

Ep #16: The Habit of All-or-Nothing Thinking



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Hi there, this is Kristi Angevine and you're listening to Episode 16: The Habit of All-or-Nothing Thinking.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits and feel as good on the inside as they look on paper. You'll get practical strategies for mindset shifts that will help you finally understand the root causes of why you think, feel, and act as you do so you can learn to create habits that give more than they take. And now, here's your host physician and Master Certified Life Coach Kristi Angevine.

Hello, everyone. Today we're going to dissect "all-or-nothing thinking." I'm going to discuss how it can show up in really stealth ways, and give you examples for how it might show up for you. And then, I'll explain three steps that you can take to start to shift this pattern.

Now before you think, "No, I don't do all-or-nothing thinking," let me just say this. This phenomenon is very similar to perfectionism, where many perfectionists, don't think that they're perfectionist. All-or-nothing thinking, similarly, can fly under your radar. And, you just might be really surprised at how it shows up.

This actually reminds me of when I first read Carol Dweck book, *mindset*. I started off thinking, "I definitely don't have a fixed mindset." And, probably about a third of the way through the book, once I better understood how a fixed mindset presented, and how it contrasted with a growth mindset, I realized that my mindset was so much more fixed than it was based in a growth mindset.

So, to give you a real-life example of how all-or-nothing thinking can show up in such variable, and really not so easy to detect ways, let me give you a glimpse into what goes on at my house near bedtime. Our kids are currently five and nine, and during the school year we aim for a certain time to get them into bed. Now you can call me grandma, but I have grown really accustomed to going to bed around the same time that they do. I'm just naturally tired then, and I love getting up early and having some early morning solitude.

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This would be unrecognizable to my college-aged self, when I was waiting tables and staying out with friends until last call, but it's what I've grown to really love.

So anyways, here's what unfolds for us at bedtime. As it gets to the point where it's really close to time to go to bed, and it's time for the kids to do their last couple of things before they say they're good nights, which for our kids is to take their little fluoride pills, because here in Oregon, the water is not fluoridated. And, to do one last bathroom trip for quote, surprise pee.

This is what happens. Either the kids or my husband will start messing about. And what ensues is lots of goofing off, tickling, joking around so much silliness, and so, so much glee and laughter. It's a time that I actually really love, in a way, because I see how well our kids get along. They're really funny, and kind, and goofy with one another. They want to do really long hugs; they want to make sure they tuck each other in.

And, it's also a time where I see some of my husband's parenting superpowers come to the surface. He is so good about being playful and making them squeal with laughter. The whole thing turns into a little bit of a sitcom when you hone in on what's going on in my mind, my internal monologue, and my external responses to all this delight and glee.

It's like I have a mental clock, and at a certain time, the authoritarian mom comes out. While they are giggling and playing, I'm unamused. I'm like a curmudgeon. And, in my mind, the fun has gone on too long. The minutes are ticking by, and if you could hear my mental chatter, it sounds like, "We're going to be in bed so late. Seriously, guys? Someone's going to get hurt with all this horsing around. Enough is enough, already. I get it. It's fun. It's cute. It's silly. It's a good time. But the timing is all wrong. People come on. What? Is no one aware of the time?"

I am basically being a total stick in the mud and a buzzkill. The feeling I have, when I have these thoughts, is somewhere between annoyance and judgment. On the outside you would see me stewing, or piping in with little demands, cloaked as suggestions. Do you ever do this? I'll say, "Maybe we should wind down?" Or, "Be careful, you might get hurt. Who's ready for

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bed?” And, some of these devolve into veering, frankly, snippy as I start vocalizing all my internal thoughts.

Now, side note here. My husband is an extraordinary parent. He's a retired ICU nurse, and when he would take those aptitude assessments, he always scored really high on the aspect of making people feel very comfortable. And, if you've ever met my husband, you've probably noticed this about him.

So, the hilarious side of this bedtime drama that I'm experiencing, is that when I'm not present for bedtime, like if I'm out traveling at a conference, there are no negative consequences. My husband and my kids, they have all the fun, all the messing about, and nothing bad occurs.

So, where's the all-or-nothing thinking to this anecdote? Underneath my idea about bedtime, is this premise: Bedtime, on time, is the correct way to do bedtime. And, bedtime that's late, is a total disaster. So, in that paradigm, there's no wiggle room for ten minutes of giggles. Either we're in bed, when I think we should be in bed, and all is right in the world, or there's a huge problem.

