

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

You are listening to *The Life Coach School Podcast* with Brooke Castillo, episode number 325.

Welcome to *The Life Coach School Podcast*, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. And now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Well hello, my beautiful friends. Welcome to the podcast. We're going to talk about something very important today. This is something that I've been seeing quite a bit with the coaching that I'm doing with my own thinking, negotiating with my own thoughts. And it's work that most of us need to do.

And the reason why I know most of us need to do it is because we have human brains, and human brains love all or nothing thinking. And the reason we like it is because there's no cognitive dissonance. There's no tension. There's no resistance because things are either one way or the other and we can just settle into the comfort of having there be no ambiguity and just being 100% positive that we're right, or that we are good, or that they're wrong, or that they're bad.

So, I want to offer this up as a challenge for you to look at when you're evaluating your own thinking. And some of the most obvious ways we see this in coaching is where someone will come to us and say, "Everything's terrible. My day was awful. I'm a terrible person. Life is bad." These all or nothing statements that send us away from cognitive dissonance, so there is a level of indulgent comfort in it. But it also leaves us with not having to think critically or negotiate what reality we want to create.

You may notice this in your own kind of depiction and the meaning that you make of life. And one of the ways you might see this is with people. And when you categorize people as either good or bad, "This person is a good person or this person is a bad person." And you may try and do that with yourself, "I am a good person or I am a bad person."

Now, the trick is, humans are not good or bad. Humans are good and bad. And ideas and thoughts and approaches are not right or wrong. They are,

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

most often, right and wrong. And so, when we can hold that truth of both of those things being true at the same time and use our critical thought, we can evolve ourselves much more quickly.

We don't find ourselves getting caught up in this all or nothing thinking, which for many of us, causes us to freeze and hide. If we have to either be a good or bad person, a success or a failure, we won't put ourselves out there into the world because the risk is too high of being bad or wrong or failing.

But when we understand that life is about succeeding and failing, getting it right and getting it wrong, being a good person sometimes and being a, quote unquote bad person sometimes, then there's freedom in that, in being able to use the word "And," instead of "Or."

I see this happen with me sometimes with some of my clients and my students. They start learning some of the things that I teach and they start agreeing with a lot of the stuff I teach and they start applying it to their life and they see change. And so then, they start thinking that I'm all-knowing or all-good or have all-good ideas or I'm always right.

And when they see something that maybe they don't agree with or a lesson that I teach that doesn't resonate with them, they start questioning, "Wait a minute, can Brooke be my teacher if I agree with this stuff and I disagree with this stuff?"

And the answer is, of course, yes. I'm always telling my students, "Listen, I'm going to teach you a lot of things. You need to take what resonates, what makes sense, what works for you and apply it to your life and let the rest of it go. You don't have to agree with everything that I teach. Of course not."

And there's going to be some stuff you love about me and like about me and appreciate about me. And that's great. And there may be some things you don't appreciate about me and don't like about me. And that's okay too. You don't have to pick one or the other. It can be "And." It can be both.

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

Now, where this might get into trouble and where you may be confused about this is in your value system. And there are certain things that are non-negotiable values for you. And this is an important thing for you to know about yourself and to recognize when you're discerning and choosing teachers and choosing things that are really important to you that you want to learn, education that you want to do.

And it's a tricky thing because can you get both sides? Can you understand both sides of an idea before making that decision? Can you hold that cognitive dissonance and understand the interpretation and where both sides are coming from before you make a decision?

And when you do make a decision about something you believe in or something that you value, can you still hold space for the alternative view? Or is there a complete intolerance for it? And what does that look like? And does that serve you? And the answer may be yes in some of those. But I want you to be asking the questions.

So, for example, for me, I believe in good and bad. I believe in right and wrong. I believe in victims and that there are victims in this world and that there are horrible victimizations in this world. And I also believe in the victim mentality that many of us adopt, that I adopted in many areas of my life that didn't serve me.

So, I do believe we need to acknowledge victims and take care of them and support them and treat them. And then, I also believe that we need to, as victims in our own lives, take self-responsibility for not developing a victim mentality and revictimizing ourselves. We don't want to set ourselves up, so we're reliving the abuse that we may have experienced and taking that out on ourselves personally.

Those are not either-or ideas. You can have the idea of personal responsibility for yourself and also have the idea of support. One of the ideas that I have that is non-negotiable for me is the belief in human rights for all individuals. And that we have a choice of who we want to be in this world.

