



Classroom Activity

Dialectical Thinking

All-Or-Nothing Thinking

Understands viewpoints as all one thing or another — also called “Either/Or Thinking.”

All Good vs. All Evil

Totally Sane vs. Totally Crazy

All Benefits vs. All Costs

All Pro vs. All Con

Always Wise vs. Always Ignorant

Only a Victim vs. Only a Victimizer

All Reward vs. All Risk

100% of the Evidence vs. 0% of the Evidence

Pure Altruism vs. Pure Selfishness

Only Pure Intentions vs. Only Malice

Omnipotently powerful vs. 100% powerless

Others...

Dialectical Thinking

Accepts that, in our daily lives, opposing sides almost always both have some merit — also called “Both/And Thinking.”

Dialectical thinking involves the ability to take other's perspectives and to accept uncertainty, ambiguity, and nuance.

Dialectical Thinking is difficult because:

1. Social problems can be upsetting, and when we're upset, we like certainty
2. It's hard to tolerate that there's a lot we don't know and don't understand
3. We can experience people who disagree with us as aggressive, arrogant, or rude, and when we do, it's painful to acknowledge when they have a point
4. We may fear that if we acknowledge that an opponent has a point, it will cause us to lose the argument
5. We may worry that others will use any concessions we make to invalidate our argument or hurt/shame us
6. We may think that more extreme arguments are more persuasive/effective
7. It's difficult to acknowledge negative things about people or views we cherish
8. Other reasons...

Despite these fears, dialectical thinking is more likely to:

Facilitate dialogue

Help us understand things

Help us understand each other

Boost our emotional stability

Find effective solutions

Help people get along with each other

Increase inclusion, empathy, and justice

Be more persuasive

Practice Dialectical Thinking

Try to come up with at least three pros, three cons, and one uncertainty for an issue of your choice.

Try to think of the best arguments for all sides. A pro supports the argument, a con argues against it, and an uncertainty is anything that you yourself are unsure of that doesn't neatly fit as a pro or a con.

Avoid making "straw man" arguments (weak arguments you can easily defeat) for other viewpoints. Instead, make "steel man" (strong and challenging) arguments for the view with which you disagree. Also, try to include genuine uncertainties about the issue as opposed to "it may not go far enough" arguments.

Issue: _____

Pro:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Con:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Uncertainty:

- 1.

Reflection Questions

- 1 Describe what it was like having to come up with both pros and cons of an issue. Did you have a hard time coming up with arguments for one side?
- 2 Look at the reasons dialectical thinking is difficult. Do one or more of those reasons resonate with you? For example, was it difficult to acknowledge negative things about issues or people we care about?
- 3 In going through the process of coming up with different arguments, did you think about the arguments any differently? Is there a position you are more willing to listen to that you hadn't previously considered?
- 4 How often do you read articles in the news or in your classes that reflect dialectical thinking vs. all-or-nothing thinking? Are there ways to consume information that could foster dialectical thinking? Are there other practices you could engage in that could help you increase your dialectical thinking?