

Discover Your Mindset



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Mindset

Why do some people reach their full potential, while others of equal talent, do not?

After three decades of extensive research, Dr. Carol Dweck asserts that success is directly related to people's beliefs about their intelligence and talent. Those who believe their gifts and intelligence are innate and carved in stone have a "fixed mindset", whereas those who believe that their abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and practice have a "growth mindset". The effects of one's mindset on life choices and resulting achievements are profound.¹

Fixed Mindset

Children and adults who hold the implicit belief that intelligence and talents are fixed tend to be concerned about proving their abilities, rather than learning. This belief causes them to interpret mistakes as threats to their ego rather than as opportunities to improve. Mistakes defeat their self-confidence because they attribute errors to lack of ability, which they feel powerless to change. Consequently, in order to decrease the likelihood of making mistakes, and increase the likelihood of demonstrating their skill or intelligence, these individuals tend to avoid challenges.

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Youth with a fixed mindset often avoid making a concerted effort in their endeavors - in the classroom, on the field, or in pursuit of personal goals, fearing that hard work indicates a lack of ability or intelligence, which prevents them from reaching their full potential.³

Growth Mindset

Youth with a growth mindset, on the other hand, tend to demonstrate the kind of perseverance and resilience required to convert life's setbacks into future successes. They believe intelligence and skills can be developed through education and hard work. They want to stretch themselves and learn. Challenges are motivating rather than intimidating, as they present opportunities to grow their skills and intellect, enabling them to work towards audacious goals and achieve their full potential.

Another significant difference between individuals with growth and fixed mindsets is in their ability to accurately self-assess. Those with a growth mindset are more "open to accurate information about their current abilities, even if it's unflattering", because they believe they can develop and improve. "Since they're oriented toward learning... they need accurate information about their current abilities in order to learn effectively." Those with a fixed mindset, however, tend to have distorted or unrealistic views of their abilities.⁴

"The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives." Dr. Dweck

Research: Junior High Transition

A 2007 study by psychologists Carol Dweck and Kali H. Trzesniewski, of Stanford University, and Lisa Blackwell, of Columbia University, proved that students with a growth mindset were destined for greater academic success, and were likely to outperform their fixed mindset peers (of comparable academic standing). The researchers followed 373 students for two years during the transition to junior high school, a time when the workload increases and grading is more stringent, to determine how different mindsets affect math performance.⁵

As predicted, students with a growth mindset felt that learning was a more important goal than getting good grades. In addition, “they held hard work in high regard, believing that the more you labored at something, the better you would become at it... Confronted by a setback such as a disappointing test grade, students with a growth mindset said they would study harder or try a different strategy for mastering the material.”⁶

“Believing talents can be developed allows people to fulfill their potential.” Dr. Dweck

The students who held a fixed mindset, however, were more concerned about demonstrating intelligence and had less interest in learning. “They had negative views of effort, believing that having to work hard at something was a sign of low ability. They thought that a person with talent or intelligence did not need to work hard to do well. Attributing a bad grade to their own lack of ability, those with a fixed mindset said that they would study less in the future, try never to take that subject again and consider cheating on future tests.”⁷

“Such divergent outlooks had a dramatic impact on performance. At the start of junior high, the math achievement test scores of the students with a growth mindset were comparable to those of students who displayed a fixed mindset, but as the work became more difficult, students with a growth mindset showed greater persistence. As a result, their math grades overtook those of the other students by the end of the first semester, and the gap between the two groups continued to widen during the next two years”, demonstrating how a growth mindset can have a long-term impact on one’s success.⁸

While Dweck recognizes that people differ in intelligence and ability, research is converging on the conclusion that accomplishments are typically the result of years of passion and dedication and not something that flows naturally from a gift. American Idol’s Jennifer Hudson, Thomas Edison, Jerry Rice, and Mozart were not simply born with talent; they cultivated it through tremendous and sustained effort. Consequently, if we foster development of a growth mindset, we can empower youth to love challenges and believe in effort, thereby helping them to achieve their full potential.⁹

“Simply learning about the growth mindset seems to mobilize people for meeting challenges and persevering.” Dr. Dweck

Implications for Practice

“Such lessons apply to almost every human endeavor. For instance, many young athletes value talent more than hard work and have consequently become unteachable.” Similarly, many youth accomplish little in their work without constant encouragement to maintain their motivation. Adult guides can help youth develop a growth mindset to increase a youth’s motivation to reach goals, with tactics that include:

- Teaching youth about growth versus fixed mindsets through self-assessment and discussion.
- Discouraging labels (such as “smart” or “dumb”) that convey intelligence as a fixed ability.
- Praising effort, strategies and progress, not intelligence or abilities.
- Presenting youth with opportunities to be challenged, conveying that challenging activities are fun, and that mistakes help them learn and improve.¹⁰

References

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Footnotes

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