

# Deficit Thinking and a Growth Mindset

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October 5-6, 2021



# What is deficit thinking?

- Deficit thinking refers to the tendency of educational professionals and others to assume that when students from disadvantaged or marginalized circumstances struggle in school, they do so because their circumstances hinder their academic progress.
- Sometimes this refers to material deficits, such as not having the resources to succeed in school. “She failed because she couldn’t afford the equipment she needed to succeed.”
- Sometimes this gets extended to the erroneous assumption that those in these circumstances “fail because no one taught them the motivation and focus they needed to succeed.”

# Why is deficit thinking #problematic?

- This type of framing, even when made sympathetically, tends to be harmful for students—especially for students from marginalized backgrounds.
- Deficit thinking can lead to educators assuming disadvantaged or marginalized students will do poorly in their classes.
- Students in these circumstances usually receive LESS help than other students. Instructors might view the students as a lost cause and expect less of them.
- Deficit thinking often amounts to blaming the students for their disadvantages.
- Deficit thinking tends to reinforce stereotypes about people from marginalized backgrounds.

# It comes down to framing

- Overall, deficit thinking is a framing device; it amounts to viewing a student's difficulties from a "glass half-empty" perspective.
- Because deficit thinking focuses so much on a student's "deficiencies," while doing little to help with these issues, the student may feel hopeless and overwhelmed, causing them to feel these deficiencies are inherent.
- Educational instructors can assist students with disadvantaged and marginalized circumstances by focusing on their strengths and how to use them to improve their academic accomplishments.

# Examples of deficit thinking

- “Her parents never taught her discipline.”
- “He doesn’t get enough attention at home, so he tries to get attention in class.”
- “The material is so far over their head, so they get frustrated when they try to study.”
- “He has a chaotic home life, so he can’t study enough.”

How can we improve the line of thinking in these situations?

- “Her parents never taught her discipline.”
- “She might benefit from a ‘Study Skills’ tutorial.”
- “He doesn’t get enough attention at home, so he tries to get attention in class.”
- “He needs opportunities in the classroom where he can lead a project or task.”
- “The material is so far over their head, so they get frustrated when they try to study.”
- “We need to make sure they are learning background material they need to understand the concept.”
- “He has a chaotic home life, so he can’t study enough.”
- “He might benefit from a structured environment in class.”

The slide features a decorative border of lightbulbs. On the left, three lightbulbs are drawn in white on a black background. On the right, a single lightbulb is drawn in white on a black background. The central area of the slide is white and contains the title and a list of bullet points. The background of the central area is decorated with a faint, repeating pattern of lightbulbs.

# Deficit thinking and a fixed mindset

- Deficit thinking can cause students to develop a fixed mindset of their academic potential. The fixed mindset assumes there is a limit to one's academic abilities.
- What is the difference between a fixed mindset and deficit thinking?
  - Deficit thinking is a different person's view of a student's ability—usually educational professionals, but can also be other students, friends and family members.
  - A fixed mindset is a student's view of their own ability.
- A fixed mindset leads to students' believing they are incapable of learning material beyond a certain point.



# Fixed mindset vs Growth mindset

- When a student has a fixed mindset, they end up limiting their own potential to learn.
- If the student's perspective is changed to focus on their growth as a student, they usually have better academic outcomes.
- This perspective on one's potential is known as a growth mindset.
- Changing a student's views of their potential from a fixed to growth mindset should be a primary goal of students themselves, and **EVERYONE WHO SUPPORTS THEM.**



# How do we change the fixed mindset perspective?

- Here are examples of what a student with a fixed mindset might say. How can we help them change from a fixed to a growth perspective?
- “I’m not good at math.”
- “I can’t write this type of paper.”
- “My chemistry homework is too hard for me.”
- “My instructor said I solved the problem wrong, so I never will get it right.”
- I don’t like my psychology reading because I have never seen these words before.”

# How do we change the fixed mindset perspective?

- “I’m not good at math.”
- “I will improve my math skills.”
- “I can’t write this type of paper.”
- “I will get the help I need to learn how to write this type of paper”
- “My chemistry homework is too hard for me.”
- “I will learn the background information I need to complete this homework.”
- “My instructor said I solved the problem wrong, so I never will get it right.”
- “I will use this feedback get the next problem correct.”
- “I don’t like my psychology reading because I have never seen these words before.”
- “I will use this reading as an opportunity to build my vocabulary.”



# Key Conclusions

- Deficit thinking can create a state of mind in students that can become an obstacle to their success.
- Embracing a growth mindset can help create a better state of mind for the student.
- Ideally the students, educators, and other supporter of the students will contribute to the growth mindset, but a student's embrace of a growth mindset is also important to help combat the deficit thinking of others.
- A growth mindset takes practice; we all fall into a fixed mindset. It's important to not get discouraged when this happens.