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Commentary

Promoting a growth mindset in pharmacy educators and students

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ABSTRACT

Commentary: Mindsets are implicit theories that influence how individuals think, act, and respond. Those with a fixed mindset tend to resist learning opportunities; those with a growth mindset embrace learning opportunities. It is important that pharmacy educators work to shift the mindsets of their students toward a growth mindset in order to promote resilience, improve personal outcomes, and enhance attitudes toward learning. Mindsets are not static, and with persistence and effort, can be modified.

Implications: Pharmacy educators can do much to influence the mindsets of their learners, and with purposeful effort, can help cultivate an environment that enhances a learner's growth mindset. If an educator is not deliberate, fixed mindsets can be inadvertently promoted to learners, which can result in diminished learning experiences for both student and educator. This commentary will inform pharmacy educators about mindsets and present several teaching and precepting techniques that can help promote a growth mindset among themselves and their learners.

Introduction

Mindsets are the implicit theories or attitudes that govern one's actions, behaviors, and thoughts. Mindsets can be thoughts of as the internal “coding” or beliefs that shape how individuals interact with the world around them.

Carol Dweck is a leader in the research of how mindsets (or specifically an individual's beliefs about intelligence) affect learning. She describes two mindsets that warrant special consideration for educators and students, growth (or incremental) mindset and fixed (or entity) mindset.[1–3] Table 1 summarizes the general traits of both growth and fixed mindsets.

Those with a growth mindset believe that humans have the capacity to adapt and change, and that certain qualities, such as intelligence, personality, and abilities can be developed with persistence and nurturing.[1,2] To illustrate, an individual with a growth mindset would assume that with dedicated practice and training, one can develop high levels of skill in athletics, music, or academics. An individual with a growth mindset sees themselves as malleable or changeable, assuming that a low grade on an exam is merely an indication that they need to modify their study habits, not necessarily a marker of their intelligence.[1,2]

In contrast, an individual with a fixed mindset believes that humans have certain identifying traits or characteristics that are essentially not malleable.[1,2] For example, a person with a fixed mindset would assume that one is born with a fixed level of talents in athletics, music, or academics, and their level of talent in certain areas remains fairly static throughout their life. An individual with a fixed mindset would assert that a clumsy individual who was not “a born athlete” could never become a professional athlete, no matter the amount of practice and training put forth.[1,2]

As growth and fixed mindsets are defined here, it is important to remember that people may have varying mindsets toward

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Table 1
Comparison of common traits for individuals with growth and fixed mindsets.[2,3]

	Growth mindset	Fixed mindset
Attitudes about learning	• Pursue challenges • Value effort • Believe that mistakes and effort are critical to learning	• Feel "smart" when education comes easily • Avoid looking foolish or unlearned • Worry about making mistakes • Will sacrifice learning if it risks showing deficiencies
Responding to feedback	• Eagerly seek out formative feedback • Quickly implement feedback received	• Become discouraged and defensive about constructive feedback • More likely to cheat and lie about grades and performance
Responding to setbacks	• Demonstrate resilience to setbacks • Believe setbacks are part of the learning process • Employ adaptive studying methods • Adapt to increasing challenges	• Give up easily • Believe setbacks are indictments of self • Assume that setbacks signal low ability and low intelligence • Make excuses and blame others • Avoid similar courses/situations in the future

different areas of their lives (e.g., professional or personal) or qualities (e.g., intelligence, character traits, talent).[1,2] Also, while the descriptions provided here describe two ends of a spectrum, it is important to not think of a person as having one mindset or another all of the time, but as shifting between them depending on the situation.[4] Individuals can shift their mindset over time so that they can begin to approach areas in which they previously had a fixed mindset with a growth mindset.[4] Multiple studies have shown that mindsets can be shifted with educational interventions for both students and educators.[1,2,5–12]

When considering some overarching characteristics of students with these different mindsets, it is important to note that the traits exhibited by students with a growth mindset are very forward-looking, with a focus on improvement, growth, and progression. These students will tend to appreciate effort and tasks that require hard work.[1,2] Growth mindset students understand that a deficiency or weakness is a learning opportunity, and simply a marker of their ability at a particular moment in time.[1,2] In comparison, students with a fixed mindset have a "here and now" focus and can exhibit difficulty in looking forward at what they might be able to achieve. More specifically, they may have challenges in thinking about themselves as being more skilled or adept at a task in the future, tending to believe that the skills and talent they exhibit now represents their true self or identity.[1,2] Additionally, a student with a fixed mindset might have difficulty with the concept that identifying areas of concern is the first step to turning weaknesses into strengths and acknowledging these areas of opportunity can actually threaten their identity and self-esteem.[1–3] Differences can also be seen when considering the types of goals students set for themselves. A growth mindset student will tend to set goals that can be described as learning-oriented goals (focusing on increasing competence, learning new skills, mastering tasks) while the fixed mindset student will tend to set performance-oriented goals (winning positive judgment or praise, demonstrating ability, earning a certain grade).[1,3]

Most individuals find their own mindsets fall between a fixed and growth mindset, manifesting some attributes of both, depending on their situation.[4] This would indicate that educators and students alike have opportunities to shift toward a growth mindset. When educators are willing to take an honest look at their own mindsets, they can, in turn, be influential in fostering growth mindsets in their learners.

Commentary

Mindsets are an important and often overlooked consideration for those involved in the education of health science students. There are a variety of factors in today's healthcare landscape that indicate a growing need for growth mindset education in health care education. To begin, in a *Patient Safety Curriculum Guide for Medical Schools*, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends training on understanding medical errors and mistakes, and methods to learn from these errors.[13] Without training, students and faculty can inadvertently foster unhealthy and unproductive coping mechanisms to deal with medical errors, such as blaming, lying, and covering up.[14] As Klein et al.[14] point out, health professional students need strategies to help build resilience as they learn from mistakes, encounter challenges, and begin to face the reality of medical errors in their practice settings. Klein et al.[14] build upon Wu's[15] concept of the "second victim" and further describe how health care practitioners can become the "second victim" of a medical error, as a result of the guilt, shame, and loss of confidence that can accompany such errors. Learning to adopt a growth mindset can help young health care practitioners understand that errors can be a powerful tool for learning and growth, often highlighting flaws in systems and processes, when the error is appropriately analyzed and addressed.

Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons why a growth mindset is an important consideration in pharmacy education relates to the mandate of continuous professional development.[16] Pharmacy professionals are tasked with self-assessing their own knowledge gaps and taking steps to address those opportunities. A growth mindset is needed in the accurate identification of one's knowledge deficits.

As previously alluded to, resilience and grit are also important concepts for health care professionals, as awareness of provider burnout and suicide is becoming more well-known and widespread.[17] The National Academy of Medicine is making strides to call

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