All or Nothing – Understanding the Problem

It's hard to do anything when we feel like the only choice is between everything and nothing. When you find yourself caught in "all or nothing" thinking, giving yourself only two opposite choices - either "this" or "that", ask yourself if there might be other possibilities somewhere in between.

For example, maybe you don't have to choose between quitting your job or putting up with your boss being cruel to you. You might look for ways to stay and start to shift the situation with your boss. You don't have to decide everything right now. Just decide something.

What about the big decisions about where you want to go? Break your goals down into concrete steps, sters you can take, just little steps - walking on middle ground.
Sometimes we think about things in such black and white terms, like it's 0% or 100%. Either we are doing FANTASTIC in a course, or totally sucking and going to fail for sure. Either we completely trust someone with our life, or we can't let them in at all. Maybe we try to keep total control over everything that's happening, or just throw up our hands and let – or hope other people fix things for us...

This way of seeing life can hurt our efforts to learn new things. For example, have you ever started a course thinking "THIS time I'm going to do it..." and so you start off making super-human efforts to succeed? But that superhero burns out pretty fast, because regular life gets in the way. Then this huge switch happens inside: "Okay, screw it, I can't do it, I can't do anything, forget it!"

"Exploding" one experience into a general rule

We can also get caught in mental or emotional habits, like "exploding" one experience into a general rule: If you let me down once, you'll always let me down; if I make one mistake, I'm an idiot. It's like saying "I hate movies" after seeing one movie you hated.

For many of us, these habits and the 'thinking in extremes' come out of stuff that happened a very long time ago. They were defenses (or strategies to protect ourselves). If we experienced violence, or weren't safe or loved when we were growing up, we might not be so great at paying attention to or taking care of the day-to-day "normal" stuff - because there wasn't a lot of "normal" stuff going on back then. Everything was opposites like 'safe' or 'in danger', and 'right' or 'wrong'; in a violent house, there's no chance to question authority - and negotiating for a middle ground can be dangerous, even 'life' or 'death'. So now finding balance is a big challenge.
Stories

Words of one literacy learner

Living with abuse is a life of extremes. Things are either - you're getting bouquets of flowers delivered in the snow outside your door, or you're being woken up at 2 o clock in the morning with a knife at your throat. It's extremes.

Finding balance, I think it's beyond confidence in yourself. You don't even know who you are, you know. If you've been told since the day you were born you're a piece of shit and you don't have a brain, much less ever use it, you carry that on through the whole life, you don't know who you are.

Perhaps exploring how the 'all or nothing' attitude got going in our own lives will help us start to think about how to find some middle ground, and to spend more time in the grey places in between black and white - because that is, after all, where a rich daily life can happen.