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# MINDSET

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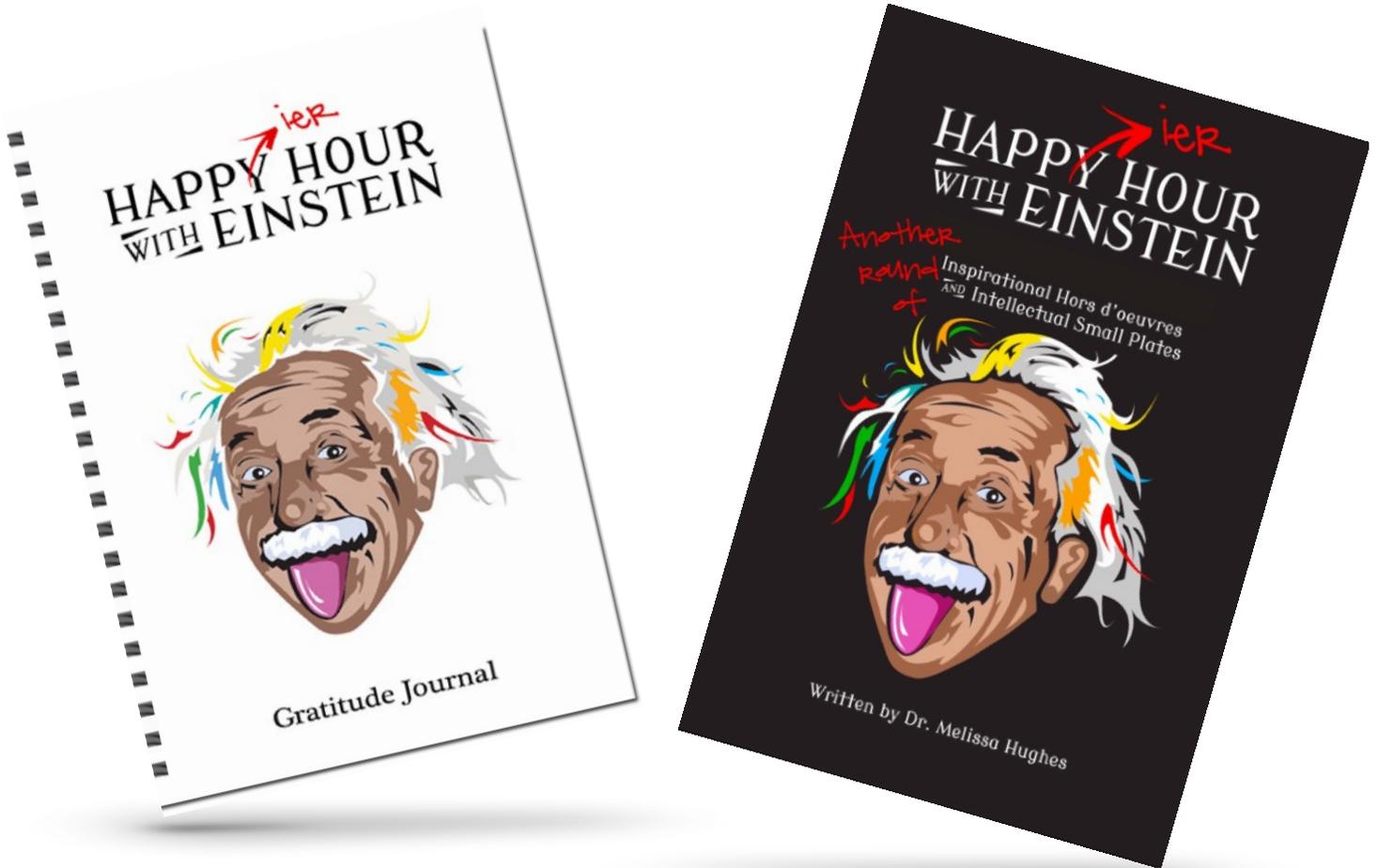
**Fears, Commas  
& the  
F-Word**



