

The Power of a Growth Mindset

By: Pamela Stager

Which set of statements do you identify with more strongly?

1) “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” “You’ve either got a head for math or you don’t.” “Some people are just hopeless when it comes to music/sports/art.” “Some people don’t need to practice; they’re naturals.”

2) “Practice makes perfect.” “What you learn is more important than whether you win or lose.” “Anyone can become good at something if they put in enough effort.” “Stars are made, not born.”

Some people tend to view intelligence, talents, and personality traits as set and unchangeable. We call this the fixed mindset. They believe that people have a set of traits, talents, and abilities, and there isn’t much you can do to change them.

Others believe that intelligence, abilities, and personality traits are malleable, and with practice and effort you can improve in any of these areas. We call this the growth mindset. They believe that you may be born with a certain level of ability but you can always increase it through effort.

These different mindsets colour the way we approach different situations and how we respond to feedback. People with fixed mindsets see everything as a test to show how good they are at something. If they do well, they get validation that they are good at it. However, if they do less than perfectly, they take that as evidence that they aren’t in fact good at it, and in their mind this means they failed. There is no gray area. Fixed mindsets discourage people from trying new things or pushing the boundaries of what they can do (“If I’m not good at it right away, I’ll be a failure”). On the other hand, people with a growth mindset see everything as an opportunity to learn or expand their skills. They focus more on the process of learning and improving than on the outcome. They don’t mind being less than perfect because there is always room for improvement.



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A big difference between the two mindsets is how they view effort. For someone with a fixed mindset, effort is seen as useless. They reason that if you aren't good at something now, you'll never be good at it, so why bother even trying. And if you are good at something, then practice is just a waste of time. Those with a growth mindset, however, see effort as key to learning and improving. It doesn't matter what skill level you are starting out at, effort and hard work will always lead to improvement.

The chart below highlights some key differences between the fixed and growth mindsets.

FIXED MINDSET	GROWTH MINDSET
Views intelligence, talent, personality traits, and skills as fixed	Views intelligence, talent, personality traits, and skills as malleable and able to develop with hard work
Concerned about appearing smart/talented/good	Concerned about learning and improving
Avoids challenges – they might provide evidence that I'm not smart/talented/good. Gives up easily when obstacles come up.	Embraces challenges – they are opportunities to learn something new or improve. Tries harder in the face of obstacles.
Doesn't put in effort – if you aren't good at something more effort won't help, and if you are good at something effort is a waste of time	Sees effort as the path to developing new skills and improving
Views tests as a way to show how smart/talented/good they are, and if they do poorly it is a reflection of how stupid/untalented/bad they are. "I scored 100%! I must be smart!" / "I only got 80%, I must be stupid/a failure!"	Views tests as a way to identify areas to work on. "I got 100! That hard work paid off. I guess I have to move onto something more challenging." / "I got 80%. I guess I need to review a couple of those concepts a bit more."
Avoids or ignores criticism (even helpful feedback)	Learns from criticism
Feels threatened when others do well. "I'll never be as good as them".	Is inspired by others to up their game. "If I keep working hard I can be that good too".
May start off strong, but plateaus early, especially when things get more challenging	Shows improvement from whatever level they start at
"I'm not very good at X, why bother even trying?"	"I'm not very good at X...yet. I'll have to keep working at it."
"I'm naturally talented at X, why bother practicing?"	"I'm pretty good at X. I bet with some more practice I can be great."

There have been lots of studies comparing the two mindsets, and unsurprisingly, those with a growth mindset tend to fare better in many aspects of life compared to those with a fixed mindset (school, career, hobbies, personal relationships, etc.).

The Power of ...Yet

It's a small word, but it holds a lot of power. Those with a growth mindset understand the power of ...yet and use it whenever they hit a bump in the road. Read these sets of sentences, and feel how much of a difference ...yet can make.

I can't read.

I can't read...yet.

I don't know how to take the bus by myself.

I don't know how to take the bus by myself...yet.

I'm not good at keeping calm when I'm angry.

I'm not good at keeping calm when I'm angry...yet.

The first sentence in each pair is negative, definitive. The second sentences are filled with hope and possibility. Those with a fixed mindset get stuck on the first sentences, but those with a growth mindset always see the ...yet. The yet means it is possible, and the ... represents all the effort and hard work that will get them to that point.

