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This Research Study Changed the Way We Think About Success (Here's How You Can Use It)

It was my freshman year of high school and our basketball team had started the season with a losing streak.

One day at practice, as our team was struggling to find some confidence and get our first win of the season, our coach pulled us together and said something that has stuck with me ever since.

He looked at our group and said, “Confidence is just displayed ability.”

In other words, if we wanted to become the type of team that stepped onto the court and believed we would win every game, then we had to become the type of team that displayed our ability over and over again.

It didn't have to be in big ways — it could start by making a free throw or getting back on defense or boxing your man out and grabbing a rebound. But if we displayed our ability, then the confidence would come.

Up until that time I had just assumed that sometimes you were confident, sometimes you weren't, and that was that. But this was a totally different way of thinking about it.

If you could display your ability to do something — whether that was making a free throw, solving a math problem, or selling a candy bar — then you would naturally become confident in your ability to do it again. I had never thought about using my actions to drive my mindset.

In fact, it seemed like everyone was always saying the opposite. “*You need to believe in yourself first, then you'll achieve it.*” Or, “*If you could only learn to believe in yourself, then you'll be unstoppable.*”

Instead, my coach was saying, “Display your ability first. Prove it to yourself and then you'll believe it.”

In other words, this was the first time I thought about confidence, willpower, determination, and perseverance as qualities that could be *developed* through your actions.

And as it turns out, my coach wasn't just tossing out an unproven idea. There is now a body of research that shows just how right this approach can be.

Let's talk about that research now and what it means for succeeding in work, sports, education, and life in general.

Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset

Carol Dweck is a researcher at Stanford University and is the author of the hit book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/mindset>) (audiobook (<https://jamesclear.com/audiobook/mindset>)), which reveals the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset.

In the quote below, Dweck explains the difference between the two mindsets by using students as an example...

“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.”

Dweck's research has changed the way we think about success. Because of her studies, we know that much of your success hinges on whether you believe that your abilities can be developed versus believing that they are fixed.

You Can Have Both Mindsets

The typical response to this research is to compare the two mindsets and say, “Obviously, the growth mindset is better. And, of course, that's what I have.”

But there is a key distinction that is true for all of us: you can have a growth mindset in some areas and a fixed mindset in others.

For example, you might be very growth-oriented in your career and believe in your ability to develop and improve at work. Meanwhile, you might display a fixed mindset with regards to your health and believe things like *“I’m just not the type of person who works out”* or, *“I was never the athletic type.”*

But that’s just one example. The point is that it’s very easy for anyone to have a fixed mindset in a given area even if they display a growth mindset in others.

How To Develop a Growth Mindset

I'm not Carol Dweck, so I won't pretend to speak for her here. (Carol, if you're out there reading, I'd love to get your take on this.)

That said, I do think that the advice of my high school basketball coach can be very useful if we want to develop a growth mindset.

My coach said, “Confidence is just displayed ability.” Put another way: “Prove it to yourself in small ways and you'll develop the confidence that you can improve.” In other words, small wins repeated over time (<https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains>) can lead to a growth mindset.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen this in the gym.

You can bring someone new into the gym — someone who doesn't see themselves as a fit person or as a strong person in the beginning — and yet their confidence grows with each workout they finish, each rep they do, and every 5 pounds they

add to the bar. They begin to believe they can grow. They begin to see their health as something that can develop. In other words, all of their tiny actions add up to a growth mindset.

As an example, this is what my buddy Chase Reeves (<http://icetothebrim.com/2013/the-self-made-mans-self-worth-problem/>) said when he started lifting consistently...

*Here's one thing I've learned from a year at the gym ... **I can grow**, build up strength, whatever's necessary. I'm not defective.*

There's confidence that comes with that — wisdom enough to know when it's too much weight, confidence enough to know what I can do. Confidence changes the kinds of thoughts you have.

Chase's actions drove his mindset. This is completely different than what most people talk about when they discuss believing in yourself or becoming confident. The usual approach is to “fake it until you make it.”

Instead, we are talking about starting small, proving your ability to yourself in a thousand tiny ways, and letting the confidence and growth mindset naturally follow from there. Confidence is just displayed ability.



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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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