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## Thinking about Thinking | Learning about Learning

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***Mindset: Fears, Commas, & the F-Word is an excerpt from Happier Hour with Einstein: Another Round.***

Written by Dr. Melissa Hughes

Dr. Hughes is the Founder and President of the Andrick Group and the author of *Happy Hour with Einstein*, *Happier Hour with Einstein* and the *Happier Hour with Einstein Companion Gratitude Journal* (available August 2018). She holds her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction and her research focuses on the achievement gap impacted by summer learning loss and parental involvement. Throughout her career, she has taught in both the public K-12 sector as well as at the university level and has authored more than a dozen instructional resource publications for teachers. Melissa currently delivers keynote speeches and workshops to help people work smarter and to help organizations build collective Intelligence. For more information about bringing Dr. Hughes to speak to your organization and better understand how the brain works and how to make it work better, visit [www.andrickgroup.com](http://www.andrickgroup.com).

# FEARS, COMMAS & THE F-WORD

*“Everything you want is just on the other side of fear.”  
-Jack Canfield*

Professionally or personally, no one likes to fail. Some people are so adverse to failure that it becomes paralyzing. There's a name for that. Atychiphobia – an irrational fear of failure that prevents sufferers from any task or activity that does not guarantee their success – is number 15 on the top 100 phobias list. When we allow fear to prevent progress in school, at work, or in life, we're going to miss great opportunities along the way. New research demonstrates that success is determined by how we use the F-word: FAILURE.

We're taught at a very young age that the brightest kids get the right answers. Wrong answers are evidence that we aren't smart. As adults, intellectually we know that mistakes are essential to the learning process, but no one wants to make them let alone *embrace* them or shine a light on them. The mind is a powerful thing. The way we see ourselves and the stories we tell ourselves can either fuel success or sabotage it. That internal dialogue doesn't just impact our success; it profoundly influences the goals we set for ourselves.

Our worldview, our behavior, our perception of success and failure professionally and personally, and ultimately, our capacity for happiness springs from the mindset we nurture. Nurturing a growth mindset means facing fears, using lots of commas, and learning how to use the F-word as a bridge to success rather than a barrier.

**People with a fixed mindset use periods:**

*It is what it is.*

*There is nothing else I can do.*

*Overcoming this is impossible.*

*I can't do this.*

**People with a growth mindset use commas:**

*That didn't work, so there must be another way.*

*I can't do it today, but I'll be back tomorrow.*

*I don't know, and I'm determined to find someone who does.*

*I can't do this, yet.*

## **Mindset Influences How and What we Learn**

According to Stanford researcher Carol Dweck, the difference between what she calls a “fixed mindset” and a “growth mindset” determines *what is learned* and *how well it is learned*.

Dweck maintains that a fixed mindset assumes our character, intelligence, and creativity are fixed traits that we have no control over. A growth mindset is the belief that even though we each have unique talents, aptitudes, and interests, our mental traits can change through effort and experience.

Dweck contrasts the two mindsets this way:

*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, excellent 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.*

—Carol Dweck, Stanford University

*“Failure is success  
in progress.”  
-Albert Einstein*

Much of Dweck’s research explores how and how early on in life these mindsets are formed. In a study on hundreds of school-age children, she examined how different types of praise are likely to influence mindset as well as how each mindset impacts learning and academic achievement. Some students were praised for how hard they worked on various tasks while others were praised for their ability.

The best thing about having a growth mindset is that you don't have to be great at something to enjoy learning how to be great at it.

Two critical findings stood out: (1) praise that focuses on effort nurtures a growth mindset while praise that focuses on ability nurtures a fixed mindset, and (2) students with a fixed mindset will reject learning experiences to avoid failure. When students were asked to choose the tasks they wanted to complete, those who were praised for ability chose the most straightforward tasks. They declined to try more challenging tasks that could result in failure or spotlight their weaknesses. To this group, failure meant they were not smart, and the risk of that far outweighed the benefits of learning something new.

