

The Flexible Mindset: the solution to the gap between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset

An original philosophical paper by Tricia M Johansson

Introduction

I think many of us have heard about the fixed versus growth mindset. It's a psychological concept and is used a lot in modern coaching and even Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Aaron T. Beck) as it is used today. The concept of these mindsets was first introduced by psychologist Carol Dweck, who spent decades trying to understand how people's beliefs impacted their desired outcomes in life.

What it means is that a fixed mindset means you have no control over your life, and what happens externally determines your life. On the opposite end, the growth mindset teaches that you are in control of your life and that you always have an opportunity to grow. Your control comes inherently from within.

At its core, I'm not criticizing it as a concept; I just think something is missing and that the two are too static on their own.

In the end, I'm doing this to help people and to find something for the people who don't feel like they have a choice but to be in the fixed mindset, just because they, for various reasons, cannot physically or psychologically reach the growth mindset. I would also argue that a mindset shift is harder than it's marketed to be by coaches today.

What was missing?

I see it as a gap between the fixed and growth mindsets, and that the two are polar opposites with no middle ground. That makes them static instead of a dynamic spectrum.

To make it so even people who are forced to be in the fixed mindset can make progress, I decided to give the phenomenon in between a name. I call it a flexible mindset. The flexible mindset can also move like a spectrum between a fixed and a growth mindset. In some areas, you might have a fixed mindset, in some, you might have a growth mindset. Are you then a fixed or a growth kind of person? This is where the flexible mindset also comes into play.

The gap

How I define the gap is simple: there is no term for what people in the middle of these two opposites are. I invented that term: the flexible mindset.

What I found

The growth mindset doesn't take into account life circumstances or people that fall outside of the neurotypical life experience. For people who are disabled, belong to minority groups, or have experienced childhood trauma, as just a few examples, it can be a very different experience from that of a neurotypical person in a majority group. Therefore, it can be hard or nearly impossible to adapt to the growth mindset.

As it is in reality, you are often privileged if you can go from fixed to growth easily.

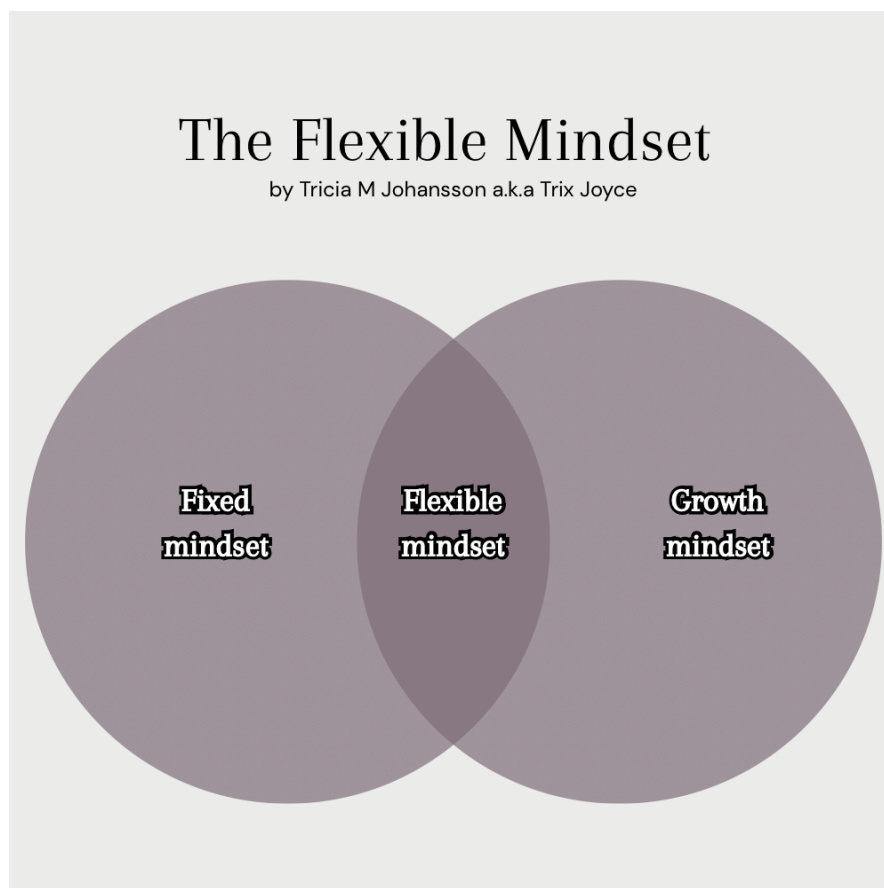
By being close to minority groups, and in several minority groups myself, I have direct contact with this phenomenon. So let me tell you why it is different for these people to reach a growth mindset compared to their neurotypical and majority group counterparts. Not just on an emotional level, but also on a physical and psychological level as well. The barrier is not imagined in this case.

