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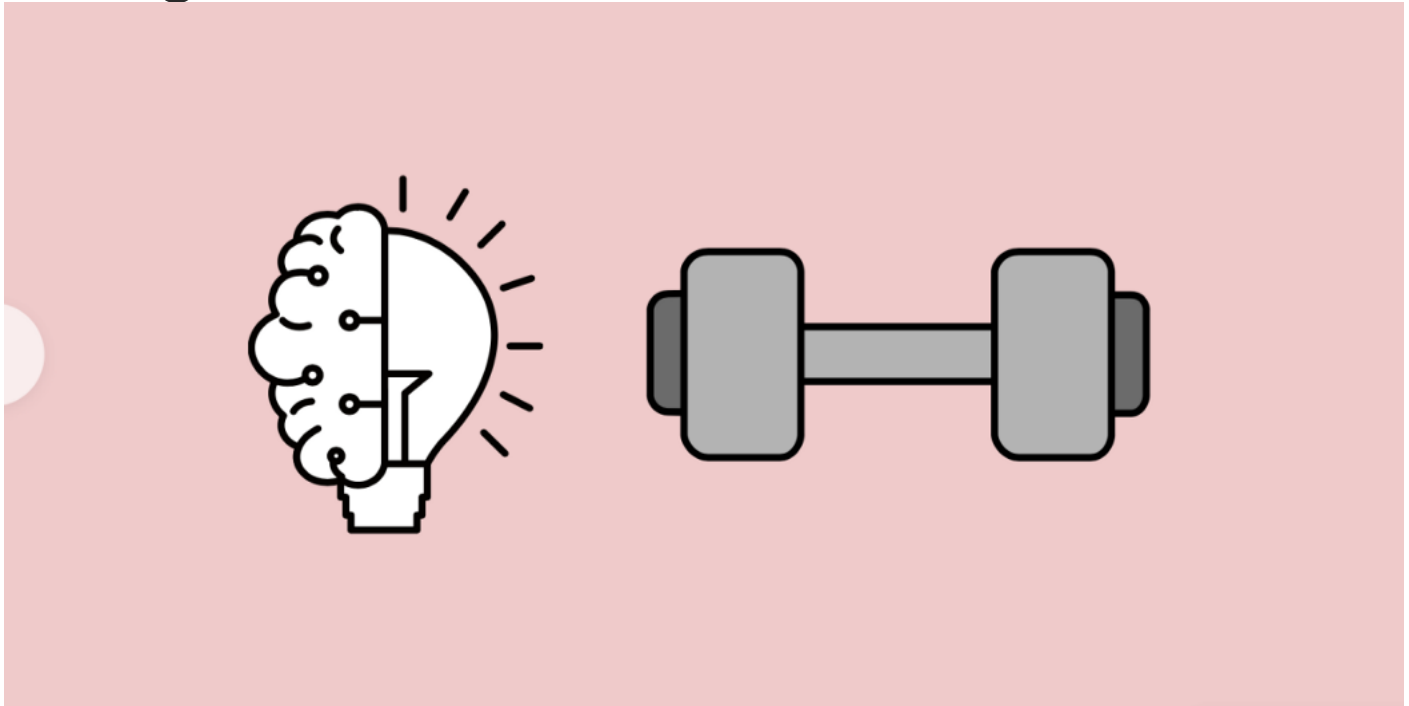
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Reference: The Importance of a Growth Mindset for College Students | by Jasmine Wu | Medium

The Importance of a Growth Mindset for College Students

From elementary school to high school, I considered myself a bright student. I was accepted into my school's talented and gifted program in 2nd grade, got straight A's, and made the honor roll consistently. However, those early successes resulted in me seriously struggling once I started university.

Let me tell you about a typical night in my first semester. It's 10:00 pm on Sunday night and I'm sitting at my table cramming for my exam...which is tomorrow at 9 am. There are powerpoints and textbooks everywhere and I am sitting there wondering what I learned in this class. I am about 2 seconds away from a complete mental breakdown, tears and all. Mad at myself because after the last exam I failed, I promised myself that this time, I would get it together.

I thought I did everything I could think of to prepare for the exam. I watched all the Youtube videos on how to study for exams. I made the perfect study schedule, color coded and all. I even bought a new planner. And yet, here I was on a Sunday night 11 hours before the exam trying to catch up on 3 chapters worth of material, and I was so overwhelmed I didn't even know what to focus on.

Why couldn't I seem to motivate myself, stop procrastinating, and pass one exam?

I spent the summer after my first year researching, learning, and testing every study strategy out there. I read numerous books on study strategies. I went into this process hoping to discover some secret study tips that will make me a better student.

However, the solution had nothing to do with a pill to raise my IQ levels or a specific notetaking method or app or switching to an easier specialization or class. If the solution to having a 4.0 GPA really was about finding the perfect planner and plugging times into a calendar, all of us would be on the Dean's Honour Roll right now. The real issue is our thoughts.

I believed that people were either smart or not, and I carried this mindset throughout my first year. It was the reason I never asked for help from professors or asked questions in class. It was the reason why I found myself in the undergraduate office one day on the verge of tears, about to drop out of the business and computer science program thinking that I was not smart enough.

