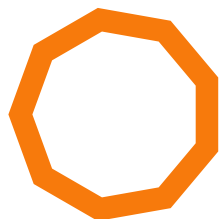




Mindfulness and Mindset

ebook



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Mindfulness and Mindset

Start somewhere.

I was a train wreck for a majority of my life, so people often ask me what it was that helped me change.

I was emotionally immature, insecure, self-absorbed and clueless. I had addiction issues, personality issues, anger issues, and general inability-to-function-as-a-human-being issues. All the best stuff.

Let's be clear about something. I do not have everything together these days, I'm just doing better than I used to. It's like running a 20 minute mile when you used to throw up before you got to the track. Improvement, but still barely approaching baseline.

That being said, I have a much better life than anyone would expect these days. I have a great job, an amazing wife, kids that I love AND like, and a lot of cool opportunities in the future. I work hard, but I also have way more than someone like me deserves. There isn't much that gets me down, there isn't a lot that I dislike or get frustrated with.

Life is cool.

One thing is for sure - I have had more help than anyone I know. My parents helped me well past when they should have and my brother helped me more than I deserved. I have had so many people invest in me over the years, so many people go out of their way for me – I really am the most fortunate person I know in this respect.

The thing is though, even with all the outside help, nothing changes if you don't change what is inside of you, and I have never been able to pinpoint the exact change in thinking that helped me until a few weeks ago:

Mindfulness and Mindset

It's all about Mindset.

I presented at a conference recently, and the keynote speaker they brought in was a guy named Trevor Ragan. He does a lot of work with what's called a Growth Mindset. Ragan's work is based on and inspired by Carol Dweck, who wrote *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.

Dweck has spent her career studying how people perceive their personality and potential, and has discovered that we tend to fall into one of two categories: a Fixed Mindset or Growth Mindset. These are not hard and fast designations, and we can display different characteristics in relation to different situations, but they tend to hold true in general.

I wanted to tie my presentation into the theme of the conference so I decided to talk about using mindfulness to break out of a Fixed Mindset. A lot of things about my life clicked in when I began studying this, and more and more clicked in as I read through her book.

Here are the basics:

A person with a Fixed Mindset sees talent and temperament as being something they are born with that remains static throughout life. This puts a sort of cap on their capability from the get-go and leads to a life where one constantly seeks to prove themselves while not stepping too far out of their comfort zone. This makes sense because failure is seen as a strike against their very identity. It's kind of like someone who knows how to play one song on the piano and believes it is literally impossible to learn any more songs. They are going to make sure everyone knows they can play that song and that they never wind up in a position where they have to play another one. They would have a constant fear of failing to play that one song they know perfectly because it's the only thing they have going for them.

Mindfulness and Mindset

Alternatively, a person with a Growth Mindset sees talent and temperament as fluid and something they can cultivate. They don't believe there are any limits on what they can do, and therefore consistently put themselves in positions to learn and grow. Failure isn't seen as a strike against their identity, but as an opportunity for learning and evolving as a person. This is the person who learns to play a song on the piano and then wants to learn other, more difficult songs. They don't mind failing because that is inevitable when learning something new.

There is something deeply insidious in the Fixed Mindset because it actively prevents a person from doing any of the things that allow us to grow. Think about it – for anything to ever change in our lives we need effort, challenges, mistakes, and feedback. A Fixed Mindset undermines all of these.

Effort is seen as pointless because we are incapable of growth.

Challenges are just opportunities to fail.

Mistakes are fatal when you only have a few specific things to offer.

Feedback is pointless and painful.

In short, a Fixed Mindset is closer to frozen or paralyzed than simply inflexible, and breeds thought patterns and behaviors that ensure it will never be challenged in any real way.

A Growth Mindset is the direct opposite. Someone with a growth mindset believes that everything can be cultivated, even aspects of our personality like creativity and talents that seem inborn, like being able to draw. It doesn't take this to a delusional degree – LeBron James was always going to be a better basketball player than me, but imagine if he had believed there was a ceiling on his talent. He wouldn't be in the NBA.

More than anything, A Growth Mindset sees challenges as opportunities to learn and grow, so it seeks them out rather than avoids them. Someone with this mindset wants to be critiqued and questioned so they can improve, they want new challenges and difficult things to work on so they don't get stagnant.

Mindfulness and Mindset

I think I first encountered this mindset idea in Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* – a classic in self-help literature, and one that holds a special place in my heart because of its connection to the punk scene through the Bad Brains in Washington DC. I read through it years and years ago and the idea that the thoughts we have about reality matter really hit me hard, so I started changing my thinking.

