



# Exploring Mindset through Outdoor Learning - How to Move Beyond, “but I can’t!”

by Kate O’Brien



# “But, I can’t!”

This is a statement frequently uttered

by participants we work with on outdoor programmes. I began to wonder what this actually meant and how to move beyond those three small, but powerful, words. My journey took me to the urban wilds of London to spend two years studying towards a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology. Subsequently I carried out a study considering the impact of a series of interventions underpinned by psychology, within an outdoor programme. This article considers what we can do as practitioners to support young people in understanding the psychological processes involved with challenge, so they are best able to make decisions to promote success in their lives. Positive Psychology (PP) is a branch of psychology which seeks to use psychological theory, research and interventions to recognize and develop human potential. Recent literature suggests that finding congruent themes from within psychology and outdoor personal development (OPD) may support our understanding of some of the processes underlying the success of outdoor courses, and may also strengthen the impact of programmes. It has also been suggested that the impact of OPD courses may be enhanced if instructors have an awareness of the factors which contribute to particular areas of psychological development, and explicitly focus upon these<sup>1</sup>.

When studying PP, Mindset theory<sup>2</sup> stood out as being particularly useful to practitioners working in OPD. Mindset theory offers a model representing the way in which underlying beliefs regarding the self can transform into powerful motivational processes to construct significant patterns of cognition (thinking), affect (feeling) and behaviour (doing) in young people. The theory explains how different meaning systems, and subsequent self regulatory processes, are created in achievement situations, depending upon a person’s beliefs regarding the fixed or malleable nature of intelligence, personality and character. Such patterns are particularly significant when people are faced with challenge or failure.

Dweck describes two different Mindsets. Someone who has a Fixed Mindset believes that intelligence, personality and character are fixed from birth, therefore these are uncontrollable entities which they can’t change. This creates a meaning system focused on proving oneself, and the pursuit of tasks which will reaffirm this pre-set ability. Challenges are viewed as a threat to their abilities, if they cannot meet them, failure becomes a final measure of aptitude, and application

of effort is seen as a measure of their incapability in that area. Subsequently those with a Fixed Mindset tend to avoid challenges for fear of revealing weaknesses, give up easily, become distracted and withdraw effort when things become difficult. Conversely a person with a Growth Mindset believes that intelligence, personality and character are malleable, therefore open to change and development under personal volition. People with a Growth Mindset seek out challenges seeing them as opportunities to learn. They also see effort as the switch which can turn on their abilities, believing it to be a necessary ingredient for success. This means when things become difficult a person with a Growth Mindset will tend to adopt new strategies, find solutions, apply more effort and use self monitoring to overcome the challenge. It is important to note that Mindsets can be context dependent, with people holding variable beliefs in different life domains, however people generally trend one way or the other.



There have been huge research efforts<sup>3</sup> in the past 20 years to create the existing body of evidence suggesting that Mindsets do matter, they have huge implications for creating successful outcomes in young peoples’ lives, and crucially, they can be changed<sup>4</sup>.

Mindset presents a useful tool for outdoor practitioners who already work in a context where a variety of challenges come with the territory, personal effort is usually required for success, coping strategies are tested and opportunities for reflection, feedback and processing of the experience are frequently encouraged. Outdoor courses offer just the challenging circumstances required to illuminate the Mindset responses thereby creating a perfect opportunity for development.

An understanding of Mindset theory and ability to facilitate this explicitly could maximise the strengths of this educational method by providing some underpinning scientific evidence regarding personal growth, as well as offering empirically validated intervention techniques which compliment the outdoor experience and strengthen the learning. Facilitators may be able to intervene in real time situations if they have an understanding of how each Mindset can play out, as well as teaching and encouraging the Growth Mindset throughout the course.

My study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of exactly this. Could teaching instructors to use Mindset interventions within an OPD course increase the impact of the course, in terms of self efficacy, resilience and change in Mindset? Around two hundred students, aged 11-14 took part in the study during 5 day OPD courses at The Outward Bound Trust’s Ullswater Centre. The half who made up the control group experienced a standard Outward Bound course, while the other half making up the experimental

group experienced the Outward Bound course with a series of Mindset interventions interweaved throughout the programme. Both groups experienced similar adventurous activities and instructors were similarly experienced. A quantitative methodology was employed, using validated psychological measures pre-course, post-course and one month post-course. As with any study there were limitations, however the results were fascinating and showed some significant trends. Both the control groups and experimental groups significantly increased their self efficacy as expected. However, the most important finding may surprise. Only the experimental group, who experienced the Mindset interventions throughout their course significantly increased their resilience and moved towards a growth mindset. The results confirmed positive behavioural results experienced by myself and reported by the instructors using the interventions.

For the first time the study provides important evidence that combining a Mindset intervention within an OPD course can increase the impact of the course in terms of resilience and change in Mindset, potentially leading to sustained positive behaviour change. This supports growing evidence to suggest that OPD courses may be enhanced by understanding key psychological theory and may also offer advances in knowledge into the intricacies of the process by which OPD courses are able to impact on certain areas of psychological development.

