

2

changing your brain puts you in charge

for you to know

As a teenager, your brain is supercharged to learn, change, and grow in new ways. Teens have more than one hundred billion neurons to work with—not bad for a brain that weighs about as much as ten apples! What most teens don't realize is that building new connections in your brain doesn't just help with developing skills, like swimming, playing a sport, or learning the saxophone. Building new connections can also change parts of who you are, like your feelings, thoughts, and actions: how shy you are, how sad you feel, or how you cope with stress and struggles in your life.

Plus, you have a lot of control over how your brain grows and changes. You can decide the kinds of skills to develop, depending on which of your thoughts, feelings, and actions you most want to grow.

Everything you think and do helps build new connections in your brain. Believe it or not, every thought and feeling you have lives in your brain. Thoughts, by the way, are words we say to ourselves, like *I totally failed that math test* or *What if nobody likes me?* And feelings exist in our body, like fear, when our heart speeds up and we start to sweat, or sadness, when we feel heavy and tired all over. Our thoughts tend to come hand in hand with feelings. So, when someone thinks *I'll never make real friends*, they feel sadness, and a new connection forms between neurons in their brain. These connections between neurons lead to our actions in the real world.

In this case, a teenager who thinks *I'll never make real friends* or feels sadness may stay at home instead of going to school. It's tough to do much when your thoughts and feelings are so blue. Well, guess what happens in the brain when that teen stays in bed and keeps feeling sad? The connection between sadness and certain thoughts—like *I'll never make real friends*—grows even stronger. Those neurons keep talking to each other and build up larger links over time. That teen *learns* to act in certain ways (like staying home from school), even if those actions aren't what they really, truly want.

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But good news: You can actually change connections between neurons. By acting differently, you can create new thoughts and feelings, which means new connections in your brain. And when neurons form new connections, your personality can change. These new connections can support different types of thoughts and feelings in response to stress. As they grow stronger, they can help you learn to cope with life's challenges in better ways.

Maria's story gives us one example:

Even when things feel tough, change is always possible. I learned this through my own personal experience. Last school year started out hard for me. I felt really low-energy and down all the time. Eventually, I stopped talking to other kids, I quit my soccer team, and I just stayed at home most afternoons. Somehow, I stopped doing everything that made me, well, me. It made me really sad, but I didn't feel like I had the energy for those things anymore. So I decided something had to change. First, I talked to my mom about what was going on. I also talked to a counselor at my school. We made a plan together: I would start doing three positive things every day—eat my favorite snack, go to soccer practice, and talk to at least one friend. My counselor told me that doing these things would help me build new, more positive connections in my brain. It was hard. I mean, some days I felt better, and that was awesome! But I didn't always feel up for it. Some days, I wanted to just stay in bed and do nothing all day, even though I knew that would make me feel worse. But I kept reminding myself: changing your brain is hard work, and it might take time for those new connections to stick. After a few months, I did start to feel more like myself. I wanted to do fun things. That experience taught me not to give up on myself: change is possible, even when you feel like it isn't. And support from others can go a long way in helping you change into the person you want to be.

As Maria's story shows, people aren't stuck being sad, low-energy, or lonely. You can always change how you act, which in turn changes your thoughts and feelings. This process can help you become the person you want to be.

Everybody's brain is a work in progress.

for you to do

Everyone has moments when they feel really stressed out, or when life's struggles seem like too much to deal with. Think about the last time you felt like this. It might have been at school, around friends, or on your own.

What was going on for you during that time? Write about what happened to make that moment so stressful for you.

What is a *thought* that you had during that stressful moment? (Remember: thoughts are the things we say to ourselves—our inner voice.)

I was thinking: _____

What is a *feeling* you felt during that stressful moment? (For example: sad, angry, anxious, happy, worried, calm, jealous, lonely)

Inside, I was feeling: _____

What were you *doing* during that stressful moment? (For example: reading a book, texting a friend, staying home, crying, laughing, doing jumping jacks)

In that stressful moment, I was: _____

Now, think about what you've learned about the brain, personality, and people's ability to change. If this type of moment happens in the future, what could you think (or say) to yourself to remember that you (or what is happening) might change? (Remember: a thought is only helpful if you really think it's true!)