And when there's a huge problem, from the way I'm thinking about things, all I can see are all the downstream problems. In my annoyance, I will imagine someone gets hurt because of the goofing off. I will forecast grumpy, sensitively, all kids who don't want to get out of bed. I predict a grumpy husband from dealing with grumpy kids. I see all the problems from myself being tired; not exercising, not feeling clear headed, etc.

Now, if you told me, in the moment, that I was engaging in all-or-none, black-and-white thinking, I would just think you were nuts. Because to me, in those moments, I can't appreciate how binary my perspective is. In those moments, I just think I want what's best for all of us. However, when I'm outside the situation, and I tap into my rational side, the rigid binary view is clear as day.

At bedtime, I'm a woman approaching bedtime, like it's a battle. And, I have the marching orders that say, “Bedtime or bust.” Nothing in-between, no

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flexibility, no exceptions, which gives me zero bandwidth to appreciate the glee and joy in the moment.

So, what exactly is all-or-nothing thinking? All-or-nothing thinking is a tendency that's commonly referred to as a cognitive distortion. Now, cognitive distortions are assumptions. They are assumptions we make based on sparse evidence. Or, they're assumptions we make without actually considering facts or evidence around us. And, they're shaped by biases and by worries.

Of the many cognitive distortions that are outlined in cognitive behavioral therapy, all-or-nothing thinking, which is also called black-and-white thinking, either-or-thinking, and dichotomous thinking, is one of the most common cognitive distortions.

All-or-none, dichotomous thinking is the view that there are only two categories. There's good or bad, right, or wrong, total success, total failure, there's winning, there's losing. It's like wearing blinders, where you can see only two opposing views and nothing in between.

If something isn't precisely as you want it, it's nothing like you want it. Things have to be just so, otherwise, they're an utter failure. One fumble, one stutter, and the entire interview was blown. Missing a day of exercise, and you're now starting from zero. Having one difficult conversation, one argument, one awkward moment, and seeing the relationship is doomed.

Like all habits, this distortion actually isn't without some benefits. Quickly categorizing things into a polarized good-and-bad can be useful for quick decision making. Simplifying, what's complex and confusing, may actually help us make sense of things. And so, in this way, there can be a sense of safety, and control, and order that comes from categorizing things into good-and-bad, this-or-that, all-or-none.

And, this is especially comforting if we find ourselves unsettled, or unnerved by things like uncertainty, chaos, and the unpredictability of reality. But it's when this all-or-nothing thinking becomes a global way of

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looking at the world, seeing other people or seeing yourself, that's when there can be consequences that are not desirable.

So, first of all, all-or-none thinking oversimplifies, and it reduces our view into a very narrow one. When it does this, it blinds us from considering all the in-between explanations, all the gray zone, the alternatives, all middle ground. And, when our view is narrowed and we can only see two options or two categories, this is fertile ground for rigidity, irritability, and anxiety. This can block things like creativity and brainstorming.

All of this combined, such that all-or-nothing thinking is associated with perfectionism, anxiety, a harsh self-assessment, and depression. All of which, make this already challenging experience of adulting, ever so much more challenging.

So, for me, at that time, all I saw were the barriers and problems. My all-or-none belief blinded me from seeing how the fun shenanigans might actually be just as precious as asleep. It blocked me from considering that I could just go to bed earlier, before them, if I wanted to.

And, talk about a fertile ground for rigidity and anxiety. So, let's talk about some of the specific ways that it could show up for you. As I illustrated, with my bedtime routine drama, all-or-nothing thinking is really easy to miss. I'm going to give you several examples of some of the obvious, and some of the more stealthy, quiet ways that this might show up for you.

The reason for giving you a really comprehensive list, of the ways that it shows up, is so that you can increase the sensitivity of your capacity to detect it. Physically, you can become more aware of it when you're doing it. And, this is important because the first step towards changing this habit, of all-or-none thinking, starts with your awareness.

So, I want you to just listen in as I share examples, and I want you to consider, as you listen, how my all-or-none thinking show up in your life. All-or-nothing thinking might look like this: You get feedback from a peer or an employer, and that one "room for improvement," eclipses everything positive. When you recall putting your foot in your mouth and saying

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something that seems really stupid or awkward, 25 years ago, and you still cringe at how it reveals your ineptitude as a person. This is all-or-nothing thinking.

It can also show up as, you vacillate between believing you're an expert, or you're a complete idiot who will never succeed. If you forget something, you spend hours or days beating yourself up for the omission. Or, you don't double check something and it ends up having a negative impact, and afterwards, you are reeling in shame.

