

The importance of developing a growth mindset for the dental team

By **Morag Powell**¹ and **Ewen McColl**²

Our mindset is a set of beliefs that can shape our view of the world. Having the correct mindset can help to play a significant role in shaping our achievements and success in our chosen careers¹ (Fig. 1).

Fixed mindset

Dweck¹ describes two different types of mindsets: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Fundamental to a fixed mindset is the belief that we are born with a fixed ability and that this cannot be changed over time. When people are in a fixed mindset they are focused on achievement and outcome, for

example focusing on how well they have done in a clinical procedure or what mark they have received in an assessment. This is then linked to their feeling of self-worth and if they do not achieve the outcome that they expect then this becomes a negative emotion for them. Additionally, in a fixed mindset people can give up on things that seem too difficult to complete, which can also lead to feelings of failure and negative feelings and emotions.² This can impact on all members of a clinical team, ie if something goes wrong and the team do not reflect appropriately to improve and give up on carrying out the procedure again.

People in this mindset can also find it difficult to accept feedback and support from peers, which can lead to increased feelings of isolation and can become a source of conflict within teams. Another trait of the fixed mindset is the feeling of being threatened by the success of others. The fixed mindset will look for flaws in others, which can leave them feeling angry, disappointed, or resentful at times. The focus on negativity here in the fixed mindset can lead to people spending

unnecessary time and energy on this, which in turn increases their negative emotional state.²

Growth mindset

The opposite belief is that ability can be nurtured and developed over time, and this is the basis of a growth mindset. Here the focus is on how an individual can improve and what one can learn from this situation. This is crucial if clinicians want to develop and optimise outcomes for their patients.

It goes without saying that when we are in a fixed mindset with the belief that our abilities are unchanging, this thought process can be very limiting and restrictive. It restricts personal growth and influences an individual's self-belief and self-worth. Experiencing failure with a fixed mindset is seen negatively as a setback, which can have a negative impact on attitude and outlook. When failure is experienced with a growth mindset, it is seen as an opportunity for further development and growth, which has a positive impact on attitude and outlook. Dental team members who adopt a growth mindset perceive

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setbacks as a necessary part of the learning process and can 'bounce back' by increasing their motivational effort.^{3,4} Therefore it is important for all members of the dental team to understand how they can move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset if they wish to succeed in their chosen career or clinical discipline.

Mindset and wellbeing

Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to form and reorganise synaptic connections, especially in response to learning or experience. It can occur throughout life with neurons having the ability to breakdown and rebuild in the adult brain.^{5,6} A person who adopts a growth mindset has the belief that their abilities can be developed throughout their life. They hold a fundamental belief that the brain can grow and get stronger with consistent training² and whilst clearly not a muscle, the brain can be trained much as we train our muscles. Resetting how we frame things in our mind can help us move towards a growth mindset.

Ways to help develop a growth mindset

1. Acknowledge and embrace your weaknesses

We are all flawed human beings and accepting that we are not perfect is essential when moving towards a growth mindset. It is perfectly normal not to be good at everything, and regardless of how successful we are within our chosen careers, we all have weaknesses. Acknowledging and accepting our weaknesses will allow us to develop further. Clinically, when a procedure does not go to plan, focus on all the other procedures that have and how you will work to further improve next time around (Fig. 2).

2. Work-life balance

Having a good work-life balance is key to reducing stress levels and improving the quality of your life. Dentistry is a high stress profession, regardless of the role that you hold within the dental team. Recent research⁸ suggests to regularly check your work-life balance by taking the following steps:

Pause – and ask yourself what is causing you stress or unhappiness? How is it affecting your work and personal life? Taking time to pause and reflect about your current situation will allow you to assess whether you need to make changes or not.

Pay attention to your feelings – Being aware of any areas that are causing you stress or unhappiness can help you decide if you need to make any changes.

