

# 10

Chapter

# Everything in Moderation: Avoid the Extremes

Remember that you feel what you think. If you say, “Nothing ever goes right for me,” you will feel like nothing ever goes right for you. If you say, “I can’t do anything right,” you will feel like you can’t do anything right. Some other common extreme words and phrases that can leave you feeling angry, frustrated, anxious, and sad include “everything,” “always,” “never,” “every time,” “constantly,” “horrible,” and “bad.” In the example of “I can’t do anything right,” it’s more accurate to say something like “I’m frustrated that I’m making an unusual number of mistakes today. I know I can do better.” The good news is that this bad habit of using extreme words can be changed.

When you use extreme words and change them to something more accurate, you feel better. One example is saying that you “hate” something or someone, when the reality is that you dislike it or dislike them. If you use the word “hate” daily, it’s likely you use it when you don’t really mean it. However, you will feel like you do hate many of the aspects of your life and this will affect your mood accordingly. If you only use the word “hate” once or twice a week (when you truly mean it), it will have a greater impact when you use it to express yourself to others too. Similarly, when you say it frequently, people may perceive you as a negative person. Moreover, when you use more moderate and accurate labels, the things that you only dislike won’t feel quite as bad as when you use the word “hate.”

Another example is the word “never.” Some examples in sentences are “You never help me,” “I never do anything right,” “You never support me,” and “You never visit me anymore.” A very similar misuse is seen in its opposite: the word “always.” Some examples are “You always criticize me,” “You always come home late,” “You always watch TV,” and “I always have bad luck.”

## EXERCISE

## Extreme Words

Below on the left are some of the words that are overused that can add to depression, anger, and anxiety. To the right are words and thoughts that you may want to substitute instead of those words. When in doubt, ask yourself which is more accurate: one of the words on the left or one of the words on the right.

**Circle those extreme words that you think you may use inaccurately.**

Extreme Words	Substitute Words and Thoughts
Hate	Dislike, Don't like
Always	Often
Never	Not often enough, Rarely
Constantly	Frequently, More often than I'd like, Usually
Awful, Terrible, Horrible	Unfortunate, Uncomfortable
Worthless, Loser	Find ways in which you or the other person is worthwhile; be more specific about the shortcoming that caused you to think the extreme word.
Failure	You are <i>not</i> a failure! Unsuccessful events are temporary and serve as learning experiences. It's a fact that failures are positively correlated with success: people who try and fail are more likely to succeed in the long term. There's a difference between failing at something and letting it define you as a failure.

Some phrases I often hear that are examples of extreme thoughts are: "I'm having a bad day," "My life sucks" and "She's an idiot" or "I'm an idiot." Another one is "I have the worst luck" when, in reality, there have certainly been times when the speaker had good things happen to them. In some instances, we may recognize that these words aren't accurate but say them anyway to blow off steam. If you think you do this, be sure to be mindful of the reality.

There are exceptions to these rules; otherwise, we would not have these words in the English language. Sometimes extreme words "fit." The first thing to consider is how the use of these words feel when you are saying or thinking them. The second thing to consider is whether the use of these words is accurate or an exaggeration. Is the use of the word extreme or true? If eating blue cheese literally makes you gag, you hate blue cheese. If your child has cancer, it is truly awful. If a terrorist murders 25 innocent people, it's horrible. If you miss an appointment, it's not awful, it's unfortunate. If you get into a fender-bender, it's not horrible, it's frustrating.

If there have been no instances ever of you oversleeping, you can say "I never oversleep." In addition, if you *rarely* oversleep, it's okay to say or think that you *never* oversleep. While it would be more accurate to say "rarely," it's certainly not necessary to change exaggerated words if they don't cause you, or someone who hears them, to feel uncomfortable. In fact, if you're an optimist, it might be that you use extreme words inaccurately but that they make you feel good, and in this case, there is certainly no need to change them unless you are misinforming someone.

If your thought is pessimistic and inaccurate, it will likely contribute to you feeling worse about a situation. For example, if you're running late and hit unexpected traffic and you think, "This is horrible," you're likely to *feel* like it is horrible. Even if you're going to an important interview, it's not horrible. If you substitute the word "unfortunate" for "horrible," you will likely feel much better. If you think of the situation as frustrating and unfortunate, when you arrive, you're likely to explain your lateness better and sound better in terms of your voice tone and facial expressions. Once the interview begins, you're likely to be more composed in your interview than if you're thinking, "Oh no, this is the worst! This is horrible. I'm feeling awful!"

The most important thing to consider is whether there is another word that is true, but feels better or sounds better than saying the more extreme word. Imagine that you're running late to an interview and say aloud "Getting stuck in this traffic is horrible" while thinking about arriving late. Now think about arriving late and saying "Getting stuck in this traffic is unfortunate."

Does it sound better and feel better to say "I don't like blue cheese" than it does to say "I hate blue cheese?"

# Discovering and Changing Your Extreme Words

Below, list the words and phrases you tend to use in a way that exaggerates your situation in a negative way and makes you feel worse. It may be helpful to ask others to point out extreme words that you overuse. Consider asking people close to you whether they hear you say some of these extreme words, too.

To the right of each word, write at least one replacement word or rephrase. If it's helpful, write about how these words make you feel and what thoughts and feelings might be more accurate.

**Extreme word or phrase**

Never

**Accurate replacement word or phrase**

Rarely – This feels more hopeful and less frustrating

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