Has anyone ever told you there was something you were not capable of doing? Is there anything you think you are not capable of doing or learning? Read this.

Mindset and Intelligence

One thing about human intelligence is absolutely certain: it is malleable, meaning it can be changed through exposure to new information or even by looking at what you already know in a new way. There is no limit to what you can learn, and, contrary to what some may think, nobody's brain has ever been "filled." The brain continually changes by making new neuroconnections between its cells, which represent new knowledge or skills, and when this happens, we say someone has become smarter. It is possible for humans to become smarter all the time and in any area of study. Some subjects will be harder for you to learn than others, but learning in any area is possible. Intelligence is not a fixed quantity that you got at birth and are stuck with. You become smarter every day, and the intelligence you achieve in your lifetime is unknowable. That said, it does appear that your mindset about learning will have a heavy impact on how much you will learn - and just about everything else in your life.

Your mindset is your view about your own intelligence and abilities. This view affects your willingness to engage in learning tasks and how much, if any, effort you are willing to expend to meet a learning challenge. Dweck has spent more than 30 years researching learners' mindsets and their individual views of their intelligence. She noted that mindsets fall into two categories: "fixed mindsets" and "growth mindsets." A person with a fixed mindset "believes that intelligence is a fixed trait," despite hundreds of studies that have found otherwise. In this view, either you are smart in a given area or you are not; there is nothing you can do to improve in that area. Individuals with fixed mindsets believe their intelligence is reflected in their academic performance (Dweck, 2006). If a student doesn't do well in a class, it's because he or she is not "smart" in that area. Individuals with fixed mindsets mistakenly believe either that they shouldn't need to work hard to do well because the smart students don't have to (although when researchers asked students who consistently achieved high grades about their work, they reported working very hard at academic material) or that putting in the effort won't make any difference in the outcome ("I'm just not good at math"). In fact, individuals with fixed mindsets see putting in effort as indicating that they are not smart. They have falsely come to the conclusion that learning comes easy to the students at the top of the class and that they were born that way.

People with growth mindsets, in contrast, believe that intelligence grows as you add new knowledge and skills. Those with growth mindsets value hard work, learning, and challenges and see failure as a message that they need to change tacks in order to succeed next time. Thomas Edison is reported to have tried hundreds of times before he got the lightbulb to work. At one point, he was asked by a New York Times reporter about all his failures and whether he was going to give up. Edison responded, "I have not failed 700 times. I've succeeded in proving 700 ways how not to build a light bulb" (as cited in Ferlazzo, 2011). Shortly after this interview, he was successful, and we have all since benefitted from his growth mindset. Individuals with growth mindsets are willing to take learning risks and understand that through practice and effort-sometimes a lot of effort-their abilities can improve. Those with growth mindsets believe that their brains are malleable, that intelligence and abilities constantly grow, and that only time will tell how smart they will become.

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