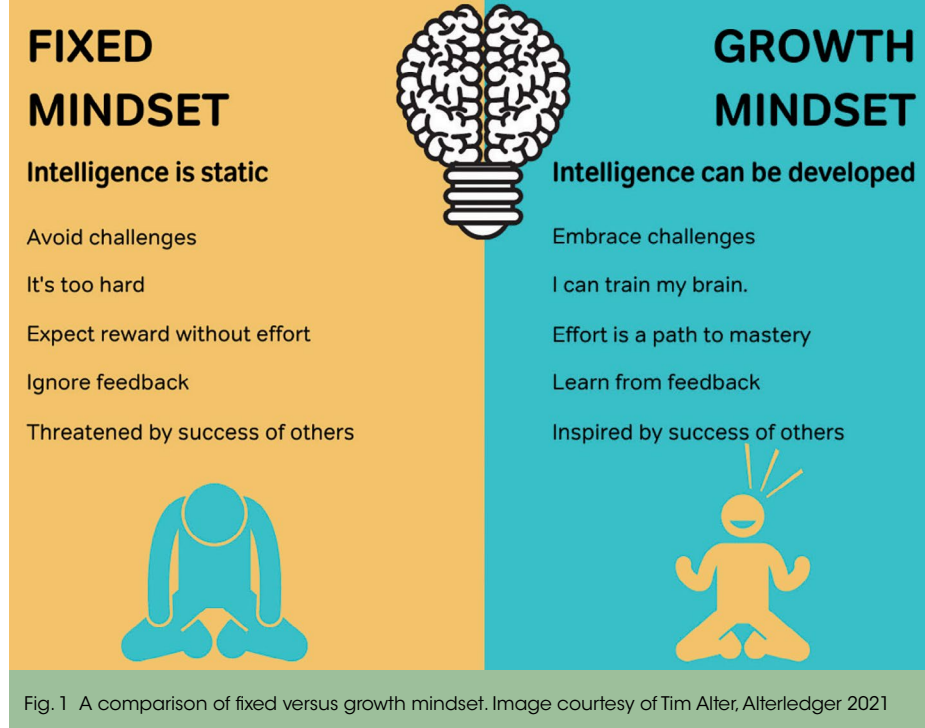


Fig. 1 A comparison of fixed versus growth mindset. Image courtesy of Tim Alter, Alterledger 2021

'When reflecting on what did not go so well, it is important to be kind to yourself and be mindful that at times things may not go to plan, and that is okay.'

Reprioritise – These changes do not have to be big changes, they can be as simple as not responding to emails out of hours, taking a daily lunchbreak away from your workspace or deciding to commit to exercising more frequently every week.

Consider your alternatives – Is there an opportunity here for change to help you meet your new priorities? Moving to a growth mindset will help facilitate the changes.

Implement the changes – Commit to making the changes and set a date to review the progress of the changes.

3. View challenges as opportunities

Adopting a positive attitude to the challenges that we face and viewing them as opportunities will help move you from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. When faced with a challenge, assess the situation and look for the obstacles that are present and turn them into strategies. This allows you a new perspective on the challenge and to view it as an opportunity.

4. Prioritise your wellbeing

Making time in your weekly schedule for wellbeing is important. In addition to this it is important to acknowledge the difference between physical exercise, which is great for our physical health, and wellbeing activities. Physical exercise stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, which brings many great physical benefits, whereas wellbeing activities such as yoga, meditation and mindfulness stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. Activation of the parasympathetic nervous system relaxes the body, in particular after periods of stress, and therefore should be an essential component of a wellbeing strategy for all members of the dental team.

In addition to this, if we adopt a growth mindset and view our wellbeing needs in a similar way to how we view Maslow's hierarchy of needs when applied to employee engagement, we can start to understand the value and importance of wellbeing within the dental team. Research^{9,10} demonstrates a link between employee engagement and wellbeing,

which is reciprocal. When we are highly engaged within the workplace we thrive, which decreases burnout and improves our productivity (Fig. 3).

5. Focus on the process instead of the end result

By focusing on the process, rather than the end result, you will gain more satisfaction and happiness in the activity you are undertaking when adopting this approach. If your happiness is linked to the end result, then you run the risk of not being happy until the result is achieved and miss out on the enjoyment of the journey of the process and the intrinsic value of the activity. The happiness that is gained when focusing on the end result can be short lived and cyclical in nature, therefore focusing on enjoying the process will bring you more long-term happiness.

