

Do you have the right mindset?

growth
learning mastery
you problem
improvement
effort mindset
challenge education

[1] Think back to when you were in a classroom, maybe a maths classroom, and the teacher set a difficult problem. (That could have been any time between this morning or a few years ago.) Which of the two following responses is closer to the way you reacted?

A

Oh no, this is too hard for me. I'm not even going to seriously try and work it out.

B

Ah, this is quite tricky but I like to push myself. Even if I don't get the answer right, maybe I'll learn something in the attempt.

[2] Early in her career, the psychologist Carol Dweck of Stanford University gave a group of ten-year-olds problems that were slightly too hard for them. One group reacted positively, said they loved challenge and understood that their abilities could be developed. She says they had a 'growth mindset' and are focused on what they can achieve in the future. But another group of children felt that their intelligence was being judged and they had failed. They had a 'fixed mindset' and were unable to imagine improving. Some of these children said they might cheat in the future; others looked for someone who had done worse than them to boost their self-esteem.

[3] Professor Dweck believes that there is a problem in education at the moment. For years, children have been praised for their intelligence or talent, but this makes them vulnerable to failure. They become performance-oriented, wanting to please by getting high grades, but they are not necessarily interested in learning for its own sake. The solution, according to Dweck, is to praise the process that children are engaged in: making an effort, using learning strategies, persevering and improving. This way they will become mastery-oriented (i.e. interested in getting better at something) and will achieve more. She contends that sustained effort over time is the key to outstanding achievement.



[4] Psychologists have been testing these theories. Students were taught that if they left their comfort zone and learned something new and difficult, the neurons in their brains would form stronger connections, making them more intelligent. These students made faster progress than a control group. In another study, underperforming school children on a Native American reservation were exposed to growth mindset techniques for a year. The results were nothing less than staggering. They came top in regional tests, beating children from much more privileged backgrounds. These children had previously felt that making an effort was a sign of stupidity, but they came to see it as the key to learning.

[5] So, back to our original question. If you answered B, well done – you already have a growth mindset. If A, don't worry; everyone is capable of becoming mastery-oriented with a little effort and self-awareness.

