



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly e-mail to answer questions submitted by the autism community. This is one of the past issues of the column. Visit [www.ausm.org](http://www.ausm.org) to sign up to receive the e-mails.

## **Dear Therapist:**

Many of us on the autism spectrum sometimes get stuck in black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking. How does that fit into the categories of ASD characteristics, like executive function difficulties, theory of mind deficiencies, restricted/repetitive patterns of behaviors, sensory processing differences (I don't think it's this), differences in socialization and communication, or splinter skills? Which one? Wow. And a deeper question would be, what's the neurology behind it?

## **– All or Nothing and All the Things**

## **Dear All or Nothing:**

Thank you for this interesting question. My experience with autistic adults and a brief review of online forums suggests that this cognitive style is something that is clearly recognizable to many autistic adults. I like the idea of binary thinking rather than black and white as it carries less of an ideal of values.

Binary thinking ranges from having difficulty with concepts such as “maybe” and “sometimes” to rigid judgments of good/bad, success/failure, and so on. This latter pattern is especially problematic when used in self-judgment as we tend to know our own weaknesses quite well.

The DSM criteria are, at best, an attempt to organize as broad range of cognitive differences into neat boxes – and sometimes the boundaries between boxes are not as clear as we would like them to be. In general, I think most people consider binary thinking to fall into category B2: “Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior.”



While it's not a perfect fit, I believe the tendency to binary thinking may explain some of the behavior listed. When “maybe” and “sometimes” take a lot of work, it is easier to stick to clear rules and routines.

There's surprisingly little research on how all the characteristics of autism fit together, but I think it's fair to say that binary thinking is an executive function difference – and is closely related to the difficulty in imaginative play.

Autistic individuals may be highly creative and imaginative. As one client said, “I am good at thinking outside the box because I don't see the box.”

However, many autistic individuals have difficulty flexibly imagining future scenarios that are realistic. This is seen in difficulty in pretend play with others where a child has to respond “on the fly” to an evolving scenario. It also shows up in difficulty predicting the results of one's own choices.

As for the neurology – we may have to wait a few more years on that one!

Barbara Luskin, PhD, LP

If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail [autismcounseling@ausm.org](mailto:autismcounseling@ausm.org) or contact us at 651.647.1083.