If participants are explicitly encouraged towards the belief that they have personal control over their development, gain an understanding of the utility of effort when facing challenges and have built up a bank of transferable strategies to use when facing setbacks, they are more likely to feel resilient and display resilient behaviours in future situations. In this respect Mindset may offer outdoor practitioners a well researched and logical framework to use when processing challenging experiences with young people, which can contribute to enhancing resilience.

Below are some ideas which we have developed to introduce a Growth Mindset to participants and to encourage personal reflection and development throughout the course. These

were used successfully in the study and are based on Dweck's framework of increasing **awareness** of the two Mindsets and one's personal tendencies, realisation that once we are aware we have a choice which Mindset to adopt, and finally we can make efforts to **change** our Mindset.

**Introductory Session** – students were introduced to the two Mindsets using laminated cartoons (see <http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/flourishing-lives.php>). In small groups students were asked to consider how each Mindset could affect their experiences at Outward Bound. Instructors stressed that there are two ways of thinking in challenging situations, and introduce the course as an opportunity to adopt a growth mindset, sharing what that would mean.



**Personal Shields** – Once students had been introduced to their programme for the week they were asked to complete a personal shield (this could be either on paper, or represented on the ground outside). They considered the following questions: Something you will have to work hard at this week? This was discussed as a good opportunity for challenge, effort, pushing oneself and adopting a growth mindset. Secondly they were asked, something you will find easy this week? This was discussed as an opportunity to support others. The two questions can be used to provoke discussion about the course, individual differences and the importance of supporting others in their challenges. Later the final two

boxes of the shield were used to reflect on progress e.g. what strategies did you use when finding something difficult? Was this effective? Which activity was more rewarding, the easy one, or something you had to work hard at?

**Mindset Cycle** – Students were introduced to the idea that how they view situations (beliefs) will affect their emotions and thinking, which will in turn affect behaviour and ultimately the outcomes they experience. This can be introduced as a visual model using a simplistic cycle format representing how each Mindset response can lead to vastly different outcomes and future experiences. This was most effectively facilitated using a high impact activity with quick results e.g. getting over the commando wall, or similarly challenging problem solving activity which may evoke a mixed Mindset response from the group. The cycle can be drawn out in chalk or on paper. Again this activity was used to set up and promote the idea of being open to challenges, application of effort and employing different coping strategies when challenged (these

may be mental, physical or involve getting the required level of support from the group).

**Two Brain Model** - Students looked at the effects of the two Mindsets in greater detail using the two brain model (Dweck, 2000). They were asked to consider the first three elements of the model (“embracing challenges”, “persist in the face of setbacks” and “see effort as the path to mastery”) in relation to the next adventure they will be experiencing. They brainstormed what the team would be saying and doing in a Fixed versus a Growth Mindset. They also highlighted what strategies the team could use when they find things difficult. This was returned to after the adventure to look at real examples of when people showed each Mindset, and what strategies were most successful. They also began to consider how these strategies could be generalised to future situations.

**Mindset detectives** – A more individualised intervention involves pairing people up at the start of a day with the intention that they would become “Mindset detectives” for each other. Students can focus on their partners responses to situations throughout the day and provide feedback in a facilitated session at the end.

**Transfer of Learning** – students can build up a group and individual “strategies bank” containing any useful transferable strategies they have used when challenged on the course (this can be done on a flipchart, or on post it notes in a box, or any other method of recording as long as they have something written to refer to at the end). Students in the study then completed an action plan based on using these personal strategies in new challenging situations at home or school in the few months after the course.

The study carried out suggests that simply taking part in an outdoor programme alone is not enough to increase resilience and change Mindset. Something deeper is required, arguably a series of progressive challenges undertaken in a supportive environment, combined with structured facilitation which focuses on the psychology of this area of development. Mindset may offer one theoretical model based on extensive research within the psychology field which can provide outdoor practitioners with a framework to use in supporting young people to develop their understanding of the psychological processes involved with overcoming challenges in their lives. ■

Example of how an instructor facilitated moving from fixed mindset thinking to growth mindset thinking:



### Notes

1. Ewert, A., & Yoshino, A. (2011). The influence of short-term adventure-based experiences on levels of resilience. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 11(1), 35-50
2. Dweck, C. S. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation personality and development*. Francis and Taylor: Hove
3. E.g. Blackwell, L. S., Trzesniewski K. H., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Implicit theories of intelligence predict achievement across an adolescent transition: A longitudinal study and an intervention. *Child Development*, 78(1), 246- 263
4. Dweck, 2008. Can personality be changed? *The Role of Beliefs in Personality and Change*. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17, 391-394



### About the Author

Kate studied Outdoor Education in the Community at Strathclyde University before working at a number of centres and programmes within the UK and abroad. She has worked in personal development for 14 years, with some time out here and there to travel and pursue personal adventures. Kate recently completed a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology and is passionate about enhancing practice by implementing learning from this widely researched area.

Please contact Kate if you would like further information or to read a full report of the study. Email: [kateobrien29@hotmail.com](mailto:kateobrien29@hotmail.com)

**Photos:** all from the author