6. Mental stimulation keeps your mind active, reflect on your daily learning

Reflective journaling is an effective tool in helping you staying motivated and in a growth mindset. The process of reflecting and writing about what went well, what did not go so well and what you are going to take forward into your next session can be hugely beneficial. This process can be as simple as writing down your ‘wins’ following a more structured approach by using a reflective framework such as Gibbs’ reflective cycle. Research¹¹ demonstrates that the single most important factor in boosting emotions, motivation and perceptions during a workday is making progress in meaningful work (Fig. 4).

Adopting a growth mindset helps us develop and grow in the areas that require further development. When reflecting on what did not go so well, it is important to be kind to yourself and be mindful that at times things may not go to plan, and that is okay.

In addition to this, reflecting on what we are grateful for by means of journaling a gratitude list, is an easy and quick way to move the focus of our mind from a fixed mindset to positive growth mindset. Sometimes it can be what appears to be the smallest and most insignificant of things that can make the biggest difference to our focus and mindset.

Another way to get positive mental stimulation to keep your mind active is to listen to positive podcasts and read positive focused books. Much has been written about ‘you become what you think about’, and one easy and quick way to focus our mind on the positive is to saturate your brain with positive input. Millions of positive podcasts are online which are available free of charge, and just

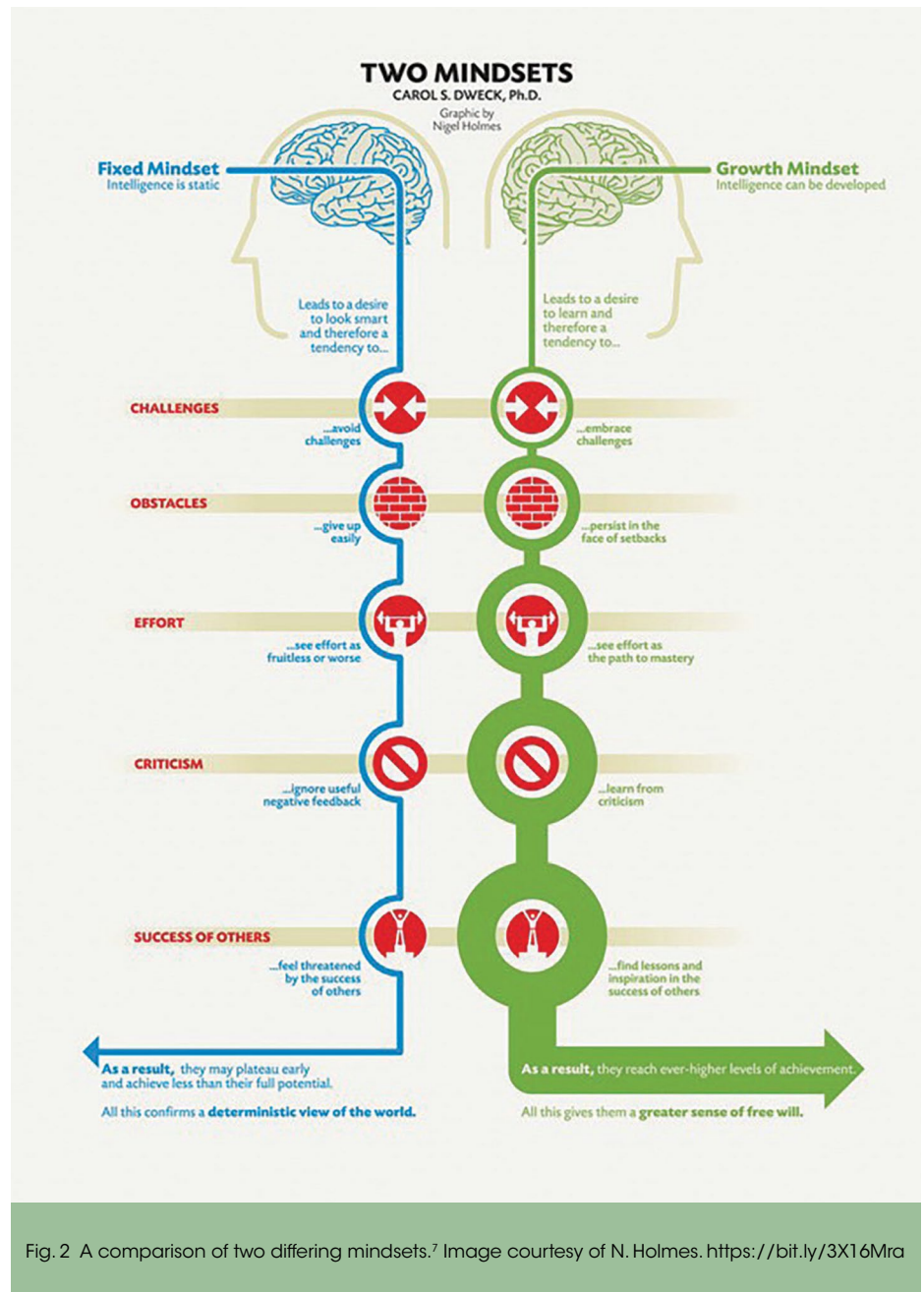


Fig. 2 A comparison of two differing mindsets.⁷ Image courtesy of N. Holmes. <https://bit.ly/3X16Mra>

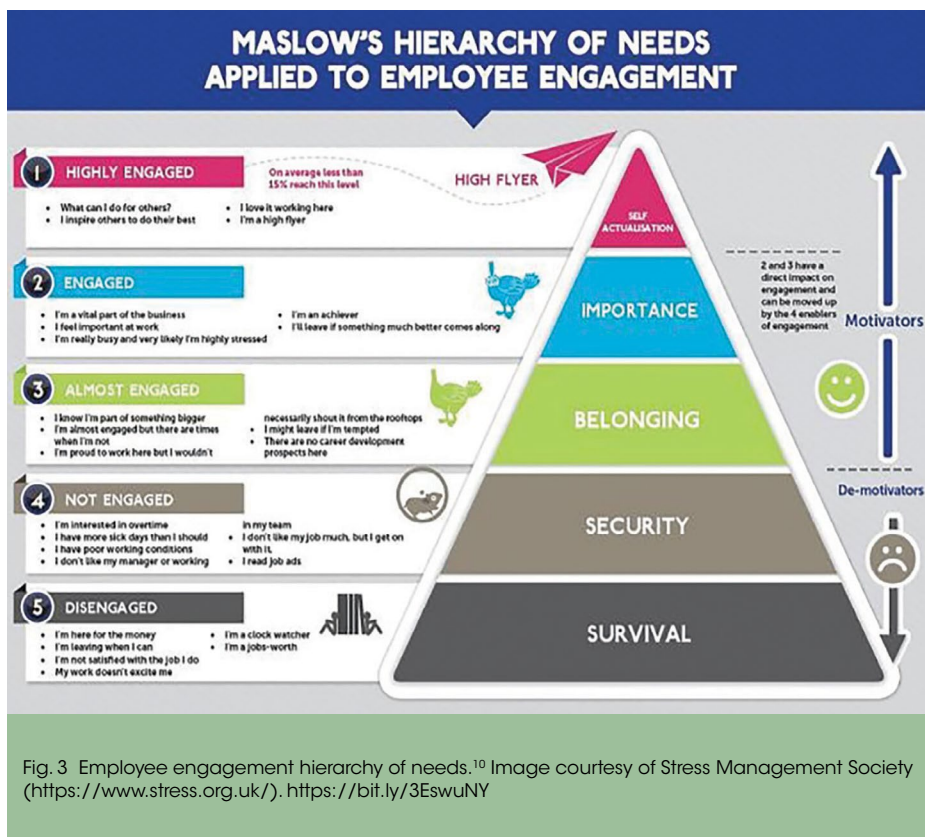
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simply listening to a few of these a week will help you develop a growth mindset.

Conclusion

Adopting a growth mindset will improve your

overall wellbeing and can help you cope with the daily obstacles and challenges that we face within a busy work environment. Prioritising our wellbeing in the long term will bring us more motivation, happiness and fulfilment in



the daily roles that we undertake. It will make us better clinicians and dental team members, and will help ensure we provide optimum care for our patients.

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