

Shifting to a Growth Mindset

How reframing your self-perceptions can launch real growth

By Eileen Spatz



“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you did not do than by the ones you did”

Mark Twain

When my girlfriend mentioned she had joined a boot camp—a grueling and unforgiving cross-training fitness craze—I sat in amazement, hanging on her every word as she described what sounded like a torture chamber. I had just turned 59 and could not even imagine pushing my body the way she was. I accepted long ago that I am, shall we say, *limited* in my physical strength (Olive Oyl is my doppelganger), so the thought of imposing such self-abuse on a body I should be trying to preserve was unthinkable.

That, dear readers, is a classic example of a “fixed mindset,” and in the spirit of full-disclosure, I will own it. Back in junior high school when our 7th grade gym class was working through the various physical challenges outlined by JFK’s President’s Council on Physical Fitness I quickly realized my limitations and strengths. For decades I have just accepted that I cannot change certain aspects of my physical capabilities... *until I joined boot camp.*

A Fixed vs. Growth Mindset

Yep, in my quest this year to bust out of my “fixed mindset” and shift to a “growth mindset”—a mindset that embraces challenge, boundary busting, and, yes, even failure—I signed up for a two-month trial run of boot camp. After just three weeks of huffing, puffing and sweating my way through each session I have discovered that I have the capacity to gain strength, flexibility, and endurance after all. Yes, I fail

miserably at some of the exercises. I mean, come on, burpees are brutal! But by adopting this new growth mindset, I envision the fitness process on a continuum and know that as I continue to make the serious effort to get stronger that I will, indeed, get stronger.

Sometimes life's major setbacks are what surprisingly provide the grist for the mindset shift. A divorce, a tragic loss, a health crisis, financial Armageddon—any major event that shakes us to our cores has the potential to jump start this amazing change in thinking, if we would just allow it to. Of course, the last thing in the world we may *feel* like doing while in the depths of despair is to embark on a new life transformation. Often while in the vortex of a serious life-crash we can barely get out of bed in the morning, much less start the day reciting positive affirmations and firing up our go-get-um engines.

It is just this kind of low point, however, that can trigger a desire for radical change in the way we live our lives. Because we manifest our particular mindset in childhood, we may have gone our whole lives believing our intelligence, talents, and skills were static—meaning that we have not pushed through boundaries, taken chances, or set lofty goals because we simply believed we were not capable of succeeding, given what was believed to be our allotted and fixed skill set.

Access your True Potential

But, alas! with a tweaking of attitude, and a purposeful rewiring of our thinking habits, we are all capable of gaining knowledge, learning new skills, and, therefore, improving our lives, often exponentially. It is in attempting a new venture that our passions are inflamed because we are forced to experience such emotions (that we have tried hard to keep in check) as fear and worry. This triggers the fight or flight response, which helps propel us forward. Seeking new challenges and setting new goals brings life to your life.

Much research has been conducted on the fixed mindset vs. the growth mindset, the most intriguing and thorough work from Carol Dweck, PhD of Stanford. Her study of children and their willingness (or lack of) to undertake a specific task demonstrated how early in our lives we chose to avoid risking failure. Dweck summarizes the difference between the two mindsets as such: A growth mindset creates a passion for learning rather than the fixed mindset's hunger for approval.

A good example of a growth mindset is Oprah Winfrey. At age 22 she was fired as the co-anchor of the evening news in Baltimore, being told she was not "fit" for television. Well, we all know how her life has developed. The essence of the growth mindset is indeed a focus on *development*. It means not accepting that our potential is finite and set in stone. It means we all have the ability to grow and learn, and that failure should be considered a tool of learning, and not a yardstick of our self worth.

As for me, I admit to having a love/hate relationship with boot camp, but can already see the love side winning as I notice small changes in my posture, my mood and even improvements in doing the exercises. Forcing ourselves to push past the roadblocks that we were too willing to accept all our lives, and to tackle new challenges will have us all standing just a little taller when we realize what we are truly capable of.