

TEST ANXIETY AND A GROWTH MINDSET



If you have a test (or quiz, or exam) as part of your studies, you might find that you get anxious before, during or after you take the test. These sorts of high-stakes tests can be stressful, and while it's natural to feel anxious, there are ways of managing this stress that will make the process easier and put you in a better headspace.



This guide will get you thinking about your headspace and it will provide a couple of strategies for coping with test anxiety.

So, firstly: how do the following statements make you feel? Do you feel strongly about or agree with one of these more than the others?

- a. Your intelligence is something very basic about you that you can't change very much.
- b. You can learn new things, but you can't really change how intelligent you are.
- c. No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it quite a bit.
- d. You can always substantially change how intelligent you are.

How you respond to these statements tells us about your adopted mindset. And understanding your adopted mindset (how you think about things) is valuable when it comes to a test, quiz or exam.

If you resonated strongly with options a) or b), you tend to think that your intelligence is a *fixed* personal attribute—in other words, you can't change how intelligent you are. These beliefs are associated with having a fixed mindset toward intelligence.

If you resonated with c) or d), you believe that your level of intelligence can be changed. These beliefs are associated with having a *growth* mindset toward intelligence.

TEST ANXIETY AND YOUR MINDSET

In her book, *Mindset: How You Can Fulfil Your Potential*, Dr Carol Dweck talks about her and her colleagues' research into students' attitudes about failure. They found that some people bounce back from failure well, while others might be crushed by even small setbacks. Dweck describes two mindsets that help explain these attitudes: a **growth** mindset, and a **fixed** mindset. Dweck's research has shown that success depends as much on ability as it does the mindset you adopt.

The **fixed** mindset

- Based on an **entity**-based belief system (your abilities are inherent and unchanging)
- Leads to **avoidance** behaviours and **anxiety**
- Informed by **negative** or **indifferent** experiences

The **growth** mindset

- Based on an **incremental** belief system (your abilities are chosen and changeable)
- Leads to **challenge-seeking** behaviours
- Informed by **positive** experiences

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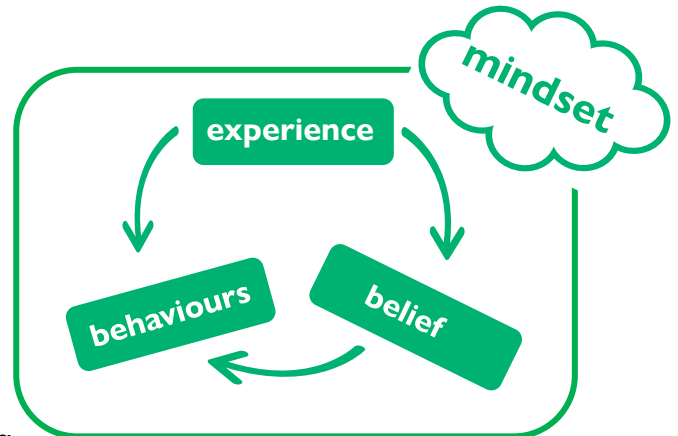


SO WHY DO WE THINK THIS WAY?

It is a false belief that our abilities are fixed, and that we are either naturally good or bad at something. Whether or not we improve depends on our adopted mindset.

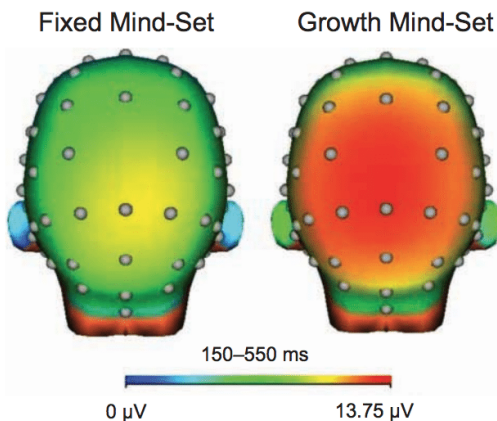
But why might we have adopted one mindset instead of another? Our mindset is influenced by the positive and negative experiences we have, as well as the social pressures we are under.

For example, it's discouraging to study hard and receive a low grade on a test. An experience like this might lead you to adopt a fixed mindset, believing that you're "just not good" at what you're studying. Maybe you know someone who tells you that they were never very good at that subject either, and that you should focus on other things. Our experiences inform our beliefs, which influence our behaviour.



And if you can learn to accept that challenges are part of learning, and if you can embrace setbacks with effort, patience, and persistence, they can become much less discouraging.

YOUR MINDSET HAS AN IMPACT ON YOUR BRAIN'S ACTIVITY.



In one study (Moser et al., 2011), brain activity was measured when people were reacting to making mistakes and receiving feedback. Different reactions to failure are associated with the two mindsets. In this image, the person on the left shows minimal brain activity, meaning they are not engaged or paying attention to the feedback they receive.

The person on the right, however, shows high levels of activity. This study found that growth-minded individuals gave more of their attention to feedback and were more likely to correct their mistakes on a surprise retest.

If you're concerned you might have adopted a fixed mindset, the good news is that you can change this! You can in fact adopt different mindsets for different aspects of your life, not just your academic studies. The first step is reflecting on if your adopted mindset and how this might be impacting your behaviour.

Do you sometimes avoid studying for a test because you think you can't change your level of intelligence and that there's no point in trying? Do you get anxious about some exams because you're afraid of failing and that doing so would be evidence that you're not intelligent enough? Do you feel indifferent to some assessments, shrugging them off as unimportant? These are just a few examples of unproductive thinking habits that can arise through having unwittingly adopted a fixed mindset toward intelligence. Through challenging these unproductive thoughts and behaviours, a fixed mindset can be transformed to a growth mindset. Not only will the experience of learning, assessment, and university tests and exams become more enjoyable, performance will also increase over time.

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STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING TEST ANXIETY

While it's good to work on developing a growth mindset, **what can you do right now** to help manage your anxiety? Below are two strategies that have been shown to reduce anxiety and unproductive thinking.

SELF-AFFIRMATION

Think about something that you value or that's important to you. It might be your family and friends, your faith, a sense of community, a love of learning, whatever you like! Try writing about it for a paragraph, explaining why it is an important value for you. This practice is called **self-affirmation**.

Reflecting on something that you value, or something you consider a strength of yours, helps us remember who we really are, what matters to us, and how far we have come toward achieving our goals. Doing this allows us to move beyond specific stressors and buffers us against negative feelings that might include, for example, worrying about receiving a disappointing grade on a test.

Research has shown that self-affirmation has a broad range of positive effects, including improved academic performance, self-control, and health-related behaviour. It has also been shown to reduce overthinking about academic failure and sympathetic nervous system activation (e.g. the fight or flight or freeze response) during an exam, thereby improving your chances of doing well.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Before you take a test, try taking some scrap paper and writing down how you're feeling (whether you feel confident or worried or something else entirely). Getting our feelings and thoughts out of our heads and onto paper can free up our minds for the test itself. This is **expressive writing**, also known as "affect" or "emotion labelling".

When we label our emotions and engage in expressive writing, we are activating an area of the brain called the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, which reduces activity in the amygdala, an area associated with emotional processing. Essentially, expressive writing helps you get distance from feelings that might otherwise overwhelm you.



REFERENCES

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Moser, J. S., Schroder, H. S., Heeter, C., Moran, T. P., & Lee, Y.-H.. (2011). Mind Your Errors. *Psychological Science*, 22(12), 1484–1489. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611419520>