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How Your Beliefs Can Sabotage Your Behavior

There are many reasons why it can be hard to stick to good habits (<https://jamesclear.com/habits>) or develop new skills. But more often than not, the biggest challenge is sitting between your two ears.

Your mind is a powerful thing. The stories you tell yourself and the things you believe about yourself can either prevent change from happening or allow new skills to blossom.

Recently, I've been learning more about the link between our beliefs and our behaviors. If you're interested in actually sticking to your goals, building better habits, and reaching a higher level of achievement, then you'll love the research and ideas in this post.

Let's get to it...

How Your Beliefs Can Help You or Hurt You

Carol Dweck is a researcher at Stanford University.

Dweck is well-known for her work on “the fixed mindset vs. the growth mindset.” Here's how Dweck describes the difference between these two mindsets and how they impact your performance...

In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it.

—Carol Dweck, Stanford University

The benefits of a growth mindset might seem obvious, but most of us are guilty of having a fixed mindset in certain situations. That can be dangerous because a fixed mindset can often prevent important skill development and growth, which could sabotage your health and happiness down the line.

For example, if you say, “I'm not a math person” then that belief acts as an easy excuse to avoid practicing math. The fixed mindset prevents you from failing in the short-run, but in the long-run it hinders your ability to learn, grow, and develop new skills.

Meanwhile, someone with a growth mindset would be willing to try math problems even if they failed at first. They see failure and setbacks as an indication that they should continue developing their skills rather than a signal that

indicates, *“This is something I'm not good at.”*

As a result, people who have a growth mindset are more likely maximize their potential. They tend to learn from criticism rather than ignoring it, to overcome challenges rather than avoiding them, and to find inspiration in the success of others rather than feeling threatened.

Are Your Beliefs Holding You Back?

Dweck's research raises an important question about the connection between what you believe and what you do.

If you believe things about yourself like...

- “It's hard for me to lose weight.”
- “I'm not good with numbers.”
- “I'm not a natural athlete.”
- “I'm not creative.”
- “I'm a procrastinator.”

It's pretty clear that those fixed mindsets will cause you to avoid experiences where you might feel like a failure. As a result, you don't learn as much and it's hard to get better.

What can you do about this? How can you change the things you believe about yourself, eliminate your fixed mindset, and actually achieve your goals?

How Your Actions Change Your Beliefs

In my experience, the only way I know to change the type of person that you believe that you are — to build a new and better identity for yourself — is to do so with small, repeated actions.

Here's an example...

Leah Culver (<https://medium.com/this-happened-to-me/9ab3cc1292a8>) started running one year ago. This is how she describes the process...

I started running a year ago. I didn't entirely start from scratch. In the past I had jogged every once in a while, maybe once a month.

My first run was just two miles at 12 minutes per mile. That's pretty slow. However, for a non-athlete I felt fairly good about it. I jogged a couple more times that week. After a couple weeks of regular jogging, I set a goal for myself.

I knew I would never be fast enough to impress anybody so it didn't make sense to make speed my goal. I could have picked a race to train for, a 5k or half miler, but I knew how those ended. Everyone seems to quit running right after their big race. I wanted to do something different. I wanted to not quit.

My goal involved not going too long between runs. If I skipped more than a couple days, wouldn't that be quitting? So I started running four and five days a week. The longest I went between runs was three days when I was in

Hawaii for vacation.

My goal made all the difference. I was still slow, but I could at least feel good that I was running a lot. I'd have good days where I would run fast and feel great but I also had lots of bad days where I was tired and just didn't feel like running. In retrospect those days were almost better than the good days because they reinforced my goal — I didn't quit.

I ran my first 5k on Halloween, nearly five months after I had taken up running as a hobby. I wore a costume — fairy wings — and tried to keep up with a random guy with an owl on his head. I finished in 28 minutes and was super happy. I learned that racing wasn't always about being the fastest, but doing my personal best.

I signed up to run a full marathon in December, hired a running coach, and set a regular running schedule.

I've started to think of myself as a runner.

If you would have told me a year ago that I would be working out almost every day and running 100 miles a month I would never have believed you. Running really snuck up on me. I had modest aspirations and didn't really care if I was great at running.

I just wanted to stick to my one goal: don't quit.

Did Leah start by thinking about how much weight she wanted to lose? No. Did she start by thinking about how fast she wanted to run? No. Did she start by thinking about the marathon she wanted to complete? No.

She didn't start by thinking about the results.

She simply focused on the process. She focused on showing up. She focused on sticking to the schedule. She focused on “not quitting.”

Eventually, the results and the self-confidence came anyway. Her actions shifted the way that she saw herself. *“I’ve started to think of myself as a runner.”*

The best musicians practice every day. The best athletes practice every day. The best writers practice every day. These are people who have a high average speed (<https://jamesclear.com/average-speed>).

Yes, their results are fantastic and they get to enjoy the fruits of their labor ... but it's not the results that set them apart, it's the dedication to daily practice. It's the fact that their identity is centered on being the type of person who does their craft each day.

This is the process of identity-based habits (<https://jamesclear.com/identity-based-habits>) that I've written about before. People with a growth mindset focus on the process of building a better identity rather than the product.

Identity-Based Habits vs. Rapid Transformations

So often, we overestimate the importance of a single event (like a marathon) and underestimate the importance of making better choices on a daily basis (like running 5 days per week).

We think that getting “*that job*” or being featured in “*that media outlet*” or losing “*those 30 pounds*” will transform us into the person we want to become. We fall victim to a fixed mindset and think that we are defined by the result.

The graphic below shows the layers of behavior change. Sustainable and long-lasting change starts with building a better identity, not by focusing on results like your performance or your appearance.

 Identity-based habits and the layers of behavior change by James Clear

Graphic by James Clear.

Here's the truth: it's your daily actions that will change what you believe about yourself and the person you become. It's about setting a schedule, showing up, and sticking to it. It's about focusing on building the right identity rather than worrying about getting the right result.

In my experience, identity-based habits tie in directly with the research from Dweck and her contemporaries. When you let the results define you — your talent, your test scores, your weight, your job, your performance, your appearance — you become the victim of a fixed mindset. But when you dedicate yourself to showing up each day and focusing on the habits that form a better identity, that's when you learn and develop. That's what a growth mindset looks like in the real world.

What You Should Do Now

In case I haven't made it clear enough already: skill is something you can cultivate, not merely something you're born with.

You can become more creative, more intelligent, more athletic, more artistic, and more successful by focusing on the process, not the outcome.

Instead of worrying about winning the championship, commit to the process of training like a champion. Instead of worrying about writing a bestselling book, commit to the process of publishing your ideas on a consistent basis. Instead of worrying about getting six pack abs, commit to the process of eating healthy each day.

It's not about the result, it's about building the identity of the type of person who gets to enjoy those results.



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With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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