



# e-quilibrium

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## No Absoluting

- An individual makes an unsuccessful attempt to fix a light switch and thinks, "Nothing ever goes right for me."
- During a marital disagreement, one spouse says to the other, "You never listen to me."
- When encountering a detour on the way to a meeting, the driver says, "There is always something to slow me down."

At first glance, it may seem that there is no problem with these thoughts or statements. They tend to be commonly used or heard. These are examples of the use of absolutes in thoughts or statements when something goes wrong. However, banning the use of such absolutes can boost emotional well-being and the health of relationships.

There are at least two critical problems with absolute thoughts when there is a problem:

- 1) They aren't accurate. To say that "nothing" ever goes right simply isn't true. Nor is it correct that one's spouse "never" listens. And there are indeed times when we make trips without having something slow us down. Most people believe that their perceptions are accurate and what they say is true. However, making statements like the examples above suggests that one's perceptions are inaccurate and/or that one is not telling the truth.
- 2) Absolute thoughts about negative situations or outcomes breed hopelessness. If it were true that "nothing" ever goes right, or my spouse "never"

listens to me, or that there is “always” a detour means that there is no reason to expect any change. There is no reason to change behavior. There is no reason to hope for improvement.

Perhaps your perspective is that having absolute thoughts or making such absolute statements is an innocent habit, and the thinker or speaker really doesn't mean what she/he says literally. I agree that it is a habit, but I would characterize the habit as unhealthy rather than innocent. I also agree that most persons, if pressed, wouldn't defend the precision of the thought or statement. However, such thoughts/statements can fuel depression, anxiety, and anger. When something doesn't go right, it is much healthier to have thoughts and make statements that are accurate and hopeful.

How does one go about banning absolutes? The first step is awareness... catch “absoluting” in the act. Once caught, the second step is to replace the thought or statement with one that isn't absolute, one that is more accurate and hopeful. Karen Reivich and Andrew Schatte, University of Pennsylvania psychologists who wrote The Resilience Factor, suggest that the ability to dispute one's absolute thoughts is a key skill in managing life's setbacks.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is an Associate Professor of Family Medicine, and Director of Behavioral Science for the Dayton Community Family Practice Residency Program, Wright State University School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:  
e-mail: [paul.hershberger@wright.edu](mailto:paul.hershberger@wright.edu)  
phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021