



An introduction to growth mindset

School resources

A mindset is a person's beliefs about their abilities and attributes. Researcher Carol Dweck has studied the attitudes people hold about their learning ability and has come up with a continuum which has a fixed mindset at one end and a growth mindset at the other. The mindset continuum does not deny differences in capability between people but is founded on the premise that people can increase their intelligence through the right learning strategies and effort.

People with a fixed mindset believe that their intelligence and ability are innate and fixed, and there's not much they can do to change it. When they make mistakes, they think it shows a lack in their intelligence or ability. They consider it impossible to improve or change these weaknesses, so they may try to avoid revealing these failings and looking foolish. As a result, they are focused on how intelligent they appear (rather than on learning). They might choose to ignore useful feedback or disguise poor performance with a lack of effort and motivation. To avoid attributing failure to low ability, learners with a fixed mindset might use strategies for self-handicapping (such as procrastination or setting unrealistic goals), or even strategies that guarantee success (cheating, setting goals too low). They avoid challenges and give up more easily after setbacks. They also tend to dislike effort, regarding it as an indication of low ability.

People with a **growth mindset** believe their abilities and intelligence can be developed and improved through perseverance, good strategies and support from others. They are focused on learning rather than demonstrating their intelligence, so they pursue challenges and excel in the face of difficulty. They have a passion for stretching themselves and persevering, even when they make mistakes or fall short of their goals. They demonstrate a willingness to make an effort and to learn from constructive criticism. They are prepared to make mistakes and experience setbacks in order to work out the best ways to adapt their action. They have grit and see a setback or failure to achieve a task simply as an indication that they need to work harder or change strategies. They regard error as an everyday, common experience that is integral to the learning process.

A growth mindset is more useful for learning because it is positively linked to self-efficacy, help-seeking behaviour and the use of cognitive strategies. Everyone has a mixture of both fixed and growth mindsets, often with different mindsets in different learning areas. The key is to identify when fixed mindset thoughts and actions occur, and to consciously replace them with more growth-oriented thoughts and behaviours.

A student with a **growth mindset** tends to:

- believe that learning and growth are possible in all areas
- tackle tasks with confidence that they can manage them
- explore new subjects and interests
- relish challenge, struggle and hard work because they believe this means they are improving
- acknowledge and reflect upon errors and mistakes as a means for improvement
- withstand setbacks, stay on track, and apply more effort when they face difficulties
- understand the value of effort and using strategies to overcome challenges
- see school as full of opportunities to learn

A student with a **fixed mindset** is likely to:

- have confidence and success in a limited realm of actions and performances, but falter when facing difficulty
- see challenges and mistakes as showing inherent deficiencies in their intellectual ability
- avoid challenges and the risk of failure or mistakes
- protect themselves by presenting themselves as capable but unmotivated: 'If I really cared, I could do well'
- view effort as only necessary for those with lower ability, and feel stupid and incompetent when they have to work hard at something
- stick to tasks and activities in which they can be successful
- desire and seek approval
- see school as full of threats and defences

Why are mindsets for learning important?

True learning can be uncomfortable and sometimes fraught with difficulty, confusion and disorientation.

The most productive learners are not more intelligent than others, but are more willing to endure these feelings of being lost or confused. A growth mindset helps students develop constructive responses and behaviours for learning, such as redoubling their efforts and trying new strategies, whereas a fixed mindset can foster negative perceptions and patterns of helpless responses, including a loss of task enjoyment and motivation, and a lack of effort and persistence. When students believe their ability to learn and succeed is limited, they go on to behave in ways that make this belief come true, such as by studying less or avoiding future challenges. They protect themselves by reducing the effort they make and using ineffective strategies. Students with a fixed mindset may excel as long as learning comes easily to them, but their achievement generally lessens when they face difficult tasks.

A growth mindset promotes behaviours and beliefs that help students achieve desired academic outcomes, and research has shown that students with a growth mindset have greater motivation and achieve higher grades and test scores. In particular, a growth mindset helps to bolster students who

underachieve academically and students whose learning could suffer because of economic disadvantage or negative cultural or gender stereotypes in relation to their learning potential.

References

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