Think about the people you support. Do you tend to have a fixed or growth mindset towards them and their abilities? Too often we focus on what they can't do rather than what they could do with a little hard work. Has someone you supported ever told you they want to do something you thought was impossible (learn to drive, get a job, have a romantic relationship, take a vacation)? How did you respond (be honest)? Did you pat their hand and say, "wouldn't that be nice," then quickly change the topic, or did you take them seriously and help them take steps (even baby steps) towards that goal? Was your mind already made up that they'd just never be able to do it, or did you focus on the ...yet and help them put in the effort to reach their goal? So often we are the gatekeepers, determining what experiences and opportunities are available for the people we support. We often discourage people from pursuing goals we think are impossible because we want to protect them from failure and frustration, but we are really doing them a disservice. Our own mindset can have a huge influence on how we view the people we support and what we think they can and can't achieve. The next time someone tells you they want to do something you think is impossible, stop and remember the ...yet.

The Right Way to Praise

Knowing about fixed and growth mindsets can also teach us how to give praise effectively. You might be thinking, "You mean there's a wrong way to give praise?" Absolutely. Not all praise is created equal, and in fact, some praise may do more harm than good.

Dr. Carol Dweck (a pioneer in the research into fixed and growth mindsets) and her colleagues conducted studies on different types of praise (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). They gave children a set of fairly easy problem-solving tasks to work on. They praised some of the children by saying

“You must be smart at these problems” (priming a fixed mindset), and others by saying “You must have worked hard at these problems” (priming a growth mindset). Then they asked the children if they would like to work on easy or hard problems next. Those who were praised for their intelligence wanted easy problems (an opportunity to show how smart they are), but those praised for their effort wanted challenging problems (an opportunity to get better and learn). All the kids were given hard problems. Those praised for their intelligence lost their confidence and motivation (“If I’m struggling it means I’m not smart), but those praised for their effort dived right into the problems and didn’t give up (“I love a challenge!”). When all the kids were again given easy problems, those who were praised for their intelligence had lost their confidence and did poorly, while those praised for their effort showed improvement. At the end of the study, the children were asked to anonymously report their scores on the problem-solving task. Almost 40% of those who were praised for their intelligence lied and inflated their scores, while only about 10% of those who were praised for their effort lied. Again, those praised for their intelligence were worried about their score and looking smart, while those praised for their effort were more interested in learning something new and challenging themselves.

The results of this study can be extrapolated out to how we give praise and feedback to the people we support. Do we tend to focus on the outcome or the effort? With the absolute best of intentions we may actually be setting people up for failure when we say things like “you’re so smart”, “you’re a natural at this”, “you’ve really got a knack for that”. People with intellectual disabilities often learn things at a slower pace and face more challenges when learning a new skill. If we focus on the end goal (total mastery of a skill) rather than on all the effort and progress they are making, they may be even more discouraged from a setback or failure. Getting from where they are now to the end point of being good at that skill may seem impossible. However, if we focus on all their hard work and how much they are learning, their goals will feel more attainable because the goal is simply to improve, not to reach perfection. Everyone, regardless of level of intelligence, disability, natural talent, or current level of skill, is able to work hard and put in effort. Everyone.

Good News

If you look back at the table of characteristics of fixed and growth mindsets and realize that you fall into the fixed mindset group, don’t despair! The good news is that we can change our mindsets (even people with fixed mindsets who don’t think that people can change!). First, be aware when the fixed mindset voice takes over, when you start thinking “I’m stupid”, “I can’t”, “I’m not good at this”, “I don’t know how”, “what if I fail”, “I’ll look foolish”. When you catch yourself thinking that way, remember to add in the ...yet. Change those thoughts to a growth mindset voice: “I’m not good at this...yet”, “I worked really hard to get good at this”, “what can I learn from this?”, “what will I miss out on if I don’t try?”, “I’ll need to work harder to get good at this”. When you are thinking of your progress toward a goal, don’t focus on the final outcome, focus on how much you’ve learned and how much progress you’ve made so far. When you hit an obstacle or challenge, don’t view it as a failure, see it as an opportunity to push yourself to get even better.

We can also help others to foster a growth mindset. Take time to listen to the types of things the people you support are saying when they are learning something new. Do they have a fixed or growth mindset? Counter any fixed mindset talk with growth mindset alternatives. Remind them of the ...yet (“You’re right, you didn’t get it perfect this time, but you’ve been working hard and you did better than you did last week. With some more practice I bet you’ll get even better.”). Focus on all the things they are learning and how they are improving each time they tackle something hard, even if they fail at it. Help them get excited about challenges that might be difficult and tackle them as ways to improve rather than something they might fail at. Be mindful of the praise and feedback you give. Praise effort rather than outcome or raw talent. Point out examples of people who worked hard to achieve something. Model a growth mindset yourself.

