

This Type of Thinking Will Only Perpetuate Your Spouse's Addiction

Living in an addictive system creates and perpetuates unhealthy patterns of thinking and feeling. One of these patterns is called "all or nothing" or "black-and-white thinking." Most addicts and partners of addicts live, think and feel in extremes. They understand feelings way up or way down, and can be uncomfortable just simply feeling OK. They understand good and bad, but have difficulty with the concept that every human being has both good and bad qualities. They believe they have to have it all, or they have nothing. In a relationship with an addict, this is manifested in a number of ways.

One example of black-and-white thinking is that the partner sees the addict as either all good, or all bad. The partner can focus on the addict's acting-out as evidence that they are not good, thereby creating some sense of esteem for themselves (at least, they are not doing those terrible things.) This works as long as the addict is acting out. When the addict does something kind or loving, however, the partner will feel confused. The partner will switch to thinking they were all wrong about the addict, and that the addict is, indeed, all good. Or, they will deny that the addict is acting out, and out of a need to believe in their goodness, the partner will discount evidence to the contrary, no matter how obvious it is. Always focused on whether the addict is good or bad, they will be unable to focus on themselves and make decisions about their own behavior, or value themselves independently of who the addict is today.

Another example of an extreme belief system is reflected in the partner who believes they themselves are either all good

or all bad. At any given moment, their behavior will reflect whether they believe they are good (often exhibited as a holier-than-thou attitude, or grandiosity), or bad ("I'm worthless and deserve to be treated as such"). On the other hand, this partner can feel all bad on the inside and be compelled to project an image of being all good on the outside. They will frequently insist that their family members do the same thing and be intolerant of behaviors in themselves or others that disturb the surface image of a good family. The partner understands feeling perfect and feeling worthless but has limited experience of the in-between. Anything less than perfect is worthless, in themselves or in others. Because of this, the partner can either love themselves, or hate themselves and love others or hate others, but leaves themselves no room for other emotions. It's an exhausting existence, an emotional roller coaster, a frightening ride through life.

In the area of behaviors, black-and-white thinking again produces extremes. Partners of addicts will decide one day to leave, and the next day to stay with the addict. The partner will make promises to themselves and threats to the addict about things they will, and will not, put up with, then not be able to follow through. They will alternate between elation, when things are going their way, and depression, when they are not.

For example, the partner will set boundaries with the addict about a particular act, and unrealistically expect that the addict will be able to maintain their new boundaries within the relationship. Having made the decision, they will feel good about themselves until they meet with the addict's insistence that they participate as they always have.

Black-and-white thinking is a "no win" situation for the partner, leading to constant inconsistencies in feelings and behavior and perpetuating the trap of the addictive system. When it comes to expressing feelings, this all-or-nothing

phenomenon can result in one partner expressing all the feelings in the relationship, and the other, remaining shut down. Or, there may be certain feelings that are permissible for one member to express, but not the other.

The end result of black-and-white thinking is an unmanageable life, either outwardly apparent or internalized. With their thinking, feeling or behavior out of control, the partner will find other things to control.

Partners of addicts who have black-and-white thinking (not all do) have to work on a few paradigm shifts. The first paradigm shift is the world is not the way they want it to be. Their pain, fear, confusion and other uncomfortable, undesirable realities are, indeed, a part of life. These undesirable realities affect them, and they cannot control them all from affecting themselves or the ones they love. {eo}

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