Conversely, those who were praised for effort weren't intimidated by the risk of failing difficult tasks. They embraced them. In fact, 90% of them wanted to tackle the *most challenging* tasks. To this group, failure was not a reflection of intellect or ability; instead, it was motivation to keep trying until they mastered a challenge.

The team expanded the research to find out if a fixed or growth mindset influences character traits such as honesty. They asked the students to write about their experience and disclose their scores on the tasks. Forty percent of the students in the ability-praised group inflated their scores to make them look more intelligent. Because a fixed mindset equates failure with intelligence, almost half of these students lied about their scores so that others wouldn't see them as stupid.

Dweck didn't confine her research to school-age children. She examined brain waves of adults to determine how mindset affects the way people receive feedback. Those with a fixed mindset were much more interested in feedback about their ability than they were in feedback about how they could improve their ability. Those with a growth mindset were much more interested in learning how to improve regardless of their current ability. They saw ability as *who they are today* instead of *who they are*. The collective body of this research confirms that mindset is an influential factor in willingness to learn as well as the ability to learn new things.

Dweck's research shows that the view we adopt for ourselves profoundly impacts not only our ability to learn, but also determines how we lead our lives and whether we accomplish the things we value. Mindset changes what people strive for and how they define failure and success. It also changes the most fundamental meaning of effort. In the fixed mindset, effort is a bad thing. Like failure, effort means you're not smart. In the growth mindset, effort is what *makes* you smart. In her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, she writes:

Everyday presents a new opportunity to grow and move a little closer to success.

The key is knowing the difference between who you are today and who you can grow to become.

*I've seen so many people with this one consuming goal of proving themselves — in the classroom, in their careers, and in their relationships. Every situation calls for a confirmation of their intelligence, personality, or character. Every situation is evaluated: Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser? . . .*

*There's another mindset in which these traits are not simply a hand you're dealt and have to live with, always trying to convince yourself and others that you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair of tens. In this mindset, the hand you're dealt is just the starting point for development. This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way — in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments — everyone can change and grow through application and experience.*

### **Organizational Mindset**

This research has been expanded over the last twenty years to explore whether an organization can cultivate a fixed or a growth mindset, and, if so, how it impacts employee engagement and company culture. Any type of workplace environment—academic, business, nonprofits, and others—communicates cultural mindset through shared norms and values. In correlation with growth or fixed mindset, cultures can be defined as those of *genius* or *development*.

A culture of genius is the view that brilliance is the critical ingredient for success. These companies focus on finding the “rock stars,” and people learn quickly to be smart or smarter than the next guy. For example, consider this description of Enron:

*It was a company that prized “sheer brainpower” above all else, where the task of sorting out “intellectual stars” from the “merely super-bright” was the top priority when making hires and promotions. It was an environment where one of the most powerful executives was described as being “so sure that he was the smartest guy in the room that anyone who disagreed with him was summarily dismissed as just not bright enough to “get it.”*

—Description of Enron (McLean & Elkind, 2003)

This organization deemed that people were either intelligent or not, and there was little or no value placed on growth, learning, or effort. Malcolm Gladwell called this mindset the “blueprint for Enron’s culture and demise.” In a piece published in *The New Yorker* a year after the Enron scandal, Gladwell wrote:

*The broader failing of McKinsey and its acolytes at Enron is their assumption that an organization's intelligence is simply a function of the intelligence of its employees. They believe in stars because they don't believe in systems. In a way, that's understandable, because our lives are so obviously enriched by individual brilliance. Groups don't write great novels, and a committee didn't come up with the theory of relativity. But companies work by different rules. They don't just create; they execute and compete and coordinate the efforts of many different people, and the organizations that are most successful at that task are the ones where the system is the star.*

Gladwell maintains that companies with a talent-mindset teach employees to define themselves and the company by that description. Genius creates value. When that image is threatened, employees would rather lie than admit to mistakes that would *invalidate their value*. Any opportunity for learning and self-correcting the system is sabotaged by the system. As Gladwell concludes, “They were there looking for people who had the talent to think outside of the box. It never occurred to them that, if everyone had to think outside the box, maybe it was the box that needed fixing.”