I was fortunate to pair this new understanding with a mindfulness and meditation practice a few years later. I think this gave it a boost as it helped me learn to be aware of my thoughts and ideas, while also helping me cultivate a degree of equanimity to how things turn out. This freed me up to start taking on new challenges like college and then Masters degrees. It gave me the courage to step out and start my own business, to try new things and put myself out there in ways that I wouldn't have even considered in the past.

And this is what hit me when I started reading about Fixed Mindsets. Napoleon Hill is all positive and upbeat – he focuses on where you need to go. Dweck's book really made me realize just how mixed my mindset was for most of my life, and I think it came from an unexpected source.

As I said, I've been surrounded by good people my whole life, and by people who loved and invested in me. I was always told I was smart, and while it seems like a good thing, Dweck notes an odd thing that happens with it – people start to think that being smart is something you just are, rather than something you have to work for. This is all well and one until they aren't the best at something, as this seems to be an indication that they have peaked and it's time to settle into a safe routine.

Mindfulness and Mindset

Looking back, I can see where I played it safe to avoid failure, but I did it under the guise of being too cool for things or simply not caring about them. I didn't play sports, I wasn't involved in school at all. When I was a Teaching Assistant in grad school I worked 20 hours a week in the computer lab because I was completely terrified of having to speak in front of people like my peers who got roped into doing test reviews or guest lectures occasionally. I can see where having a Fixed Mindset kept me in a Fixed Mindset. When I was younger people often talked about me not living up to my potential and eventually about me being lazy. As a TA, I stayed in my safe little bubble in the computer lab, never being challenged to do more. A Fixed Mindset maintains a Fixed Mindset.

This all eventually fell apart when life started insisting I challenge myself. A professor I really respected told me I'd be coming to speak to his class, grad school for counseling required me to talk to people all the time and I ended up teaching at another university. A cool thing happened from all of this: I found out that I like challenges and that it feels cool to excel. I began to see hard things as puzzles to be solved.

Things have been a lot easier ever since.

A mindful lifestyle can go a long way toward breaking out of and staying away from a Fixed Mindset.

Negativity and fear have a hard time existing in the open space of awareness that exists when we become more aware of the way our mind works. Tony Toneatto identifies some useful insights that emerge from a mindfulness practice, all of which are useful in breaking out of a Fixed Mindset:

Mindfulness and Mindset

Most of our thinking is conditioned through experience and is not necessarily objectively true.

Pleasant and unpleasant thoughts will occur throughout our lifespan whether we like it or not.

All thoughts and feelings are temporary.

Although we may be gripped by a thought, thoughts are illusory – like flickers on a movie screen.

A Fixed Mindset functions on the assumption that our perception of reality is accurate, and therefore that our fears and limitations are true expressions of our limitations. Conditioning is the ultimate form of fixedness because we think it is based on experience. A Fixed Mindset is driven by unpleasant thoughts. The desire to avoid is rooted in them. A Fixed Mindset fails to factor in the understanding that thoughts and feelings come and go, and that they are not clear indications of reality. More than anything, a Fixed Mindset takes thoughts very seriously. It accepts its beliefs about limits, ability, identity and the terror of failure as being very real, and responds to them accordingly. Mindfulness is about experiencing and accepting things as they are more than anything else. This allows the strange paradox of acceptance and change to emerge in our lives as fully accepting ourselves opens up the ability to change in a deep way.

Accepting that I am unhealthy is the only way to begin making changes that will improve how I feel.

Accepting that I am unhappy with my job is the necessary first step to ending a new one or beginning the training that will open up new opportunities. Accepting that I fear failure is the only way to even begin confronting this fear and taking risks.

Mindfulness and Mindset

In short, acceptance and change go hand-in-hand, and mindfulness is an acceptance-making machine.

I would not ever deny the overwhelming support I had from people. We all had help surviving, even if it was nothing more than being cared for as a baby and small child. I think I have had more opportunities in life than most, but none of it mattered until I was able to change my mindset.

It's a weird thing that we don't think about how we think about things, but it's there. The question is what are we going to do about it.

Mindfulness and Mindset

Journal Prompts

Use these journal prompts to explore some of the concepts and questions from this short book in more depth.

What do I believe about my ability to change, grow, and evolve as a human being?

What skills do I see as fixed or unchangeable?

Have I examined these assumptions?

What do I believe about failure?

Does this belief help or hinder me?

How do I experience feedback?

Am I missing opportunities for growth because of how I experience feedback?

What would I change if I believed I was able to?

How can I start this change?

What is preventing me from starting right now?