

Mindset Matters

Fixed and growth mindsets come from our beliefs about intelligence and can have a profound impact on how we experience necessary steps of the learning process. Having a fixed mindset can be detrimental to learning, while having a growth mindset promotes learning. This handout defines these two mindsets, explains why they affect learning, and provides a step-by-step guide to developing a growth mindset.

Fixed and Growth Mindsets

A mindset is a belief or set of assumptions that affect our thoughts and feelings, which, in turn, affect behavior. Beliefs about intelligence and knowledge are particularly salient to college students and learning generally.

Fixed mindset

Believing that intelligence is largely innate and fixed

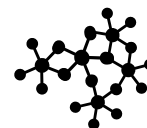


You can think of your mindset as a map. Having a fixed mindset is like having an inaccurate map. If you are trying to navigate to a particular destination, it will be frustrating, fraught with difficulties that don't make sense, and it will be really hard to find. Alternatively, having a growth mindset lends itself to fruitful gains from effort.

Growth mindset

Believing that intelligence is developed over time through effort

Intelligence and knowledge do, in fact, develop with time and effort, so having a growth mindset is a more accurate way to think about our intelligence. Brains have plasticity, that is, they change: connections between neurons can strengthen or weaken, new connections form or disappear, and neurons can be created. What we do and think, and how we are stimulated, affects our brains.



Mindset attributes

Some attributes and characteristics of each mindset are listed in the table below:

Fixed mindset		Growth mindset
Current abilities define sense of self	Self-image	Self-image is not tied to current abilities since abilities can improve
Oriented toward showing and proving intelligence	Defining success	Oriented toward growth and learning
Are avoided since they might indicate one is not intelligent	Effort and challenges	Are embraced and believed a necessary part of growth
Criticism of abilities is equated to criticism of self and feels personal	Feedback (graded assignments)	Criticisms are necessary information to grow

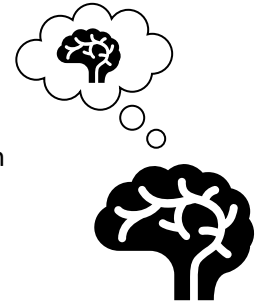
Operating in a fixed mindset creates an emotionally painful learning environment. Critical steps in the learning process (effort and receiving feedback) challenge one's positive sense of self, do not support the idea of success, and are avoided as a result. Evaluations (such as an exam or presentation) have a sense of permanency since current abilities define one's sense of self.

Changing your mindset

Do you believe that you have a certain amount of intelligence and there's not much you can do to change it? Do mistakes and errors feel embarrassing or shameful? Do you relate to the fixed mindset attributes on page 1? If you answered yes to these questions, you might have a fixed mindset. Development of a fixed mindset is very common and results from culture and personal experiences. Now that you know about mindsets, however, you have the ability to *intentionally* shift from one to another.

Steps to shift toward a growth mindset:

- **Simply be aware** of growth and fixed mindsets, and accept that you have a fixed mindset in some situations.
- **Identify** and recognize your fixed mindset triggers. It might be helpful to come up with a persona for your fixed mindset, complete with its own name (Bob, for example). Some things to look out for include:
 - Black and white thinking (“I’m just not good at [insert subject]”)
 - Self-critical thoughts (“I don’t have what it takes, and everyone’s going to find out”), especially in moments of pressure.
- **Self-talk.** When you recognize it, replace fixed mindset thoughts with growth mindset ones. You can even address your persona directly. For example, “Thank you for that thought, Bob. But I choose to listen to this helpful thought instead...”:



“I’m just not good at math.” → “I’m just not good at math YET.”

“I’m going to fail. I’ll be a failure!” → “Most successful people have failed along the way. The only true failure is not growing.”

Here are some other growth mindset thoughts to keep in your back pocket:

- Success comes from effort and learning strategies, NOT from intelligence.
- Failures point me to future success.
- Performance only reflects my current skills and effort, not my self-worth or potential.



- **Learn something new!** Take on a new subject or course—a language, a project, or maybe your most difficult class. Commit to applying the steps above and see where it takes you. What do you have to lose?

Mindset and learning

Simply adopting a growth mindset doesn’t mean learning will automatically occur. Learning requires putting good study skills to use, which will be heavily aided by operating in a growth mindset.



References and further reading

- Dweck, Carol. *Mindset: Changing the Way You Think to Fulfill Your Potential*. New York: Random House, 2017.
- McGuire, Sandra Yancy, and Stephanie McGuire. *Teach Students How to Learn: Strategies You Can Incorporate into Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation*. First ed. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2015.
- Doyle, Terry, and Todd Zakrajsek. *The New Science of Learning: How to Learn in Harmony with Your Brain*. First ed. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2013.