Or, how about this? On vacation, you have a spat with your partner, and you conclude that your vacation is totally ruined, and you should never even bother taking them. Or, you conclude that it must be a sign that you're never going to be able to communicate smoothly. Or, your kid tells you they don't like what you made for dinner, and you feel completely rattled. And, before you know it, you're imagining your kid grows up to be an ungrateful, spoiled brat, and a picky eater who hates his mother.

Or, check this out. After you give a presentation, you ruminate on all the small imperfections, like the typos or a slide that was out of order, or the questions that you felt kind of clunky answering. Or, in a similar vein, maybe you post on social media, and later on you see a typo and you feel mortified.

Or, if you flub up publicly, you quickly envisioned the worst-case scenario. Where you are totally rejected, shunned by everyone, you lose your job, you have no money, you have no food, your family bonds dissolve, and you die alone. Or, perhaps you have a less than ideal parenting moment, and then, you make it mean that your kid is going to model all of your imperfections and have a life of suffering, because of your ineptitude.

All-or-none thinking can also manifest as anxiety, on the way towards making changes. This is because if you tend to interpret obstacles and challenges, as personal indictments, it can be very anxiety provoking to do the work of making a change. It also presents as discounting personal successes as flukes because you have a heightened awareness of your missteps, and you can easily see all your shortcomings. But when it comes

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to celebrating or savoring progress, or an accomplishment, that is totally foreign territory.

Your all-or-none thinking could look like procrastination, and lots of starts-and-stops. Say you have a plan, and you follow it about 90% of the time, but because you think less than 100% adherence is a failure, when you don't do it perfectly, you're prone to just quit things shortly after you start. Or, you procrastinate on tasks where you know you have to learn something new, and the prospect of not doing the work really well, from the very beginning, provokes anxiety, since you believe sub optimal results automatically make you a failure.

Black-and-white thinking could show up in your assessment of your parenting. Say you are perpetually running late getting out the door with kiddos, despite really valuing being early. And then, you think to yourself, "I'm just a bad mom, I'm terrible with time." Or, your kid misses a soccer game because you looked at the time and the date wrong, and now, you're the worst parent, ever, and you stew about it for hours even though your kid has totally moved on.

Or, think about having a day off. In your mind, you have all sorts of grand plans. And then, in reality, the six hours between drop-off and pick-up go by in a blink. And, despite getting groceries, doing a little laundry, researching your next project, you only see how you have nothing to show for the day.

Or, maybe you can relate to this. You may have a tendency to quickly make small things mean globally, negative things about your worth or your character. This could sound like, "Who lets the dishes go this long and has such a cluttered house? Losers, that's who."

Or, you submit to speak at a conference, and when you don't get accepted, it feels like the end of the world. No one will ever want you to speak, and in fact, you must be an awful candidate. Or, you speak sharply to your kid. Or, you yell at another driver in traffic, and now, you see yourself as having an uncontrollable problem with anger; it's only going to get worse. Maybe for you, if you don't finish your to do list, your whole day is considered to be a waste.

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All-or-none thinking can show up as harsh comparison, too. Say you're scrolling social media, and you're looking at the curated highlight reel of people's lives, and you think, "Look at them. They're always doing great. Meanwhile, my life is a total mess."

Your all-or-none thinking could show up in how you interpret having negative emotions. Say you've got anxiety before you're doing something new, you might think, "This is a problem, it should be easier. No one else has this much angst. I am so lame."

It can also show up in your problem-solving style. If you have a big decision to make, you might only see two options. You can also see all-or-nothing thinking if you're thinking in superlatives, "I always mess up. No one ever talks to me. I'll never figure it out."

And finally, all-or-none thinking can infuse social interactions with anxiety and stress. If you don't get asked out on a date, or invited to a party, or called over to join in conversation, you might think of yourself as unlovable, an unlikable loser, who will never enjoy connection or feel at ease at a social event.

Or, if you're hanging out with new acquaintances, and say, you say something and it seems to fall flat and no one responds to you, you might spend the rest of the night feeling like the most socially awkward mammal to ever try to make new friends.

Now the reason for such a comprehensive list of ideas and examples, is so you can consider all the varying ways that dichotomous thinking can show up for you. I like to think of all-or-nothing thinking, as if it's one actor who plays different roles in a variety of very different outfits, in many different scenes, of the same movie.

So, can you relate to some of these? How does all-or-nothing thinking show up in your life? Now, let's flashback to me being really grouchy at bedtime, and let's consider the thought-work mechanics of my experience.