I spent so much time talking about how I had no motivation, how I am constantly procrastinating and stressed and even when I had two projects due that week, a quiz in lab, and a midterm that I had not started studying for...I don't do the work. However, I never stopped to ask why I was procrastinating, why I did not want to start the project, and why the thought of studying for my exam made me so uncomfortable.

What I learned from research and books, is that mindset matters a lot more than any study strategy out there. Mindset is a set of beliefs we hold about ourselves and the world around us works. They are built from things people told us and what we have experienced. Mindset is made up of thoughts confirmed by life experiences.

What is mindset?

set of beliefs you hold about yourself and how the world around you works

For me, I had a tendency to think a lot of unhelpful thoughts like what if I put in all this effort and still fail. Or what if I am not smart enough. Or I always feel so stupid when working on my programming assignment. Maybe I should just drop out of this program. I had thoughts like this all day long, but I wasn't noticing or paying attention to them.
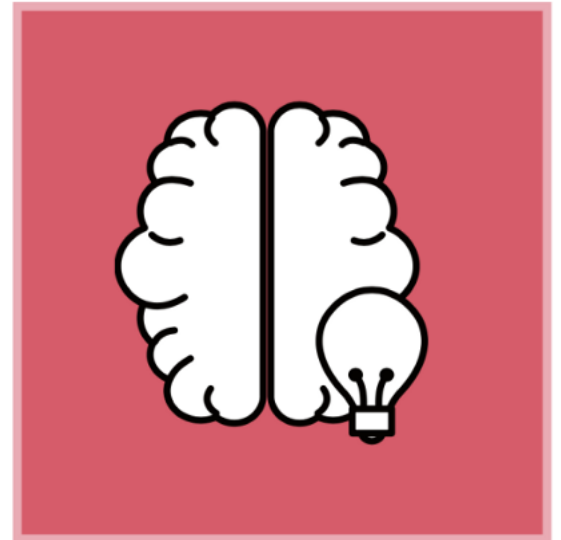

The truth was, I did not want to reveal my thoughts to myself because they were uncomfortable. What happens is that circumstances are neutral facts but our thoughts give meaning to them. Thoughts create our feelings, which lead us to certain actions, which produce certain outcomes. The issue was not about getting organized or managing my time, because without the right thoughts, I would not be able to follow through on the study strategies that worked.

The primitive part of our brain naturally has a tendency to avoid pain, seek pleasure, and be efficient. So when we think thoughts such as that assignment is going to be so hard to finish, what if I completely mess it up, our limbic system goes into fight or flight response, causing us to avoid important tasks. Instead, we watch Netflix, go on social media, or play video games because we produce dopamine in our brains. Over time, procrastination becomes a habit because our brains start connecting unfavorable school tasks to satisfying avoidant behavior.

Our Brains

- AVOID PAIN

- SEEK PLEASURE

- BE EFFICIENT

By being unaware of the thoughts going around in our minds, we unconsciously create an unhelpful thought model that influences the way we act. For example, we might have 2 exams this week and we think there is not enough time to study, how are we going to get everything done, and we are going to fail both of them. These thoughts trigger emotions such as fear, anxiety, and stress, which causes us to

not concentrate, procrastinate, and not study. This results in us getting behind in the material and not doing well on the exams.

However, if we create thoughts intentionally, we could produce a completely different result with the exact same circumstances. We could choose to think that we are in control of our time or that we know what tasks we need to do to study effectively for the exams. We would feel much more capable, relaxed, and motivated, and we would probably spend more time studying for the exams. We would go to office hours, ask questions, and do practice questions, which results in us performing better on the tests.

Circumstance: something happens
Thoughts: story about what happened
Feelings: chemical reactions
Actions: what you do / don't do
Results: effects of action

By doing the intentional thought model regularly, we have the ability to improve our current capabilities and intelligence levels due to neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change and grow throughout a person's life. Up until recently, scientists believed

that the brain was fixed in its habits and certain people were born gifted, talented, or smart.

This is known as a fixed mindset and can lead to self-sabotaging behavior in students. I personally experienced this in my first year of college as the fixed mindset played a key role in my motivation and achievement. I was less willing to face challenges, learn from mistakes and failures, and was more obsessed with the appearance of being smart than putting in the effort and hard work to develop new skills.

However, research has proven that our brains are not static and through repeated practice and continual challenges, our brains can develop talent and abilities. This is known as a growth mindset. Scientists have discovered that students with a growth mindset perform significantly better than students with a fixed mindset.

Growth Mindset

skills and abilities can be developed

Students with a growth mindset understand that anytime they want to learn something new or improve something, it will require practice and effort. A true growth mindset is not just about not giving up, but also involves evaluating what is working and what needs to be improved. This means that they will not be very good at first but as they keep trying, improving, and tweaking, they will reach a level of achievement.

Managing the mind is not an overnight solution and will take effort and dedication. Just like going to the gym, we have to be consistent with noticing and addressing our thoughts. We are smart and capable enough, so don't let your mind be the only thing stopping you from seeing the success you want.