Methods

What I did

What I did was mainly observing how people live their lives with either of the mindsets and what outcomes they get. That means taking a look at generally positive people who had a diagnosis that hindered them, or people who are unfortunate but still believed in themselves. I also take myself as an example here. I have several disabilities and live with trauma and a poor financial situation, mainly disability support. I have struggled my entire life, but still managed to believe I could grow. After a lot of growing and thought, though, I realized that to grow, you need to accept the things you cannot change. You can't willpower yourself through certain things, no matter your mindset. Part of living in the real world is realizing limitations and systemic oppression.

I also did develop a figure to help illustrate the flexible mindset:



Results

So what happened?

I named the, in my opinion, missing part of the equation. I named it the flexible mindset, and it is the middle ground between the fixed and growth mindsets. The flexible mindset acknowledges that you can grow while still remaining empathetic to the things that hinder your ability to grow. It offers a more realistic view of challenges that some people have in groups that are not seen by the majority of people.

The flexible mindset is not equivalent to the growth mindset in the sense that it acknowledges that, yes, some things will hinder your growth no matter what you do! But it's not like the fixed mindset that says you have no opportunity to change at all either... It's the middle solution to those who find the polar opposites of fixed versus growth mindset too rigid.

Let's take an example:

Linda is neurodivergent and uses a wheelchair. Linda wants to help her local charity for homeless people, but they don't have a ramp for her to use. She is shy and doesn't want to cause trouble by asking the charity if they can install a ramp. She realizes that she can't help others if she has a hindering situation herself. She realizes that she can't just walk like others, but she can grow by telling herself it's always okay to ask questions. If the staff don't install that ramp, she can try somewhere else. But she cannot force herself into the situation without proper treatment. Linda's flexible mindset creates a place to realize her limitations while working towards her goals.

So the flexible mindset is both an aid to describe what's in between the growth and fixed mindset, but it's also something that stands on its own. You can be flexible in your mindset without ever moving towards the other ends, and that's fine.

I avoid using negative and positive language when describing emotions and mindsets so I feel a flexible mindset is more kind to self. Because we hear all the time that a growth mindset is better than a fixed mindset. But what if you have experienced trauma and are less fortunate than the vast majority of the population? Sure, we should always try to grow, but it doesn't help to force a complete opposite end of a spectrum without no middleground. It's simply not realistic, and I think that is my biggest problem with the fixed versus growth mindset, it's not realistic to just switch from one to the other just like that!

Discussion

How to think about mindset and apply the knowledge

To understand this knowledge in the best way is to apply it to real-life scenarios. When you struggle to grow but want to, you might explore a flexible mindset. It's always an option for you when the others don't work.

How to fill the gap

The flexible mindset creates a spectrum between the opposites of fixed and growth. Therefore, it fills the gap between the two.

How can this help people

This can help people who want to change but can't take a huge leap, or the people who don't know where to start because it's too hard, either mentally or physically, to just jump to a growth mindset.

Conclusion

Going forward

So, in judging people's ability to have a growth mindset, we need to take the flexibility of the individual situation into account as well. This could lead to an increased understanding of human resilience when being supported and not harshly judged by other people and by the norms in society.

I would like to understand human resilience more so this is an ongoing field of research for me. With this paper, I don't aim to close the circle, but rather to open it up for discussion.

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