

Module: Growth Mindset

Module in Communication Skills for Supervisors

What is a growth mindset?

The theory of growth mindset has been developed by American psychologist Dr Carol Dweck. She suggests that there are two different ways to think about abilities, talents and intelligence.

One is a fixed mindset, which sees these traits as static and innate. Someone thinks they are either good at something or not and this cannot be changed.

The other is a growth mindset which sees intelligence, talents and abilities as traits that can be developed over time through effort, support and persistence. Someone thinks they cannot do something yet.

Difference between fixed and growth mindset

Dweck began her research in schools. She found that students with a fixed mindset who do well initially often go on to believe they have to keep achieving to prove that they are good enough.

So, they tend to avoid challenges where they might not succeed and see failure as catastrophic. Effort is seen as pointless. Over time results can deteriorate as can confidence and motivation to continue learning.

She found that students with a growth mindset see failure as an opportunity to learn and develop. They tend to see setbacks as learning opportunities, motivation remains high, effort is seen as central to progress and over time results can improve.

Some key messages regarding fixed and growth mindsets

Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hand I've been dealt • Not satisfied with own success • Failure is annihilation • Could cheat and lie to protect themselves from annihilation • Self-labelling • Provoked by judgement • Believes intelligence can be measured • Closed to feedback • Depression – can overwhelm • Reward is the goal • Asks: Can I? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be prepared to ask a question or say 'I don't know' • Embraces failure. It may upset but doesn't lead to stopping learning. • Thrives on challenge • Redefines negative experiences. • Don't know how to do this 'yet' • Believes intelligence can't be measured • Open to feedback • Depression – can galvanise to action • Reward is the by-product • Asks: How can I?

Examples from *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

Sometimes a fixed mindset can be helpful when someone is determined to achieve something and will not be thrown off course. However, the ability to switch perspectives gives greater freedom and choice on approach.

Many of us will have a fixed mindset at times. The opportunity is to spot it and learn how to shift to a growth mindset where this will be more helpful.

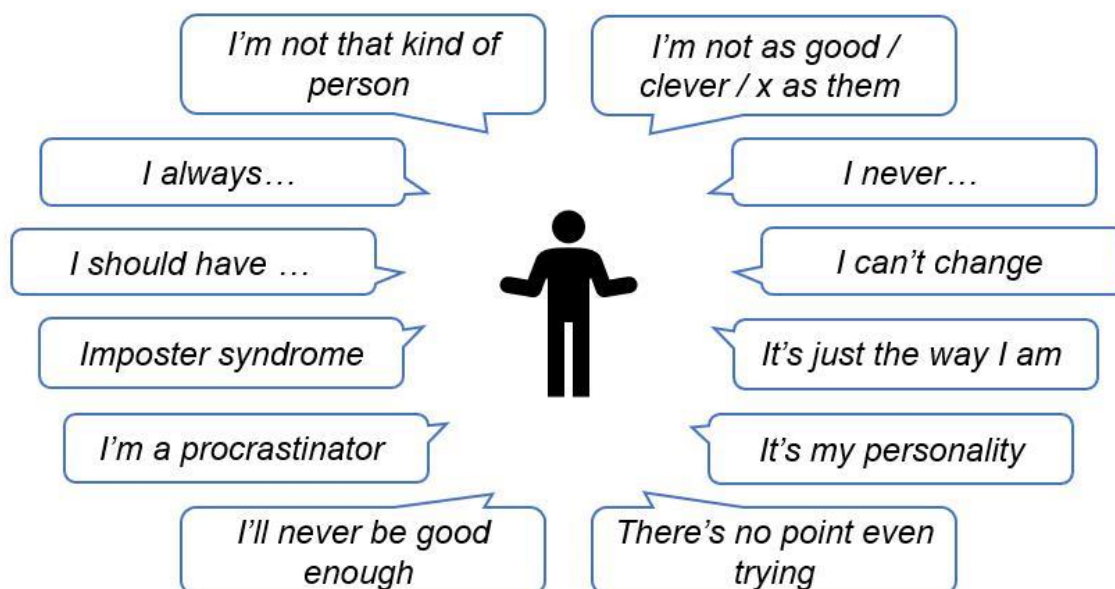
What is the relevance for trainees?

Many postgraduate trainees will have been high achievers at school and used to being top of the class. They may have become accustomed to this and so tend to adopt a fixed mindset where success is measured by good grades and achievement. This may become challenged at medical school when surrounded by others with similar expectations. Similarly, once faced with clinical practice, a trainee may feel they are not good enough. Setbacks such as exam failure or poor ARCP outcomes can also lead to loss of motivation, effort and confidence. The trainee may avoid or feel defensive around feedback.

Conversely, someone with a growth mindset will tend to see challenges as opportunities to learn and develop, they may be more open to feedback and able to move forward constructively with effort.

How to spot a fixed mindset

We might hear trainees saying something like:



What to do next

Fixed mindset in a trainee: When spotting a fixed mindset in a trainee it can be useful to support them to see themselves on a learning journey, to praise effort and to reframe setbacks and 'failure' as opportunities to learn and grow.

One key is to acknowledge effort, willingness, determination and progress rather than focus on results. Shift away from an emphasis on rewards.

Fixed mindset in a trainer: It is likely that at times we adopt a fixed mindset about something or someone. We might think of a trainee in a particular way and label them for example 'they always / never...'. We might see them as problematic or experience challenges engaging them. We might think they don't have the ability to progress.

If we can adopt a growth mindset when this happens it could make a difference to the trainee's learning journey.

Example questions and comments to support a growth mindset:

<i>If you knew you could...?</i>
<i>How can you nurture change?</i>
<i>What does change mean to you?</i>
<i>I can see how engaged you've been..</i>
<i>What worked well about that?</i>
<i>If you know they / you could change?</i>
<i>What have you tried so far?</i>
<i>I can see how much effort you've put into that.</i>
<i>What's most important to you here?</i>
<i>I acknowledge you for keeping going and sticking to the plan.</i>
<i>Always? / Never? (when someone make a definitive statement – question it!)</i>

Trainer Reflective Exercise:

Think of a trainee who is struggling or who you are finding challenging at the moment.

1. If you know that this trainee has the potential to improve or change what difference could that make to how you work with them?
2. What are they doing well?
3. What could you acknowledge them for in relation to effort, engagement or progress (rather than results)?
4. When can you acknowledge them in this way?
5. What is it like to think about this trainee in this way?

Trainer tips!

1. 'Not yet' is key.

If a trainee believes they are never going to 'get there' or similar, remind them that it's 'not yet'. The 'not yet' implies it is possible and can support them to shift their thinking to a growth mindset.

2. Acknowledge effort and determination rather than results and talent.

So rather than:

- *'That's fantastic, a great result, you're so talented.'*

Try something like

- *'You put so much into this / I can see how far you've come / I know how important this is to you, congratulations.'*

Bonus exercise: See if you can adopt a growth mindset with all trainees this week and notice what happens.

Further reading and resources:

1. Carol S. Dweck PhD, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Updated version published by Robinson 2017). (First published New York, Random House, 2006).
2. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers*, Little, Brown and Company, (2008).
3. Martin Seligman, Alfred A. Knopf, *Learned Optimism*, (Updated UK version Nicholas Brealey Publishing 2018). (First published 1991).
4. Matthew Syed, *Bounce*, Harper Collins UK (2010)
5. Carol Dweck TED talk:
https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve
6. Matthew Syed TED talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1K6bOG8mj8>