you remember. That dedication to your studies has secured you a full scholarship to your first-choice college. It's the first semester of your freshman year and it isn't going as you'd planned. You are struggling emotionally as you consistently get Bs. You feel as though you're letting everyone down, that you're failing.

The goal of self-talk should be to balance self-responsibility and self-compassion. So, to put this into context, we have put together several examples.

The Problem: An Ability To See Things Out

Do you lose steam as you approach the end of a task? You may get to 95% completion and then decide you'll finish that 5% later. You start telling yourself you've done a terrible job anyway so, what's the point? Is that the most efficient way to work? Or, does that incomplete task sit undone for days (or even longer), taking up space in your head, consuming your resources?

Your self-talk can help. You can tell yourself *While it may feel difficult to finish this task now, it will feel easier once it's finished and I'll feel better for it.*

This will help you push on and get the job done. More importantly, it helps put things in context.

The Problem: Overthinking Decisions & Overcomplicating Solutions

Do you overcomplicate things by ignoring the most obvious solution? It's tempting to put yourself down for it. You feel the polarizing whispers *Why can't you just do it right?* Instead, flip the script and practice self-talk like *What is the simplest way to tackle this situation?* This is a reminder that a) you are capable of finding simple solutions and b) you can find a solution without overthinking and overcomplicating matters.

The Problem: A Belief I'm Not Working Enough

Everyone else sees you as a hard worker, but for some reason, you are convinced that you're not hard-working enough. That perception has you telling yourself that you're lazy and undeserving of success. Is that rooted in reality when you're the only one with this perception? *You're not lazy, you work smart by taking in the big picture to carry out tasks effectively.*

Constructing Self-Talk

It's simply paying attention to your self-talk and correcting it.

- Identify self-sabotaging patterns
- Identify the course of action to best deal with those patterns
- Choose a phrase that will help direct you to your course of action

Positive self-talk should be nurturing. If you're using positive self-talk to direct you to the correct course of action, then it's going to feel nurturing. If it feels critical or harsh, then revise it.

Conversely, if your self-talk is *too* positive and removes accountability, then you need to revise it so that it's directing you to the right course and appropriate behavior. There are some examples below.

- **Negative:** I am scared.
- **Positive:** I am confident, and I am courageous.

- **Negative:** I am angry.
- **Positive:** I am determined and motivated.

- **Negative:** I am embarrassed, ashamed, and guilty.
- **Positive:** I am a proud person who values performance and success.

- **Negative:** I am confused and uncertain.
- **Positive:** I am committed to learning.

- **Negative:** I am hopeless, and I am pessimistic.
- **Positive:** I am hopeful and trying to be optimistic.

- **Negative:** I am resentful about what I lack.
- **Positive:** I am grateful for what I have.

- **Negative:** I just don't care.
- **Positive:** I feel curious.

- **Negative:** It doesn't matter what new things I try; bad things always happen.
- **Positive:** I enjoy trying new things and I am going to continue to branch out.

- **Negative:** I hate what's going on here.
- **Positive:** I cannot change everything, but I will change what I can.

- **Negative:** This isn't going to work, nothing positive can come of it.
- **Positive:** I'm going to find the potential in this situation and find a way to make it work.

- **Negative:** I will never be able to do this.
- **Positive:** I am capable of accomplishing anything I set my mind to.

- **Negative:** I'm afraid I won't be able to accomplish this so; I'm not going to try.
- **Positive:** I might be scared of the unknown, but I'm willing to try.

- **Negative:** I'm stuck.
- **Positive:** I have the power to decide.

- **Negative:** No one is going to help me.
- **Positive:** I have supportive people in my life, I just need to reach out and ask for help.

- **Negative:** This problem will just go away if I pretend it isn't there.
- **Positive:** I am capable of tackling this problem to create the desired outcome.

- **Negative:** I don't deserve success.
- **Positive:** I deserve success.

Final Thoughts

The only way to challenge thoughts like this is in shades of gray. You're being a perfectionist and seeing things in only good or bad. Getting Bs isn't going to get you tossed off your scholarship program and it isn't going to disappoint anyone. You might believe you can do better, and that could be true, but that doesn't mean you should allow those polarizing thoughts to get you down.

Is there someone in your life who tends to approach a situation with negativity? Might this have rubbed off on you? There's a good chance it has if it's someone you grew up with (like your parents or siblings) or someone you spend a lot of time with (like a colleague or romantic interest).

Our polarizing self-talk doesn't necessarily originate with us. Moods are contagious and if you spend time with negative people, it's difficult to resist adopting that same attitude. It's equally difficult to overcome the negative comments that others may make about you.

However, it's important that you understand those negative comments come from their own insecurities and aren't really about you. Don't let their comments push you into polarizing self-talk.

Instead of allowing others to get to you, discuss the issue at hand. It's important that you dig and find the source of your polarizing self-talk. If that doesn't solve the issue, then you need to separate yourself from this person. For some people, that will require cutting them out.

However, the majority of us can simply limit the amount of time we spend with the negative people in our lives. We all want the same things from life, at a base level, to be happy and safe. To achieve this, you will need to adopt a positive outlook and learn how to approach your goals with a positive outlook and mindset. Polarizing self-talk runs contrary to this.

What does it mean to change your outlook? It's simply about altering your attitude to keep on top of polarizing self-talk and negative thoughts. To start, you can check in with your thoughts as regularly as possible throughout the day.

Do you criticize yourself as you look in the mirror when getting ready? Or, as you undress to shower? Do you chide yourself for having a second cup of coffee? Are you likely to insult yourself if you're running late? You have to stop the negativity in its tracks and replace it with positive thoughts and comments.

Every time you feel tempted to react with polarizing self-talk, you need to take a step back and assess the situation. Are you just jumping to conclusions? Or, is there any fact in your negativity?

Look, having a cookie at the office party might not have been the healthiest choice you could have made. However, it's only going to add 150 calories or so to your count and the day and week are long. You can claw those calories back. It won't ruin your efforts if you're trying to lose weight or just look after your waistline.

When you look at your reflection in the mirror, repeat a mantra or affirmation. You can do this aloud or internally. You may feel silly at first, but you will see a difference in no time. Practicing positive self-talk is the best way to overcome polarizing self-talk and it's something you can practice at any time. Essentially, you're celebrating every positive choice you make instead of putting yourself down when you make the wrong one.

Compliment yourself with you wear a new outfit. Pat yourself on the back for choosing fruit instead of chips. Cheer inwardly when you enjoy a glass of water instead of grabbing a soda. This will have a massive impact on your determination and overall attitude.