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FAMILY COUNSELING
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

SPLITTING (BLACK AND WHITE THINKING)

A baby tends to experience the world in one of two ways; the world is pleasant and he is happy or the world is unpleasant and she is very unhappy. There are few gradations or subtle variations. The child may be either content or in a rage. The world and the people in it are either good or bad. This condition continues for years (sometimes for very many years).

This situation is seen with six year old Robert and his friend John. Robert and John are neighbors and they are inseparable. Any time you see one, the other is likely near by. They play together every day and often eat lunch together and sleep over at each other's houses. They plan to grow up and be firemen together or astronauts.

One day Robert goes next door to find John. When John comes to the door he tells Robert that he can't play with him. John's cousin from out of town has come to visit. He has brought some neat games with him but they are for two people only and so John can't play with Robert today. Robert comes home in tears and loudly proclaims John to be a no good ruffin and he will never like John or play with him again. He hates John!!! John has gone from being his best friend to his worst enemy. **This is splitting.** The day after John's cousin goes home, he and Robert are playing happily together again.

As Robert gets older, he will learn that the world is not so simple. The world is not just black and white. There are shades of gray. A classic question relates to the man who steals a loaf of bread for his starving children. Would it be more wrong to allow the children to starve or to steal the loaf of bread?

Hopefully, adults learn to suffer the inevitable disappointments and unhappiness of relationships without seeing the world or the people in it as "bad". The ability to understand other people through empathy and identification is essential to successful relationships.

However, when stressed, anyone can regress to an earlier ego state and engage in splitting. This is routinely seen in political strife. Reagan pronounced the USSR as an "evil" empire and currently some in the Muslim world are described as evil. Those same people describe us as evil. This is known as "demonization" wherein the person who is seen as behaving outrageously is written off as a bad person. In a sense, this is a lazy person's attempt at understanding a problem. We all want to understand. Not understanding is very stressful. We don't like being "in the dark". So we grab at an easy solution. The other person is bad. There! That explains it.

The opposite of splitting behavior is to cultivate mature and genuine understanding on a deep level.