



Perspective/Opinion

Learning about Growth Mindset from our Students

by Marty Muntz, MD

How often have you heard someone say, “I believe my intelligence, personality, or character is inherent and static. Locked-down or fixed. My potential is determined at birth and doesn’t change”? Rarely, if ever, hopefully. But have you worked with a learner or colleague who hides failures, desires to look smart, sticks to what they know, avoids challenging tasks, seems threatened by the success of others, is intensely self-critical, or seems resistant to feedback? These behaviors, which may signify a **fixed mindset** that can limit achievement and ongoing improvement, are not uncommonly observed in our clinical learning environments.

To address this phenomenon, coaches in the [4C \(Coaching for Character, Caring, and Competence\) Program](#) are trained to foster a growth mindset in their students. In her book “Mindset,” Dr. Carol Dweck suggests that learners with a **growth mindset** are likely to confront uncertainties, embrace challenges, learn from failures, and find lessons and inspiration in the success of others. A growth mindset helps one realize that feedback is a statement about current skills – and an opportunity to improve – rather than a personal attack.

Ellen Arndt and Katherine Lumetta, MCW Milwaukee medical students and near-peer coaches in the 4C program, recently developed and taught an interactive faculty development session for our coaches and created the lesson plan for the small group coaching sessions. After learning about this concept, both students and coaches brainstormed barriers to employing a growth mindset during different phases of medical school training and their careers. Unfortunately, yet unsurprisingly, the list is long and includes grades, awards, the hierarchical

structure of our teams, competition for research and other opportunities, and the residency match.

In their coaching groups, students were asked to compare and contrast challenging life experiences they approached with both fixed and growth mindsets – and consider how the outcomes may have changed with reversing their approach. The coaching groups also discussed student behaviors that might signal to teachers and teammates that learners are fully invested in their personal and professional development despite barriers. Our near-peer coaches shared how their perspectives have changed during clerkship and other clinical rotations, providing concrete examples from their experiences.

We are confident that small group sessions like these with trusted peers and faculty coaching starting early in medical school will help our students enter clerkships with the confidence and skills to set and achieve lofty goals. This, coupled with faculty development in Kern programs like KINETIC-3 and 4C to encourage growth mindset, can help transform our learning environments to more fully support our students in their individual journeys to identify and achieve their goals.

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