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

And that is for us to decide and to own those choices for ourselves, for our sexuality, for our gender, for who we want to be in the world. And I think there's a huge expanse of that that needs to be respected. Rights need to be in place. Support needs to be in place for all of those.

I think there are things that we are born with that need to be protected and need to be understood. These are non-negotiables for me. These are above all other values.

Now, when it comes to the economy and capitalism and personal responsibility and entrepreneurship and money, I believe in a very small government. I believe in a free market. I believe in the right of every citizen to be able to start their own business and make their own money and work as hard as they want to work to produce the results they want. I believe in that fiercely.

So, as that applies to our current government, as that applies to my current choices in terms of how I vote, those are conflicting ideas in many instances. And so, I have to choose. So, it doesn't mean I have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It doesn't mean I have to decide that I don't believe in one thing and that I only believe in the other.

But I do have to decide, for example, how I'm going to vote and what that priority is for me, of course. And for me, human rights trumps everything. Without that, we have nothing else. When we don't protect our individual citizens and their rights and their treatment and their equity and all of the humanness that every person deserves, nothing else matters. So, we've got to get that right first. That's my opinion.

So, when I vote for that, I'm voting against another value, possibly, in many of these situations. But it doesn't mean that I can't hold the tension of two of them, even though I'm prioritizing one over the other. I don't have to get rid of one for the other.

It's the same with people. If we believe people are good and they're bad, we get to decide whether we want that person in our life. It doesn't mean we have to make that person all bad and evil and terrible and say that they

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

have no redeeming qualities. It may just mean I'm choosing to not have this person in my life at the expense of those other things and I can hold that tension, I can hold that dissonance without having to be all or nothing.

Ow, you may ask, why is this so important? Why is it so important for us to be able to hold space for differing ideas? And my opinion on that is, if you are interested in evolving yourself and evolving ideas, you have to recognize if you have an all or nothing mentality, you're never going to be open to considering where you might be wrong.

You're going to say, "Listen, I'm a good person. I believe in good things. I'm right about this and you're wrong about this." And if you believe in those things so fiercely that you can't see where maybe you are wrong about something or maybe you are acting in a way that's hurting other people that you're not aware of, or maybe you are doing something – maybe it's unconsciously or even inadvertently. But if you're so bent on you being good and you being right and your ideas being all or nothing, you'll miss that opportunity to evolve.

You will also find indulgent comfort in being right all the time, in being a good person all the time, on being on the right side no matter what, that your thinking can become very limited because you're always looking to the right thing out there, for someone to tell you what is the right thing to think, instead of using your critical mind, instead of testing against your own value system, deciding what those values are, and then choosing from that place.

And when you do that, when you're able to question yourself really carefully, then you're able to question what's going on in the world, you start living authentically and bravely. And you don't have anything to hide. You don't have anything to keep secret because you believe so fiercely in your thoughts and you haven't given up any of your values in order to be all or nothing on one side or the other.

Now, the other piece of this that I think is really interesting is also considering – and I've talked about this a little bit in some other podcasts – also considering, what am I missing? What do I have to learn here? And

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

being open and not afraid to considering other ideas and knowing that your values will hold true for you or that maybe you want to question your values and question your history and what you've learned and maybe how you want to change.

That is a beautiful thing. That is evolving. And when you look at people's progress throughout their life, most people change ideas throughout their life. That's a beautiful thing. It doesn't mean that you're a bad person or that you were a bad person. It means that you developed and learned and changed and evolved and that is the way of living as a human.

There's good and there's bad. And when you can embrace it all in the world and in yourself, you'll just have a much easier way, a much more free approach to your life that will make it easier to forgive yourself and cut yourself a break and understand yourself and other people.

The other way that I see that this is showing up – it's not just in the all or nothing thinking. It's in the all or nothing actions. I see this a lot with myself. I want to do everything, or I want to do nothing, instead of doing everything and nothing.

So, this is how this shows up for me. I have been watching a lot of documentaries lately. I'm super-excited about Netflix documentaries. So, I've been watching a lot of them. And movies. So, I watched the movie Just Mercy. I watched the documentary Disclosure. I watched the documentary 13th. I watched the documentary Filthy Rich, which is about Jeffrey Epstein and sex trafficking. I watched the documentary on Harvey Weinstein and the sexual harassment and rape that he participated in. And I have been listening to the podcast 1619, which I highly recommend.