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The facts of the situation were, that three humans that I live with are giggling at a certain time of night. Deep in my subconscious, I had the belief that bedtime must be on time. My in-the-moment thought about the three giggling humans was, "This is not going as it should." And, when I thought that thought, I felt irritable and I started sulking, and stewing, and being snippy, and I only saw the negative consequences in the moment, and the negative consequences that were going to happen for the rest of all time.

That one thought, "This is not going as it should," created my ultimate experience, where, because of my thinking, I basically make myself the victim, suffering from my family's great assault of giggles. Now, let's be really clear, the giggles and the time that they're happening, they're not a problem in and of themselves. Clearly, they're not a problem to my family. They're only a problem when I think an all-or-none thought about them. And, this thought acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy, where all I permit myself to experience, in that moment, is this one narrow negative outcome.

If you're starting to warm to the idea that you may have some threads that are all-or-nothing thinking, a habit of looking at things as either-or, black-and-white, all-or-none, what can you do to change this? How do we change the habit of dichotomous either-or thinking?

Well, you start with these three steps: Step one is awareness. Step two is acceptance. And, step three is interrogation.

First comes awareness. Knowing your unique ways this shows up makes it so much easier to identify and detect. So, this week, I want you to be on the lookout for possible stealth presentations of it. Now, your presentations of all-or-nothing thinking don't have to be subtle, they could be completely obvious, and that's just fine, too. When you notice it, I want you to ask yourself, "What's the specific all-or-none belief here?" And then, write it down and save it for later.

Step two is acceptance. When you identify the all-or-nothing habit, and the all-or-nothing belief, and how it shows up for you, it's key to simply accept it at face value. So often, once we see that we have a particular habit, we will

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rush to either judge it, label it a problem, label it a defect, and make it mean that there's something wrong with us because we have it.

The more effective approach, and frankly, the more rebellious move here, is to acknowledge that all-or-nothing cognitive distortions are super common. It's just a tendency that humans have, it's not a defect. When it's unchecked, it can create a lot of suffering.

When we're aware of it, we can change it. So, deliberately meeting your all-or-nothing thinking head-on with acceptance, sounds like, "Oh, I'm doing some black-and-white thinking here. I've done it for years, and it's become an automatic habit. It's common, it's normal. And yet, there's a different way that I'm learning about approaching this."

Step three is interrogation. So, once you've identified how it presents for you, once you've found your all-or-none premise, and written it down. And then, once you've given some acceptance and compassion towards this habit, then you get to put on your detective hat and be really, really curious and interrogate your belief.

I think one of the simplest ways to do this, is to look at the beliefs that you wrote down. And then, go through and ask some really curious questions. I'm going to give you some examples of four questions I find really useful, but you'll also find ones that you love. Once you find the ones you love, just go with those.

So, here's the first one, ask yourself, "What's another explanation or way of looking at this?" Question two, "What bias might be driving this either-or thinking? This all-or-nothing thinking?" Question three, "What's the third way? What's a third option?" And, question four, "What's really going on here?"

And that brings us to the end of this episode. Now you understand the ways that all-or-nothing thinking make things more difficult. How it can show up in ways that you may have never considered to be all-or-nothing thinking. And then, the three steps to changing this habit.

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As you try these steps out, I'm going to be really excited to hear how your experience this, and what you discover. So, if you're not already in the Facebook *Habits On Purpose* group, come find me on Facebook and you can post what you experience there.

And for the physicians listening, the next *Habits On Purpose For Physicians* small group coaching program, will start soon. And it's the perfect container in which to learn how to actually apply all these tools I talked about on the podcast, alongside other women physicians doing the same work.

Now the program is deliberately small to cultivate an intimate community. It spans six months, with didactics, weekly group calls, and optional weekly content and homework. And, for support and coaching between the calls, there's a private online community on Slack.

If you want to learn more, go to HabitsOnPurpose.com and join the email list where you'll hear when enrollment opens. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll talk to you next time.

If you want to learn more about how to better understand your patterns, stop feeling reactionary, and get back into the proverbial driver's seat with your habits, you'll want to join my email list which you can find linked in the show notes. Or, if you go to www.HabitsOnPurpose.com you'll find it right there.

If you're serious about taking this work deeper and going from an intellectual understanding to off the page implementation, I offer coaching in two flavors: individual deep-dive coaching with the somatic and cognitive approach, and a small group coaching program. The small group is currently for women physicians only, and comes with CME credits. You can be the first to learn more about the individual or group coaching options by getting on the email list.

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Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit www.HabitsOnPurpose.com. Tune in next week for another episode.