

Cultivating a growth mindset

“If we judge ourselves as we make mistakes, we are more intimidated than inspired to try again.

We ought to celebrate instead the act of curiosity that led us explore, and then try again.”

—Carol Dweck

What is Mindset?

The theory of mindset developed by Carol Dweck has at its core the study of our beliefs both conscious and unconscious, and the power of changing even the simplest of them can have on nearly every aspect of our lives. Simply, the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value. This is related to how we view ourselves and inhabit what we consider to be our personality.

The belief that your qualities are carved in stone, the “*fixed mindset*”, creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over again. This happens when you assume that your character, intelligence, and creative ability are fixed, a given that you can’t influence or change. In this framework, being successful is the affirmation of that given intelligence, a fixed measure against an equally fixed standard. Striving for success and avoiding failure at all costs become a way of maintaining the sense of being smart or skilled and this leads to avoiding putting effort behind the things we want to achieve.

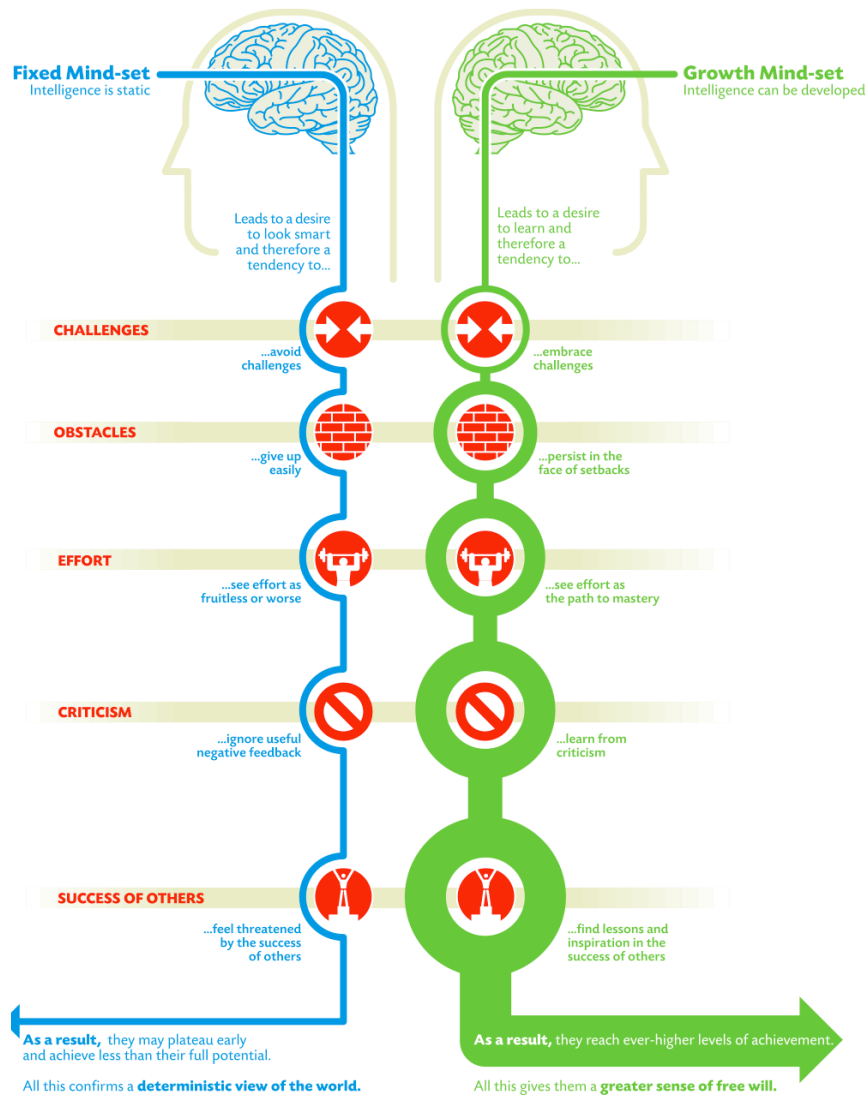
A “*growth mindset*”, on the other hand, thrives on challenge and sees failure not as an evidence of unintelligence but as an opportunity for growth and for stretching of our existing abilities.