And it's just a lot of input and a lot of things that I want to immediately do to help, organizations I want to donate to and participate in and talk to and initiatives I want to create and things I want to do personally to help with what is going on in the world. And I feel as if, when I watch this stuff and read about this stuff, I feel like there's just not enough time and I'm not

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

enough and I'm not good enough and I can't do enough and I'm so far behind, all the things, right?

So, I have that to consider. And then I'm also a mother and have a family and I'm running a company and I have clients that I'm coaching through this time and we have COVID and I'm trying to run my business with my employees and talk to my students in certification and deal with a lot of emails from people that are upset and frustrated and mad and all of the things.

And then I have, you know, bills to pay. I know you guys can relate to this. Bills to pay and my spirituality that I want to consider and my self-care and meditation. And then there's all my personal goals and my relationships and my friendships and helping others build their business. And then love and joy and the freedom I want to feel.

And I want to walk my dogs and I want to go out and enjoy the beauty and I feel like sometimes we get into, "It's either or. Either I do all of these things for the world or I do all the things for myself and take care of myself." And can we hold those ideas together? Can we do those things together? Can we contribute to the world? Can we show up for the world, for our employees and our students and our families and provide for them?

And can we also have rest and self-care and even luxury for ourselves at the same time? Can we hold those two ideas? Can we go out and have fun and laugh with our friends while there's sex trafficking happening in the world? Can that be an "And?" Or does it need to be an "Or?" Can we learn how to live in a world that will always have both? And how do we do that?

And so, for me, I shared a little bit earlier how I do that in terms of, you know, the way that I vote and the way that I show up when I have two different belief systems, two different value systems. We have to prioritize them. We have to decide, what is the most important thing? And then, we direct our action based on that.

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

It's also true for our personal lives. And for me, I want to do a lot in the world. I want to take massive action. I want to put myself out there and help. But I know that I have to take care of myself first.

I have to stay away from buffering. I have to get some exercise. I have to get really good sleep. I have to laugh and enjoy my friends and eat really good healthy food. And sometimes, that can feel like a fulltime job; emptying out my brain, loving myself fiercely when the invitation to hate myself seems to always be knocking, right? That seems like so much work.

And then, after I do all of that, then I want to go out and make sure my employees are taken care of and my students are taken care of and all of those things too. And then, go out into the community and offer my help there, because I feel a sense of responsibility. And because it can seem like I either do everything or nothing, sometimes we can feel completely frozen and we end up doing nothing.

And I'm seeing this with my students. I'm seeing this with my clients who are freaking out, "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to do the right thing. I need to do the best thing. I need to do the right thing. I need to be a good person." We're putting ourselves in this all or nothing, "I need to do all the things or I'm just going to quit."

And the way that I want to help you is first get your values clear and prioritize them. And then, here's three questions that have been really useful to me.

First is, what feels authentic and true? Once you have your priorities in place and then you're deciding what to add, maybe something to your life, how you want to contribute, what feels authentic and true? And this is a very challenging question, especially if you're a people-pleaser and you want everyone else to think what you're doing is right and good and fast enough.

You're going to want to, if you're anything like me, please all the other people. And, you know, remember to release all of that and ask yourself, what feels authentic and true to me right now? That doesn't mean it won't

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

change. Doesn't mean you don't have more to learn, or whatever. But this is what's true for me right now. And making sure you're taking action from that place.

The next question is, where can I have the most impact? Where do I have a superpower or a special different opportunity or leverage that I can utilize to have the most impact in my community? My smaller community and my larger community? What's the best place for me to put my energy? Not where someone else says I should do it, but where can I do it where it will have the most impact for what I have to offer?

And then the last question has to be, what can I release for now? We can't solve all the problems with your life right this second. We have to constrain our energy and our focus. And if we think we need to solve everything, like all of the things that I'm listening to and all of the things that I'm watching, I want to solve all of them, of course, I want to contribute to all of them. But I recognize that's not possible.

It's not possible for me to do all of those things. So, which one of those am I going to release for now? And focus on the ones that are true and authentic, that I can have the most impact on and then put my energy into that, and know that it's okay that once I've prioritized myself and my values, other people may not agree that that's what I should do. Other people may be upset with me because I'm not participating in certain things.

But you have to make that decision for yourself, for your own self-preservation, for your own mental health and your own physical health. Because if you don't have that, you are not going to be able to be of any use to anyone, if you're of no use to yourself.

