

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR YOU? THE TWO MINDSETS

It's one thing to have pundits spouting their opinions about scientific issues. It's another thing to understand how these views apply to you. For twenty years, my research has shown that *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. How does this happen? How can a simple belief have the power to transform your psychology and, as a result, your life?

Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the *fixed mindset*—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character—well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. It simply wouldn't do to look or feel deficient in these most basic characteristics.

Some of us are trained in this mindset from an early age. Even as a child, I was focused on being smart, but the fixed mindset was really stamped in by Mrs. Wilson, my sixth-grade teacher. Unlike Alfred Binet, she believed that people's IQ scores told the whole story of who they were. We were seated around the room in IQ order, and only the highest-IQ students could be trusted to carry the flag, clap the erasers or take a note to the principal. Aside from the daily stomachaches she provoked with her judgmental stance, she was creating a mindset in which everyone in the class had one consuming goal—look smart, don't look dumb. Who cared about or enjoyed learning when our whole being was at stake every time she gave us a test or called on us in class?

I've seen so many people with this one consuming goal of proving themselves—in the classroom, in their careers, and in their relationships. Every situation calls for a confirmation of their intelligence, personality, and character. 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?*

But doesn't our society value intelligence, personality, and character? Isn't it normal to want these traits? Yes, but . . .

There's another mindset in which these traits are not simply a hand-

are dealt and have to live with, always trying to convince yourself and others that you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair tens. In this mindset, the hand you're dealt is just the starting point for development. This *growth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic abilities 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.

Do people with this mindset believe that anyone can be anything, that anyone with proper motivation or education can become Einstein or Beethoven? No, but they believe that a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training.

Did you know that Darwin and Tolstoy were considered ordinary children? That Ben Hogan, one of the greatest golfers of all time, was completely uncoordinated and graceless as a child? That the photographer Cindy Sherman, who has been on virtually every list of the most important artists of the twentieth century, *failed* her first photography course? That Geraldine Page, one of our greatest actresses, was advised to give it up for lack of talent?

You can see how the belief that cherished qualities can be developed creates a passion for learning. 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. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.

A VIEW FROM THE TWO MINDSETS

To give you a better sense of how the two mindsets work, imagine—as vividly as you can—that you are a young adult having a really bad day:

One day, you go to a class that is really important to you and that you like a lot. The professor returns the midterm papers to the class. You got a C+. You're very disappointed. That evening on the way back to your home, you find that you've gotten a parking ticket. Being really frustrated, you call your best friend to share your experience but are sort of brushed off.

What would you think? What would you feel? What would you do

When I asked people with the fixed mindset, this is what they said "I'd feel like a reject." "I'm a total failure." "I'm an idiot." "I'm a loser." "I feel worthless and dumb—everyone's better than me." "I'm slime." In other words, they'd see what happened as a direct measure of their competence and worth.

This is what they'd think about their lives: "My life is pitiful." "I have no life." "Somebody upstairs doesn't like me." "The world is out to get me." "Someone is out to destroy me." "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me." "Life is unfair and all efforts are useless." "Life stinks. I'm stupid. Nothing good ever happens to me." "I'm the most unlucky person on this earth."

Excuse me, was there death and destruction, or just a grade, a ticket and a bad phone call?

Are these just people with low self-esteem? Or card-carrying pessimists? No. When they aren't coping with failure, they feel just as worthy and optimistic—and bright and attractive—as people with the growth mindset.

So how would they cope? "I wouldn't bother to put so much time and effort into doing well in anything." (In other words, don't let anyone measure you again.) "Do nothing." "Stay in bed." "Get drunk." "Eat." "Yell at someone if I get a chance to." "Eat chocolate." "Listen to music and pout." "Go into my closet and sit there." "Pick a fight with somebody." "Cry." "Break something." "What is there to do?"

What is there to do! You know, when I wrote the vignette, I intentionally made the grade a C+, not an F. It was a midterm rather than a final. It was a parking ticket, not a car wreck. They were "sort of brushed off, not rejected outright. Nothing catastrophic or irreversible happened. Ye

this raw material the fixed mindset created the feeling of utter failure and paralysis.

When I gave people with the growth mindset the same vignette, this was what they said. They'd think:

"I need to try harder in class, be more careful when parking the car, wonder if my friend had a bad day."

"The C+ would tell me that I'd have to work a lot harder in the class, I have the rest of the semester to pull up my grade."

There were many, many more like this, but I think you get the idea. How, how would they cope? Directly.

"I'd start thinking about studying harder (or studying in a different way) for my next test in that class, I'd pay the ticket, and I'd work things out with my best friend the next time we speak."

"I'd look at what was wrong on my exam, resolve to do better, pay my parking ticket, and call my friend to tell her I was upset the day before."

"Work hard on my next paper, speak to the teacher, be more careful when I park or contest the ticket, and find out what's wrong with my friend."

You don't have to have one mindset or the other to be upset. Who wouldn't be? Things like a poor grade or a rebuff from a friend or loved one—these are not fun events. No one was smacking their lips with relief. Yet those people with the growth mindset were not labeling themselves as victims and throwing up their hands. Even though they felt distressed, they were ready to take the risks, confront the challenges, and keep working at them.

SO, WHAT'S NEW?