Conversely, cultures of development embody the ability to learn and grow with a focus on resilience. These are the companies that place a value on employees’ abilities to set high goals and take risks to reach them. Consider this very different description of another company that was the target of SEC investigations, Xerox:

*In public statements, executives proudly described their CEO's growth and learning over 35 years—from sales rep to the head of the organization. Managers expected their workers to show a passion and love for learning and expanding knowledge. Instead of proving how smart a person or division was, the company's focus was on facilitating contributions, investing in employees' experiences, developing a larger portion of talent, and intense on-the-job learning.*

—Description of Xerox (George & McLean, 2005; Vollmer, 2004; Knowledge@Wharton, 2005)

When Anne Mulcahy took over Xerox in 2000, it was \$17 billion in debt with a stock value that had plummeted from \$63.69 to \$4.43 a share. On the very day that her appointment was announced, the stock had dropped 15%. But by 2003, it had delivered four straight profitable quarters. Mulcahy hadn't been groomed to become a CEO, and she didn't have a sophisticated financial background.

So how did she turn a company on the verge of collapse into what *Money* magazine called the "great turnaround story of the post-crash era"? Mulcahy attributes the success to a company-wide focus on "intense on-the-job learning" starting at the top. She identified communication as the most important element of the turnaround strategy, and she expected full participation from every employee. "When I became CEO, I spent the first 90 days on planes traveling to various offices and listening to anyone who had a perspective on what was wrong with the company. I think if you spend as much time listening as talking, that's time well spent."

It's easy to see the difference between the genius and the development approach. Xerox created a team focused on its commitment to identifying problems and learning how to fix them together while Enron created a team focused on competing with one another, each striving to be the smartest guy in the room.

Research conducted over the last decade or so has begun to provoke more questions about the interplay between talent and effort and success and failure. This is true in academic and professional settings as well as in personal growth. Understanding that it isn't just ability or intelligence that determines success or failure is the first step in redefining how to make success and failure part of a productive vocabulary. We are all born with an innate curiosity and a love of learning. A growth mindset nurtures both.

So, go ahead and use the F-word. Embrace it. See each failure as something you know now that you didn't know then – evidence of learning. Often, the most insightful discoveries spring out of failure.

*"The biggest problem human beings face is  
not that we aim too high and fail,  
but that we aim too low and succeed."  
Michelangelo*

## 5 Ways to Cultivate a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset isn't something we're born with; it's something we can all learn to nurture and develop. Here are five simple ways to do that:

1. Think of *learning as training the brain*. Remember that the brain is like any other muscle in the body; it gets stronger with more use.

2. Replace the words *failure* and *mistakes* with the words *learning* and *experience*. This shift in perspective turns the fear of failing into opportunities to improve. Eliminating the fear makes trying new things easier and promotes learning from mistakes and successes.

3. Embrace the word "yet." Instead of saying, "I'm not good at that," try, "I'm not good at that yet." That tiny word reinforces the idea that learning is a process and that process is never done.

4. Remember that the brain is not fixed, and neither is our ability to learn. Acknowledge neuroplasticity at work with every new skill, every aha moment, and every goal reached. Remember that we're never done growing cells, pruning cells, cleaning out the dead cells as all designed to help sculpt a better brain.

5. Cultivate grit. Think of grit as setting a goal so big that it can't possibly be reached and then growing into the person meets that big goal. Embrace the challenge with the confidence that each of us has far more control over the brain than anything or anyone else does.