

Insights from *Mindset* by Carol Dweck

Do you feel like you are constantly being judged? Do you go out of your way to ‘look smart’?

If so, you’ve adopted what author Carol Dweck calls a fixed mindset. A fixed mindset sees himself or herself and everyone around them as possessing a set amount of cognitive and physical ability.

A fixed mindset thinks: “If I appear to be bad at something (school subject, sport, business skill, etc.), I haven’t been blessed with the gifts to do it well.”

This belief seems innocent, but it ultimately leads to a life of fear, avoidance, and low interest for anything outside of your comfort zone.

Why?

If something is uncomfortable or hard, then you just don’t have the mental or physical capacity to do it. If it’s hard and uncomfortable now, it will always be uncomfortable and hard for you.

Luckily, you can change your mindset and learn to be more curious than afraid and sustain your interest and effort when things get hard.

The first step to going from a fixed mindset (believing challenges are a threat) to a growth mindset (believing that challenges are a chance to grow your mental and physical abilities) is to realize the truth about your brain.

Over the past 40 years scientists have shown that we can change our brains and grow our cognitive abilities in three fundamental ways:



You can physically grow sections of the brain

Several years ago, before taxi drivers used GPS, brain researchers took brain imaging scans of experienced London taxi drivers. Researchers (Maguire, 2011) noticed that the more times a London taxi driver had spent driving a taxi in London, the larger a region of the brain associated with spatial awareness and memory (the hippocampus) had become. The brain scans revealed that the more demands London taxi drivers put on their brains (the more they had to navigate the challenging London road system), the more they were able to expand a region in the brain and do their job more effectively.



You can speed up your brain circuits

However, not all brain regions can physically expand, therefore, other brain regions need to make brain circuits faster. This is achieved through a process called ‘myelination.’ As I briefly touched on in my ‘Deep Work’ book summary, when you focus intensely on a single subject for a period of time, you start forming white sheathes on your brain cells called myelin. This myelin is like the insulation on the copper wires inside your home. A brain circuit with myelin can transmit information ten times faster than a brain circuit without myelin.



You can re-wire your brain

One peer reviewed study (Taub, 1995) showed that when a person practices the guitar for thousands of hours, they activate more of their brain than novice players. When novice guitar players play the guitar, they only activate a region in their brain associated to a finger in their left hand (the hand they use to play different notes). However, when experienced guitar players play the guitar, they expand the activation of their brains to include regions associated with the fingers and palm of the left hand. It’s like re-wiring a house to make a light switch that used to only turn on a lamp in your living room, and now it turns on two or three additional lamps in the house.

Once you know the truth about your ability to grow, it makes sense to change the way you think about challenges:

- When a fixed mindset person approaches a challenge, he or she thinks: “Will I look smart or stupid while doing this?”
- When a growth mindset person approaches a challenge, he or she thinks: **“How might I learn and grow?”**
- After a difficult challenge, a fixed mindset person will think, “I’m not smart enough to do this.”
- After a difficult challenge, a growth mindset person will think, “I’m not smart enough to do this, **YET.**”

By making the transition from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset your story goes from: “*I am who I am. My personality, my intelligence, and my talent are fixed.*” To “*I am a constant learner. My abilities are constantly evolving and growing.*”

“Did I win? Did I lose? Those are the wrong questions. The correct question is: Did I make my best effort?” If so, he says, “You may be outscored but you will never lose.” - Carol Dweck