

The Second Cardinal Sin of Thinking: The Over General

by

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"I'm never going to be promoted," "I'm always going to be left out of the group," "I'm never going to have a lasting relationship," "I'm always going to be the one who gets the short end of the stick." Sound familiar? Have you ever heard anyone, or even yourself, use the words "always" and "never" in a sentence like these? If so, you are among the hundreds of millions of people who over generalize and use these very unrealistic, absolute terms. Wendell Johnson, the American semanticist, psychologist and author of *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment*, is quoted as having said, in a somewhat paradoxical and humorous manner "Always and never are two words you should always remember never to use."

So, what's wrong with using "never" and "always?" Basically, it's so often untrue, unrealistic and irrational. These two words may be the most common culprit to purely cognitive based depression. Cognitive based depression is brought about because our thinking is depressing. If we tell ourselves that we will never get a good job, we would get depressed, and with good reason. If it were true that we would "never" get a good job, who wouldn't get depressed? But, it's not true. It may not be probable that we get a good job soon, but it is possible that a good job will come at some time. By using "never" we cement the idea of never, ever, at all, getting a good job into our mind. How depressing! Even if it's untrue, the mind accepts those internal statements, subtle, subconscious and so hard to discern, as absolutely true statements. Furthermore, there is no evidence about the future so it is very unrealistic to use "never" in the context of a future event or happening, such as finding a good job, a loving relationship or whatever one might be needing or wanting. When we do use "never" in such contexts, the mind accepts it as the real situation and naturally we feel depressed. So, for those who might be depressed, examine your self talk and if you are using "never," stop it!

Perhaps we have made statements such as "I'm always messing up" or "I'm always behind" or "I'm always going to be just average." Statements like this are based on the past and then assumed into the future. As with "never," "always" is an absolute statement without any possibility of change. Because life is change, statements such as "always" make the process of living and growing stagnant. For this reason, "always" is considered faulty and should not be used in our internal dialogue, our self talk, or, for the most part, in conversations with others. "Always" can also bring about cognitive based depression, and anxiety. If, for example, you tell yourself "I always get nervous when speaking in front of groups" and are going to be speaking in front of a group in a few days, guess what? You're going to get

nervous. Why, because you have been telling yourself that you “always” do – why should this time be any different? If you want to stop getting nervous when speaking in front of groups, you first need to stop telling yourself that you always do!!

There are a few alternatives which can be used to replace “never” and “always.”

The statement “I’m never going to get a good job” can be rephrased “I am currently having difficulty seeing myself in a good job” or “It may be a while before I am able to get a good job.” Or, the statement “I’m always going to find myself in an abusive relationship” can be changed to “In the past I have been in several abusive relationships, but no longer want that.” “I always get nervous when speaking in front of groups” can be changed to “I feel nervous when I’m about to speak in front of a group.” There is certainly nothing wrong in being honest with yourself about a current feeling, such as nervousness. The problem comes when ascribing a permanent all encompassing time frame on that feeling.

The words always and never are considered irrational. That means, they are not reasonable. Yet, they are used excessively in everyday language both to others and to ourselves. Take some time to listen to others...at the coffee shop, at work, in line at the market, on television. Try and pick out these two words, always and never, and then figure out how the statement these words were used in could be rephrased to be more rational, more reasonable. Let’s say you hear someone at the market saying “I’m never going to be able to quit smoking.” How would you rephrase this statement to be more realistic – and less depressing? Then, when you have a handle on listening to others, take some time to listen to yourself. Try and catch yourself using these over generalized, absolute terms and change them to a phrase that is more realistic, more rational – and more conducive to your mental health.