

Beware Of Polarized Thinking¹

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Have you ever had one of those mornings when you come into work and from the first moment, things start to go wrong? You discover a mistake on some forms you filled out. Someone criticizes you for a decision you made. A customer points out that you didn't give him what you promised.

Just one negative thing after another...

Pretty soon, you get to thinking, "I just never seem to be able to do things right!"

Or your wife (or husband) makes several critical comments about something you've said or done and you get irritated. You turn to your spouse and mumble, "You're *always* picking on me!"

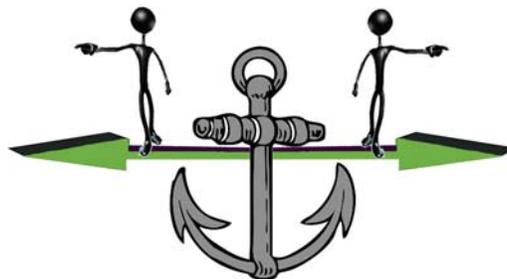
These are examples of *Polarized Thinking*.

Polarized thinking means you swing all the way out to one end of a two-sided continuum—you magnify a situation way out of proportion and exaggerate what is happening far beyond what is actually happening. To coin an old, worn-out expression: you make a mountain out of a molehill!

Polarized thinking destroys open communication. It narrows our perceptions and handicaps us in our attempts to constructively solve problems.

As we grow into adulthood, we learn to use "bipolar" words to categorize what we see and experience. These are words that are opposite ways of thinking about things. For example: good vs. bad, smart vs. dumb, skilled vs. unskilled, sharp vs. dull, friendly vs. unfriendly, satisfactory vs. unsatisfactory and so on.

With all of the many things we get involved in every day, these bipolar words become anchors in our thinking as we try to sort out our experiences.



¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

When we feel good about ourselves, when we are confident with who we are and what we're doing, these "anchors" are actually useful in processing information. We usually use them to judge most of our experiences as falling between two extremes.

For example: "I thought the movie was *pretty good*" or "I think he's *reasonably skilled* at his job but needs to learn a few more tricks." We are able to think in terms of *grays* instead of only thinking in terms of black and white, which is polarized thinking.

Now here's where it gets dangerous.

When we are feeling stressed or attacked or threatened, we often swing all the way out to our negative anchors—we lose our grays and start thinking in blacks and whites. Everything becomes all-or-nothing.

In other words, we *polarize our thinking*.

- ◆ "I'm upset" becomes "I'm furious!"
- ◆ "That wasn't such a smart thing to do" becomes "That was utterly stupid!!!"
- ◆ "You didn't do that the right way" becomes "You never do anything right!!!"

And, what happens when we start thinking that way? Our interaction with others begins to fall apart.

- ◆ We stop listening to what others are saying and communicating effectively..
- ◆ We look for someone to blame instead of searching for solutions.
- ◆ We attack instead of problem-solve.
- ◆ We magnify the bad part of everything that happens.
- ◆ We end up feeling miserable and stimulating everyone else around us to feel miserable.

Why do we think in blacks and whites when we are attacked or threatened? It's because our emotions take over and drive our thinking.

When you catch yourself engaging in polarized thinking, realize that you are experiencing an emotion. It could be frustration. It could be anger. It could be disappointment in someone.

Be aware how much your emotion is influencing your thinking and behaving. Pause and give yourself a moment of self-awareness before you speak or behave.

In today's work world, with its strong emphasis on excelling at anything we do, we cannot afford to slip into polarized thinking, no matter how stressed or attacked or threatened we feel. Nothing good will come of it and we'll leave a ton of misery tumbling in our wakes.

Be on guard against polarized thinking.

Catch yourself when you slip into extreme thinking as you respond to someone, or make decisions. Be aware when it begins to happen. Manage your emotions.

Stop your impulse to polarize before it's too late!