Putting It All Together

Let’s look at an example of how different mindsets can set the stage for either success or frustration and defeat.

Imagine Mary and Bill are people you support, and they are both interested in learning to cook. You invite them to help you prepare tonight’s supper - spaghetti. You give them each a set of ingredients and walk them through the steps to prepare the meal. Bill seems like a natural and he easily follows each step, with his spaghetti turning out perfect. You beam at Bill and tell him he must be a natural chef because he made a perfect meal so effortlessly. He feels very proud; he didn’t even have to try and he’s already a great cook! Mary, on the other hand, runs into several setbacks. Her pot boils over and creates a mess, she accidentally uses too much salt, her sauce burns, and she sets off the smoke alarm. You beam at Mary and tell her that you’re so proud of her for keeping at it, even when things went wrong. Both Mary and Bill have a great time and can’t wait to cook tomorrow’s supper, tacos. This time around Bill doesn’t find it so easy. He sets the pan too hot and his meat starts to burn. He becomes frustrated and says he doesn’t want to cook anymore. He thinks if he makes a mistake and isn’t perfect, he’s just not a good cook. You think to yourself that he probably just isn’t cut out for cooking and should probably just give up. When cooking her tacos, Mary again has some difficulties, but she remembers some of the tips you gave her last night and tries again. She still has some trouble, but she does a bit better than last night. You tell her that her hard work is paying off. She is happy she is learning and wants to help with supper every night. She keeps improving and in a few months she can cook some meals on her own. She loves trying new recipes and doesn’t become discouraged when she doesn’t get something perfect. Bill, on the other hand, never asks to help with the cooking again.

Bill assumes he has a natural talent for cooking after his first success, especially after receiving praise focusing on his effortless natural ability. When he hits a setback, all that comes crashing down and he thinks he’s a failure. Cooking is only fun for Bill when he is doing it perfectly, so he quits as soon as it gets hard. Mary doesn’t start off with a lot of cooking skills, but she works hard and focuses on all the progress she makes. Getting praise for how hard she tries motivates her to keep putting in the effort to get better. She keeps at it and continues to enjoy cooking as she improves. Bill, of course, has a fixed mindset and Mary has a growth mindset, and each mindset was reinforced by the type of praise they received.

Thinking of this scenario, what could you do next time to encourage a growth mindset in both Bill and Mary? Maybe the goal should simply be practicing some cooking techniques rather than creating a perfect meal. Maybe when Bill or Mary make a mistake you can put a positive spin on it, "I'm so glad you burned the meat because now we get to learn about what temperature to use!" Maybe you can keep the focus on the new skills they gained and progress they're making. If they get discouraged, remind them they aren't great cooks...yet. Keep an open mind and don't be too quick to assume cooking is just too hard for them to even try.

Some Things to Keep in Mind

Having a growth mindset and believing that people are capable of changing their skills doesn't mean that everyone who works hard will ultimately reach the same level of skill or will progress at the same pace. Not everyone who picks up a paintbrush will become Picasso, but everyone who puts in the effort will absolutely come out ahead of where they are now. And remember, the growth mindset is not about perfection, it's about growth and improvement for their own sake.

Also, as much as we can encourage and help foster a growth mindset in the people we support, they are the ones who will have to put in the effort, so they get to decide which skills they want to focus on. We might have a long list of things we want someone to tackle, but if they aren't priorities for that person, they won't be motivated to put in the effort to improve. You wanting them to change is not enough, they have to want to change themselves.

Summary

Having a growth vs fixed mindset has been shown to be very beneficial. A growth mindset can help people persist in the face of challenges, reframe failures as opportunities for learning, and motivate them to work towards self-improvement in all areas of their lives. It is possible to train yourself to adopt a growth mindset, and we can also foster growth mindsets in the people we support. Something as simple as the type of praise we give someone can set them up to tackle challenges head on or to give up when the going gets tough. For their whole lives, people with intellectual disabilities are told "you can't", "you don't know how", "you're not good at". Think of all they can accomplish when they (and we) start thinking ...yet.

**For those interested in learning more about fixed and growth mindsets I highly recommend the book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck.

About the Author

Pamela Stager works at Cochrane Temiskaming Resource Centre (CTRC) in Timmins. She has been in the developmental disabilities field for five years since finishing her PhD in psychology. She provided behaviour consultations, behaviour therapy, and psychometric assessment before moving into a management role at CTRC.

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