

# How to Overcome All-or-Nothing Thinking

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[All-or-nothing thinking](#) is a negative thinking pattern that's common in people with panic disorder, depression, or other anxiety-related issues. Here's an explanation of what it is, as well as ways to overcome this common cognitive distortion.

## Understanding All-Or-Nothing Thinking



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All-or-nothing thinking is one of many negative thought processes, known as cognitive distortions, that are common among people with anxiety and [depression](#). When thinking in all-or-nothing terms, you split your views into extremes. Everything—from your view of yourself to your life experiences—is divided into black-or-white terms. This leaves room for little, if any, gray area in between.

All-or-nothing thinking often involves using absolute terms, such as *never* or *ever*. This type of faulty thinking can also include an inability to see the alternatives in a situation or solutions to a problem. For people with anxiety or depression, this often means only seeing the downside to any given situation. People who fall victim to all-or-nothing thinking believe that they're either successful or a complete failure in life.

People with [panic disorder](#) are often susceptible to this type of thinking. If you have frequent panic attacks, you may view yourself as unworthy or inadequate because of your condition. You may also overlook how valuable you are in other roles, such as a friend, employee, or parent.

## Examples of All-or-Nothing Thinking

See if you recognize your own way of thinking in these examples.

### Roger

Roger decided to face his anxiety and ask a woman out on a date. He left her a voicemail message. A few days go by and Roger hasn't heard back from her. He thinks, "I'm a total loser with *nothing* to offer ... No one wants to go out with me ... I will *never* find the right person, so why bother?" He starts to feel nervous and upset as he considers a future alone.

### Elaine

Elaine was diagnosed with panic disorder with agoraphobia about seven years ago. Since then, she has sought out psychotherapy, regularly takes her prescribed [antidepressant](#), and frequently practices self-care. Elaine's symptoms have greatly improved and she feels ready to go to a concert with a friend, a situation that has caused her fearful avoidance in the past.

When Elaine arrives at the concert, she begins to experience [physical symptoms](#) of panic and anxiety. She tries a [deep breathing](#) technique but still has a panic attack. Elaine leaves the concert early, telling herself that she will *never* overcome her condition and that she lets her nervousness ruin *every* situation.

# How to Replace Negative Thoughts

Rather than finding the middle ground in this scenario, Roger is thinking in extremes. He can replace his negative [self-defeating thoughts](#) with more realistic ones. Roger could consider the possibility that the woman didn't get his message or is out of town.

Even if she forgot about the message or decided to ignore it, Roger can choose to think that he is still a worthwhile person. He can remind himself that this particular person may just not have been right for him.

In order to overcome all-or-nothing thinking, it is important to avoid thinking in negative, absolute terms.

Elaine can also choose to value herself, despite having a struggle with panic disorder. Instead of thinking in absolute terms, she can recognize that despite this setback, she has actually had many successes in coping with the panic disorder.

She can let go of the word *never* and begin to consider that she has actually been successfully living with panic disorder. Elaine can also re-evaluate her statement about how she lets her anxiety "ruin every situation" and contemplate all of the times that she has actually triumphed in spite of having overwhelming feelings of anxiety.

## Dos

- Recognize strengths
- Understand that setbacks happen
- Find the positive in situations

## Don'ts

- Focus on faults
- Dwell on self-defeating thoughts
- Use unconditional terms such as "never" or "nothing"

When you can only see one side of any situation, it can help to seek out the support of trusted friends or family. A [support network](#) may be able to assist you in finding solutions and thinking beyond absolute terms.



## Article Sources

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1. The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center. *Thinking About Thinking: Patterns of Cognitive Distortions*. The Resilience Alliance. 2011.