

The Fifth Cardinal Sin of Thinking: Totalitarianism

by

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Some people think in extremes. They just don't allow any middle ground. It's kind of like "you're either with me or you're against me" or "you're either part of the solution or part of the problem." A person with this "either/or" and "all or none" mentality can be very demanding requiring total allegiance. Any hint of deviation is paramount to a total abdication of that allegiance. A spouse may become insanely jealous, to the point of violence, if their partner is perceived to be paying attention to another person. It is, in the mind of an "all or none" thinker, inconceivable that a spouse could be friendly with many different people of both sexes and still absolutely devoted to the partner. The perfectionist also often suffers from totalitarian thinking when they say something like "I should have done better, I'm such an idiot." It's as if you're either an idiot or perfect, nothing in between.

This kind of thinking, referred to as totalitarian thinking, in which the only possibilities are "yes" or "no" "on" or "off," "all" or "none" is characteristic of very young children, before the age of 2. At this stage of development, a child believes that, for example, when the mother leaves the room, she is gone forever, she no longer exists. The child's world is based purely on perception, not a bit of logic. The child does not yet understand "conservation" in which objects which disappear still exist. This is an all or none situation in which the object (or person) either exists in its totality or it does not exist at all. There is no middle ground. There is no "maybe it will come back." It is an infantile position and one which some people do not outgrow – at least in some aspects of their life. Jealousy is one symptom of this kind of infantile thinking. It is an all or none proposition put into place by a totalitarian thinker. Perfectionism too can exhibit symptoms of all or nothing thinking. To a perfectionist, it's either perfect or it's a failure.

Jealousy often comes along with a host of associated feelings including distrust, envy, suspicion and resentment to name a few. All of these emotions arise from irrational and often infantile self talk which is only able to understand the all or none, either/or proposition. It can only see black or white, no shades of gray. This is unfortunate because life is seldom as clearly defined as black and white. More often than not, life is a confusing blend of numerous different shades of gray. More problematic is that jealousy is an extremely emotional state; it is not conducive to logical and rational explanations. Perfectionists are a bit more open to reason.

Whether a jealous person or a perfectionist, totalitarian thinking is behind it. Self talk may shed some light on the source of these intense feelings; however it's usually difficult to capture the fleeting sentences flying through the mind that triggers these emotions. More often than not, it is mental pictures, or even a single snapshot, that does it. A husband sitting at home in the evening awaiting his wife's return may become jealous when a picture of his wife with another man flashes through his subconscious mind. Without warning and for no apparent reason, he becomes angry at his wife. The mental picture is completely invalid. But, that does not stop it from passing through his mind and acted upon as valid. At that moment all the evidence of the past suggesting his wife's devotion is wiped away in an all or nothing interpretation of a single imaginary snapshot in the mind. When explained logically, it is recognized as a ridiculous situation and yet that logic is often unable to overcome raging emotions. The perfectionist, in an explosive fit of self incrimination for making a simple and relatively minor mistake, becomes a totalitarian thinker believing that if it's not perfect, the effort was a total waste of time. Perfectionists can also unload their negative energy on others demeaning and berating them for making simple errors.

Though not an easy task, the solution to this behavioral and mental health problem is tracking and changing the internal self talk and the internal mental pictures. This is often accomplished by keeping written records of the self talk/mental pictures on a piece of paper along with the resultant emotion. A third column on the paper is for the new, more rational self talk. CBT and REBT utilize an A-B-C theory. A = Activating Event, B = Belief about the event and C = Consequential emotion and behavior. The key to changing our negative and often destructive emotions and behaviors is B, our belief about the event, which is upheld through self talk and mental pictures. Change those, and C, the emotions and behaviors, will also change, even though the actual event, A, remains the same.