Out of these two mindsets, which we manifest from a very early age, springs a great deal of our behavior, our relationship with success and failure in both professional and personal contexts, and ultimately our capacity for happiness.

The growth mindset creates a passion for learning rather than a hunger for approval. It is based on the conviction that human qualities like intelligence and creativity, and even relational capacities like love and friendship, can be cultivated through effort and deliberate practice.

How do we cultivate a growth mindset?

One can cultivate a growth mindset by simply being ready to invest effort and persevere in the face of adversity in any project we decide to take on. When we decide to start changing something intentionally, we need to be prepared to encounter frustration and confusion as parts of the learning process and not signs we should quit.



GRAPHIC BY NIGEL HOLMES

Does this mean that anyone can be Einstein or Beethoven with proper motivation or education? No, it means that a person's true potential is unknown and it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, work, and training.

Here are some exercises that can help you cultivate your growth mindset.

Exercise 1. Growth mindset beliefs

Think of a recent learning experience. Try to recall an experience that you felt very challenging.

STEP 1.

Write the facts of the experience chronologically. What made you decide to take it on? How did it start?

What were the challenges you encountered? What was going well?

What was less like you had hoped it would be? What did the effort of this task consist of?

STEP 2.

Think of the thoughts/attitudes that enabled you to learn and grow. What were you telling yourself when times got tough?

Did someone else inspire you to overcome the obstacles you encountered?

STEP 3.

Reflect on the strengths you used to your advantage.

Which of your strong points came to light?

Which of your qualities made things easier?

Exercise 2. Deconstructing limiting beliefs

In a “*fixed mindset*”, every situation is evaluated: *Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?...*

The “*growth mindset*” is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.

STEP 1.

Think of times when you stopped yourself from trying something that you have always wanted to do. Make a list with the beliefs that were going through your head and influenced your decision.

STEP 2.

Look at each of the beliefs you have written down and underline the ones that are about you (your traits, defects, limitations) and stem from the fixed mindset.

STEP 3.

Think of your strengths. Recall the ones you wrote in the previous exercise and extend the list with strengths you used in other circumstances (that you were aware of or that others pointed out to you). Next to each of the limiting beliefs from above write a strength of yours that you can use to overcome the shortcoming.

A thought for further reflection: In a growth mindset, the internal monologue is not one of judgment but one of voracious appetite for learning, constantly seeking out the kind of input that you can change into learning and constructive action.

Think about how can you further develop the growth mindset beliefs? How can you recall them in times of trials and doubt?



Exercise 3. Accomplishment in failure

Not only are people with a growth mindset not discouraged by failure, but they don't actually see themselves as failing in those situations—they see themselves as learning. Martin Seligman and Angela Duckworth define this as GRIT—the passion, maintaining interest and persevering when attempting to achieve long-term goals.

“Why waste time proving over and over how great you are, when you could be getting better? Why hide deficiencies instead of overcoming them? Why look for friends or partners who will just shore up your self-esteem instead of ones who will also challenge you to grow? And why seek out the tried and true, instead of experiences that will stretch you? 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.”

—Carol Dweck

Think back at an experience from the past (preferably, from a few years ago) that at the time felt like a failure. Write down how it influenced your path and how development was possible anyway (because of it or in spite of it).

What have you accomplished since that failure? How did you grow as a person? Write a short note of gratitude to yourself.



Exercise 4. Growing relationships

One of the most profound applications of this insight has to do not with business or education but with love. Dweck found that the same dichotomy can be found in personal relationships: Those with a fixed mindset believed their ideal mate would put them on a pedestal and make them feel perfect, whereas those with the growth mindset preferred a partner who would recognize their faults and lovingly help improve them, someone who would encourage them to learn new things and become a better person.

“One problem is that people with the fixed mindset expect everything good to happen automatically. It’s not that the partners will work to help each other solve their problems or gain skills. It’s that this will magically occur through their love, sort of the way it happened to Sleeping Beauty, whose coma was cured by her prince’s kiss, or to Cinderella, whose miserable life was suddenly transformed by her prince.”
—Carol Dweck

Think of a person close to you and how you overcame a challenge together. Think of why that makes you proud? How did the both of you grow because of that experience? In which way did the relationship between the two of you become even more fulfilling because of this experience?

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