

Cultivating a Growth Mindset in Recovery

“And God said, Love your enemy, & I obeyed him, & loved myself”

Khalil Gibran

A client shared this quote by Khalil Gibran in session this week. It has become the sentiment or ideal that has permeated many of the sessions this week, both group and individual. My clients struggle with many things in their recovery journey. This week has been highlighted by struggles with self-forgiveness and perfectionism. Many people seem to hold on to the attitude that recovery is a Pass/Fail exercise and not a journey. They feel like they will “never get it”, will “never be able to stop” or have “failed at recovery” because they have experienced slips or set-backs in their recovery.

In my view, recovery is not a Pass/Fail event but a journey. I am a believer in the growth mindset. We all make mistakes and instead of judging ourselves as failures we are better served by adopting a growth mindset and using our mistakes or lack of success as learning experiences. Author and researcher Carol Dweck (www.mindsetonline.com) has done groundbreaking research on mindset. She defines a fixed mindset as one in which our basic qualities are fixed traits.

As this applies to recovery, I see clients exhibit a fixed mindset when they say things like, “I just can’t quit.” “Recovery just won’t work for me.” “I can’t not act out.” The fixed mindset is the negative self talk that pervades the addict’s mind. You are not good enough. You will never be able to do this. You slipped, you will never get this. You are failing at recovery. In therapy we try to identify this negative self talk, or fixed mindset and reframe it with the truth, reality or a growth mindset. For example, a fixed mindset thought of “I will always be a failure” is countered by evidence of past success. When we add the idea of a growth mindset to this process, we reframe the thinking into something like, “Ok, you had a slip last week. What can we learn from the slip that you can use positively the next time you are having a craving?”

A growth mindset is one in which a person believes that their abilities are not set in stone. They can learn from mistakes and build skills and talents. When we have a growth mindset, we will work harder to persevere through setbacks and cultivate our own resilience. I know my clients are starting to reframe their own mindsets when I can hear it in their feedback to other group members. I might hear them say something like “Thanks for telling us about your slip. There is no need to beat yourself up about it. It is done and we have to move forward. What do you think you can learn from the slip?”

How can we incorporate a growth mindset into our recovery?

1. Work to see slips as learning opportunities. Instead of beating ourselves up about a slip or a relapse, spend time processing the slip with a therapist, sponsor or other recovery support. Work to see each slip as an opportunity to learn and add something to our recovery. If we just beat ourselves up about a slip, it is a self-defeating fixed mindset problem. If you can come out of a slip with new information about your triggers, distorted thinking or new tools you can use, you have moved into a growth mindset.
2. Give yourself credit for trying. Recovery is not a pass/fail experience. It is not something that happens overnight. As long as you are working hard on your program and recovery, you are moving in the right direction. Focus on the positive things you are doing. Focus on what you learn from the process and try not to judge yourself too harshly.

3. Be open to the feedback of others. One of the greatest blessings of a recovery group is the feedback from others in recovery. Learn to listen to what they have to say without defensiveness. Constructive criticism and the feedback from others who care about us are wonderful additions to our personal growth. If we get defensive when we hear criticism, we are stuck in a fixed mindset. If we can hear the feedback, listen to it and process it, we are moving into growth. What others have to say may not be appropriate or fit us, but by considering feedback without defensiveness we might learn great things about ourselves.

There are numerous other strategies for integrating a growth mindset into our recovery. These are a few simple suggestions that I have found help my clients start on their journey from self-criticism and blame to growth and learning. The fundamental 12 step tenant of Progress not Perfection sums up the growth mindset perfectly. We are always growing and learning. If we can learn to learn from our mistakes, the journey can serve to boost our self-esteem and resilience as opposed to fuel our negative self-beliefs.

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