

Too Smart for Your Own Good

Success isn't just a matter of our talents or abilities. It also depends on the thinking with which we approach things. Having the right mindset opens us up to greater opportunities.

You probably feel Tom's pain. Like so many others, his software business is languishing. December sales were off 75%; January, 50%. "Of course, this is a tough time," he muses. "But on the plus side, it's forcing us to be more creative. There are things we've been thinking about for a while—how to appeal to different customers, looking at new applications—that we always meant to get to; now we're giving them priority. We'll get through this. And when we do, we'll be stronger."

Ted, on the other hand, is the stereotypical deer in the headlights. After a long career as a lawyer, he retired 10 years ago at age 55 to manage his investments. He took pride that he was one of the smart ones—able to use complicated investment instruments that few people understood. When things started to collapse last fall, Ted stared at CNBC for hours at a time, immobilized as his net worth plummeted. Why didn't he seek advice? "I'm thinking until something comes to me," he says.

The difference between Tom and Ted is instructive. Both have been hit (as we all have) by a huge external factor: economic turmoil far beyond their control. Both are experiencing significant losses. But Ted is weighed down, despairing, while Tom is energized to explore new options. It's a classic illustration of a truism: We're all going to experience *pain*, but whether or not we *suffer* is, to a large degree,



within our control. That's because a big component in suffering is *how we think* about ourselves.

A helpful way to look at this is captured in *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success* by Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck. After decades of research on

achievement, Dweck concluded that success depends not just on our talents and abilities but on the thinking with which we approach things. She challenges conventional reliance on IQ as a measure of potential, noting that Alfred Binet, who lent his name to the standard test, actually intended "to identify children who were not profiting from the Paris public schools, so that new educational programs could be designed to get them back on track" (emphasis added).

Dweck makes a distinction between a *fixed mindset*—the belief that we're born with traits (intelligence, personality, moral character) carved in stone—and a *growth mindset*—belief that we can develop our abilities through dedicated effort.

For another illustration of the issue, consider two executives, Andrew and Greg. Andrew recently gave a speech to a group of professionals who listened attentively and asked a spate of questions at the end. Clearly, what he had to say evoked a great deal of interest. Still, Andrew was disappointed: "I'm used to getting a standing ovation," he complained. Meanwhile, Greg disagreed with his annual performance evaluation because it gave him the highest

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possible marks in the area of presentation skills. “Yeah, I know my presentations go over well,” he says, “but I’m sure I can do better. I’m looking for a workshop to learn new techniques.”

Andrew’s sense of himself—“one who creates awe”—is causing him angst. Greg’s self-image of “one who can get better” keeps him open. The difference, in Dweckian terms, is fixed vs. growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset “opt for success over growth,” she observes, to prove that they’re special. “However, lurking behind that self-esteem... is a simple question: If you’re *somebody* when you’re successful, what are you when you’re unsuccessful?”

Those with a growth mindset aren’t seen as the smartest guys in the room. They don’t experience the rarefied atmosphere of a pedestal, so they don’t worry about falling. They expect to work hard to master new skills. Like Greg, they’re constantly in learning mode. Like Tom, they develop resiliency—the ability to adjust, to learn as they go, to have the confidence that adversity will make them stronger. As Dweck notes: “Even in the growth mindset, failure can be a painful experience. But it doesn’t define you. It’s a problem to be faced, dealt with, and learned from.”

Reading *Mindset*, I recognized myself as a person with a *fixed mindset*. I sat down at the piano at age four and played beautifully; I aced tests in school without a sweat; the things I said amazed my elders. Their praise stoked my ego, but it shaped thoughts about myself that I felt the need to pro-

tect. Not wanting to disappoint the people I had impressed—not wanting them to find out that I wasn’t as great as they thought—I shied away from trying things I might not be good at. And since I didn’t want to look stupid, I stopped asking questions about what I didn’t know. In short, I was “too smart for my own good.”

In a fortunate paradox, Dweck’s explanation does more than sharpen my understanding of a long trail of missed opportunities and career mistakes. It also provides hope and motivation. Because “fixed” is not what *I am*, it’s a *mindset*. In other words, it’s just a set of thoughts.

Granted, I’ve repeated those thoughts over and over. As neurological research shows, such repetition shapes neural pathways in the brain. Since I’m in my seventh decade, I imagine those pathways are well-formed grooves or, if you will, ruts. But I am still the thinker of my own thoughts. *Any* mindset, or thought habit, can be changed. Reading Dweck’s book leads me to suggest:

1. Begin by parsing your thoughts. Simply being aware of our thinking loosens its grip and makes room for new possibilities. In *Mindset*, Dweck provides quick questions to help identify mindsets. For me, a big indicator is my automatic “No, I don’t know how” when asked to take on a new challenge.
2. If you find that you have, in general, a *growth mindset*, look at situations with your awareness of that. Where there’s conflict or a snafu, could someone’s *fixed mindset* be contributing to the problem? How

can you bring your *growth mindset* into play to help find a solution?

3. If you realize that you’re stuck in one area of your life but not in others, consider if the difference is that of mindset. And if you’re benefiting from a *growth mindset* in one area, how might you migrate it to other situations?
4. If you find that you generally have a *fixed mindset*, first find compassion for the habit you innocently fell into. Then consider areas you can explore. In conversations, resist the urge to declaim something that will astound the others; instead, ask, listen with curiosity, and ask more questions. Do even small things that are unfamiliar, awkward: Try writing with your nondominant hand; listen to a radio station that plays music you normally spurn; cook something from an unfamiliar cuisine.

I, for one, am absolutely sure that I have no talent for art. I still blush at the pathetic excuse for a squirrel I modeled in the second grade, and I’m always careful to hide any doodles. But I’ve just signed up for two classes at the community college down the road—one in watercolor painting, one working in clay. Surely my husband could use a new bowl. Maybe if I do a second or a third, it won’t even be lopsided. **SF**

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