

## Catch Those Black-and-White ANTs!

In the previous issue, 'Catch those ANTs', we looked at Automatic Negative Thoughts. These are not consciously created thoughts. They creep into our minds, often unnoticed, even when we are not thinking. Although we are unaware of their existence, they drive our emotions and our actions, resulting in self-defeating behaviour.

ANTS are a by-product of thought habits we formed in childhood. Previously, we examined 'Self-pity thoughts'. These resulted from our habit of feeling victimised and seeing ourselves as always having the worst deal that life dished out. As all ANTs originate from our limited capacity to understand as children and by default, negative human nature, their source is unreliable, limiting and inaccurate. ANTs are hence untrue, unhelpful and need undoing.

In this issue we look at another type of ANTs. They are often referred to as 'All-or-Nothing' Thoughts. They are produced by a thought pattern we call 'Black-and-White thinking'.

People with Black-and-White thinking perceive others, situations and the world at large as existing only in completely opposing extremes. For example, either right or wrong, good or bad, positive or negative. To them, there exist only mutually exclusive possibilities. "If I do this then I cannot do that." "I am happy with my current situation. If there are changes, I will not be happy." They find it difficult to conceive options. Possibilities of permutations and combinations do not occur to them. They do not think in shades of grey. This limits their problem solving ability.



This thought pattern originated when we were young and could not cope with complexity. We learnt concepts best when presented to us as opposing extremes, big vs small, short vs tall, black vs white. The concept of secondary colours was beyond us. Although we grasped it later, many of us got stuck in our Black-and-White thinking habit. We never got out of our All-or-Nothing Thoughts. Black-and-White thinking became ingrained as our default thought pattern.

Black-and-White thinking sets us up for misery and discontent. It causes us to view things with distorted lenses. We cannot see things for what they are. We become mentally constrained which is worsened by our default negative nature. For instance, a distorted assessment of our home situation using limiting Black-and-White thinking may produce an All-or-Nothing Thought that "If our parents love our brother that much, they cannot have much love left for us", causing us to wrongly conclude that we are not loved. We are unable to see that our parents can love us all, in different ways.

Another example of an All-or-Nothing Thought is "I either succeed or fail". Therefore we wrongly suppose that "If I do not pass this test, I am a failure". In adulthood, this unchecked thought pattern colours our self-perceptions. We evaluate ourselves in extremes terms, as either successes or failures, rich or poor, happy or miserable. All-or-Nothing ANTs such as "If I do not get this promotion, I am a failure." "If I do not at least own a five-room flat, I am a loser in life" will creep into our subconscious minds to run our lives and influence our decision-making.

Black-and-White thinking pattern also sets us up for relationship problems. It drives us into constantly fitting people into opposing categories of 'good or bad' 'approved by me or not', 'like me or not', 'my type or not my type'. This constrains us from relating healthily. We dismiss people too soon and too easily. We cannot get into deep and rich relationships. It hinders our ability to embrace the uniqueness of individuals, warts and all, because we cannot see that there can be good traits even in someone we dismiss as 'bad' just as there are flaws in the person we deem to be 'good'.

Another common All-or-Nothing thoughts which causes relationship problems is "If I am right (and I know I am because I know they come from good intentions) then you have to be wrong". A person ingrained in this thinking pattern is unable to conceive the possibility that both parties can be right, each looking at the situation from a different angle. He will not entertain the possibility that even the person with the best intentions can be wrong, if it is premised on the wrong assumptions or on inaccurate information. Black-and-White thinking is one of the main causes of marital discord.

## Connect-Point

***"I am not what happens to me. I choose who I become." ~Carl Jung***

Since Black-and-White thinking pattern is behind All-or-Nothing Thoughts, changing the thoughts to helpful ones involves adopting a new thinking habit. The strategy of 'catch, check and change' suggested for 'self-pity' thoughts will work just as well here.



Changing thinking habits is a very intentional discipline. It means starting a conscious practice of catching ourselves when All-or-Nothing Thoughts surface. Since thoughts drive emotions, the presence of negative emotions is a clue to where we should begin looking for ANTs. Feeling like a total failure after we fail to achieve something is a sign that we are definitely bound by Black-and-White thinking. If we scan hard enough, we find an accompanying All-or-Nothing ANTs lurking somewhere. 'Since there is nothing positive about not getting a promotion, it has to be regarded as negative.' Notice the two pairs of extremes- success/failure, positive/negative.

The second step in the strategy, checking the thoughts, involves scrutinising the ANTs and asking the right questions. "What is it doing to me or making me feel?" "Am I trapped because I have too narrow a view?" "Am I too rigid or fixed in my perceptions?" When we are able to catch, check and recognise ANTs for what they are- limiting, untrue, unhelpful, inaccurate thoughts, the battle would already have been half won.

Finally, changing the thought - this is the confronting phase. We are only ready for this phase if we can confront ourselves with honesty. What are the other ways of looking at my failure to get a promotion besides seeing it as succeeding or failing / positive or negative? Not getting a promotion may not be a positive thing, it need not be altogether negative as well. If we confront the situation and ourselves honestly, we *will* find something positive in the midst of this negative outcome. Are there not lessons that this outcome teaches us? Have we not been considered for the promotion? Have we not grown over the years... and the list goes on. It is not to be a self-consolation list. It is also not an attempt to look at it positively. It is looking at it as it is. It is looking at it holistically, expansively, taking into account and acknowledging all aspects, all facets, all possibilities of various combinations and all options. If scrutinised along the same vein, asking questions such as "Have I defined 'success' or 'failure' too rigidly?" we will broaden our perspective to accept that "yes, I have failed to get the promotion, it does not mean that I am a failure."

The experience we have is a fact. It is 'what is'. How we look at it and what we think about it are influenced by our thinking patterns and the ANTs they produce. The same experience of failing to get a promotion will affect two people, one with Black-and-White thinking and one without it, differently. Black-and-White thinking oppresses. It often leads to depression.

Breaking out of Black-and-White thinking frees us. Once we begin to practise catching, checking and changing our All-or-Nothing ANTs, and getting into the new habit of debunking limited thinking, exploring possibilities and generating options, we will slowly but surely step out of the cage of our own making.

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