I, ironically, went to a local bookstore here and picked up a book called How to Do Nothing. It was really interesting. Jenny Odell is the author. And it's a book about how to withdraw from the attention economy and the idea that we have to do more and we have to do better and we have to create and always be growing.

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

And, of course, when I read this I laugh because, of course, that has been my message to myself and to everyone, like, “Let’s keep growing. Let’s keep evolving. Let’s keep creating more.” And do we have to pick between doing that or doing nothing?

And her book, it doesn’t say that we have to pick between them. But it’s an interesting thesis that she presents, that we should withdraw from that so we can be more present with the day to day. And so, I started questioning, “Wait, I think the answer is not to do one or the other, not to withdraw from it or do it all in, but to do both.” To be able to stay present. To be able to pay attention to our brains and to be where we are in our lives and be connected to ourselves and also grow, and also have big goals, and also have that future.

That is a much harder life. I want to offer that to you because I think it’s an important thing to understand. It’s a much harder life to hold both of those things at the same time, to hold the importance of doing nothing and self-care and relaxation, and have very big goals and value you want to create and contribution you want to create.

That creates that cognitive dissonance, that tension in our lives. And we have to learn how to hold both of those. It’s much easier to become a workaholic in some ways, to just go all in on work and to never take a break and to never rest and to always just be hustling and hustling and hustling at your own expense because you don’t have to hold two separate ideas at once. You don’t have to negotiate them.

It’s also much easier and indulgent in the other way too, where we just do nothing, where we don’t show up, we don’t create value, we don’t contribute, we don’t take a stand. We just withdraw and hide and find peace in the mountains somewhere.

And I’m not saying those aren’t valid choices, because, of course, they are. You can choose to work all the time and you can choose to never work at all, never contribute at all in terms of taking care of your family or taking

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

care of your community or creating a business, or even participating in society at all, these all or nothing ideas.

But most of us have decided to live in the middle somewhere, to create and contribute and be present for other people, for our families, for our children, for our businesses, for our employers, for our companies, and also find space and peace and do nothing. And that, holding that together, is the tension that we have to learn how to live with in a way that serves our growth, but not ever at our own expense.

And I think this is really interesting to look out in the world and find people who hold both ideas for themselves, to find examples of this, of people who are doing beautiful, wonderful contributions in the world and also giving to themselves.

Who believe in – like for me, I like to look for people who – and Oprah's such a beautiful example of this for me – who hasn't put any limit on the amount of money that she can make or the ambition that she has, and takes beautiful care of herself and her community and the causes that she cares about. And holding both of those and believing in both of those.

And those are the people that, to me, have figured this out. It's not the all or nothing. It's not the everyone is good or all these people are good and these people are bad. It's that humans are both and all humans are born innocent and worthy and often lose their way or are taught something or believe something that doesn't serve communities, that doesn't serve life. And can we understand that as part of the human experience, without just railing against it and not understanding it and vilifying it?

For me, that is my work. That is what I want to do. And I think, for those of us who feel very strongly about many different things, we're going to have to get used to and-thinking instead of or-thinking. We're going to have to release all or nothing thinking and decide what our values are and how we will take action from that, but also understanding that there is a lot in this world that we don't understand, that we need to learn, and that we may

Ep #325: All or Nothing Thinking

think we're right, but we should consider that maybe we're wrong. We can always go back to being right.

So, I know that many of you are struggling right now. There's a lot going on. There's a lot of overwhelm. There's a lot of fear of being bad or wrong. There's a lot of thoughts that life is terrible and awful and nothing good is happening and that everything is falling down and that the world's gone crazy and that we're all going to die.

I mean, there's so much of this all or nothing thinking. And I just want to recommend that you just sit down and you write down your thoughts, as I always do. And look at where in your life are you having all or nothing thinking? Where are you not willing to consider alternatives and consider that, yeah, the world is going through a lot of negative stuff and there's so much positivity as well.

Can there be both? Can you hold space for both? And when you do, what do you notice? What happens inside your brain and inside your body when you're willing to give up the all or nothing thinking? It's an invitation. Have a beautiful week, everyone. I'll talk to you soon. Bye.

Hey, if you enjoy listening to this podcast, you have to come check out Self-Coaching Scholars. It's my monthly coaching program where we take all this material and we apply it. We take it to the next level and we study it. Join me over at the TheLifeCoachSchool.com/join. Make sure you type in the TheLifeCoachSchool.com/join. I'd love to have you join me in Self-Coaching Scholars. See you there.