Is this such a novel idea? We have lots of sayings that stress the importance of risk and the power of persistence, such as "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" and "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" or "Rome wasn't built in a day." (By the way, I was delighted to learn that the Italians have the same expression.) What is truly amazing is that people with the fixed mindset would not agree. For them, it's "Nothing ventured, nothing lost." "If at first you don't succeed, you probably don't

MINDSET AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Let's step down from the celestial realm of Mozart and Darwin and come back to earth to see how mindsets create achievement in real life. It's funny, but seeing one student blossom under the growth mindset has a greater impact on me than all the stories about Mozarts and Darwins. Maybe because it's more about you and me—about what's happened to us and why we are where we are now. And about children and their potential.

Back on earth, we measured students' mindsets as they made the transition to junior high school: Did they believe their intelligence was a fixed trait or something they could develop? Then we followed them for the next two years.

The transition to junior high is a time of great challenge for many students. The work gets much harder, the grading policies toughen up, the teaching becomes less personalized. And all this happens while students are coping with their new adolescent bodies and roles. Grades suffer, but not everyone's grades suffer equally.

No. In our study, only the students with the fixed mindset showed the decline. They showed an immediate drop-off in grades, and slowly but surely did worse and worse over the two years. The students with the growth mindset showed an *increase* in their grades over the two years.

When the two groups had entered junior high, their past records were indistinguishable. In the more benign environment of grade school, they'd earned the same grades and achievement test scores. Only when they hit the challenge of junior high did they begin to pull apart.

Here's how students with the fixed mindset explained their poor grades. Many maligned their abilities: "I am the stupidest" or "I suck in math." And many covered these feelings by blaming someone else: "[The math teacher] is a fat male . . . and [the English teacher] is a slob with a pink . . ." "Because the teacher is on . . ." These interesting analyses of the problem hardly provide a road map to future success.

With the threat of failure looming, students with the growth mind-

study

Fixed = ↓ grades

Growth = ↑

set instead mobilized their resources for learning. They told us that they, too, sometimes felt overwhelmed, but their response was to dig in and do what it takes. They were like George Dantzig. Who?

George Dantzig was a graduate student in math at Berkeley. One day, as usual, he rushed in late to his math class and quickly copied the two homework problems from the blackboard. When he later went to do them, he found them very difficult, and it took him several days of hard work to crack them open and solve them. They turned out not to be homework problems at all. They were two famous math problems that had never been solved.

challenge = threat test cope → don't try
 The Low-Effort Syndrome

Our students with the fixed mindset who were facing the hard transition saw it as a threat. It threatened to unmask their flaws and turn them from winners into losers. In fact, in the fixed mindset, adolescence is one big test. *Am I smart or dumb? Am I good-looking or ugly? Am I cool or nerdy? Am I a winner or a loser?* And in the fixed mindset, a loser is forever.

It's no wonder that many adolescents mobilize their resources, not for learning, but to protect their egos. And one of the main ways they do this (aside from providing vivid portraits of their teachers) is by not trying. This is when some of the brightest students, just like Nadja Salern-Sonnenberg, simply stop working. In fact, students with the fixed mindset tell us that their main goal in school—aside from looking smart—is to exert as little effort as possible. They heartily agree with statements like this:

"In school my main goal is to do things as easily as possible so I don't have to work very hard."

This low-effort syndrome is often seen as a way that adolescents assert their independence from adults, but it is also a way that students with the fixed mindset protect themselves. They view the adults as saying, "Now we will measure you and see what you've got." And they are answering, "No you won't."

John Holt, the great educator, says that these are the games all human beings play when others are sitting in judgment of them. "The

worst student we had, the worst I have ever encountered, was in his life outside the classroom as mature, intelligent, and interesting a person as anyone at the school. What went wrong? . . . Somewhere along the line, his intelligence became disconnected from his schooling.”

For students with the growth mindset, it doesn't make sense to stop trying. For them, adolescence is a time of opportunity, a time to learn new subjects, a time to find out what they like and what they want to become in the future.

Later, I'll describe the project in which we taught junior high students the growth mindset. What I want to tell you now is how teaching them this mindset unleashed their effort. One day, we were introducing the growth mindset to a new group of students. All at once Jimmy—the most hard-core turned-off low-effort kid in the group—looked up with tears in his eyes and said, “You mean I don't have to be dumb?” From that day on, he worked. He started staying up late to do his homework, which he never used to bother with at all. He started handing in assignments early so he could get feedback and revise them. He now believed that working hard was not something that made you vulnerable, but something that made you smarter.

Finding Your Brain

A close friend of mine recently handed me something he'd written, a poem-story that reminded me of Jimmy and his unleashed effort. My friend's second-grade teacher, Mrs. Beer, had had each student draw and cut out a paper horse. She then lined up all the horses above the blackboard and delivered her growth-mindset message: “Your horse is only as fast as your brain. Every time you learn something, your horse will move ahead.”

My friend wasn't so sure about the “brain” thing. His father had always told him, “You have too much mouth and too little brains for your own good.” Plus, his horse seemed to just sit at the starting gate while “everyone else's brain joined the learning chase,” especially the brains of Hank and Billy, the class geniuses, whose horses jumped way ahead of everyone else's. But my friend kept at it. To improve his skills, he kept