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A helpful thought might be: _____

When you think this helpful thought, what feeling do you think you might have?

After thinking this helpful thought and having this feeling, what might you do differently to help yourself deal with the stress?

Compare and contrast the thoughts, feelings, and actions in the two examples above. What are the biggest differences?

If you practice the helpful thought, feeling, and action above, how do you think you might change over time? For example, do you think the thought will get easier to think? Do you think the thought might happen automatically after some practice? What would this mean for your feelings and actions?

more to do

Everyone's brains are constantly growing and changing, so almost everyone has a personal "change story" to tell—especially about learning to deal with stress and struggles in different ways. In this activity, we'd like you to learn more about the change story of an adult close to you.

First, pick an adult to interview (like a teacher, parent, mentor, or coach—someone you look up to). Write that person's name here:

Next, ask them these questions, and write down their answers.

When you were my age, what were the biggest struggles you were facing? What were some of the stressful things you were dealing with?

How did you deal with stress and struggles when you were my age?

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Do you deal with struggles differently today? If so, what are the biggest differences?

What has helped you learn to deal with stress in new ways?

When you think about the new ways you've learned to deal with stress, what changes make you most proud?

If you could go back and give advice to your younger self, what would you say to let yourself know that things can change—including how you deal with stress in the future?

3

beliefs that do (and don't) boost brain change

for you to know

Teens (and adults!) tend to hold one of two types of beliefs—which brain scientists call *mindsets*—about their ability to grow, change, and bounce back after stress. These two belief types are called *fixed mindsets* and *growth mindsets*. While people with a fixed mindset tend to view personal traits like shyness, sadness, and loneliness as set in stone or near impossible to change, people with a growth mindset tend to view those same traits as changeable over time (by putting in effort, trying new strategies if needed, and finding people to support you).

Here are three important facts to know about how mindsets can shape your everyday experiences:

Fact 1: *Fixed mindsets and growth mindsets trigger very different thoughts about yourself and your ability to cope with stress.*

Fixed mindsets trigger thoughts like *You're stuck the way you are* (depressed, a “worrier,” unlikable); *you will never change*, and *there's nothing you can do about it*. When you're anxious, sad, or overwhelmed—*Too bad*, a fixed-mindset thought might say. *You'd better get used to it. That's just how you are*. Fixed-mindset thoughts are exaggerated and untrue, but it's easy to fall into believing them now and then, especially when we're at our most vulnerable.

Growth mindsets trigger thoughts that tell us that change is possible, and that setbacks and stress mean opportunities for growth and change. They remind us of the scientific truth: practicing new ways of thinking helps you grow new neural connections in your brain, which opens the door for change in your feelings and actions.

activity 3 * beliefs that do (and don't) boost brain change

Fact 2: *Mindsets tend to shift over time (from fixed to growth and back again), so almost everyone experiences both fixed- and growth-mindset thoughts at different points in time.*

You've probably had both fixed-mindset thoughts and growth-mindset thoughts before. In fact, you can have both types of thoughts in the same day (even in the same moment!). This is to be expected, because our mindsets aren't set in stone; instead, they evolve over time and are shaped by the situations we're in. For example, when you experience stress or failure, you are more vulnerable to falling into fixed-mindset thoughts—which are usually harsher and less forgiving than growth-mindset thoughts.

Fact 3: *Because they trigger such different thoughts, fixed and growth mindsets lead to very different actions.*

It's important to know the difference between your fixed- and growth-mindset thoughts, because they tell you to act in totally opposite ways.

Fixed-mindset thoughts tell you to give up when life gets tough, and to ignore or avoid things that upset you. These thoughts are the ones that tell you *Don't bother volunteering in math class; you'll just get the answer wrong and embarrass yourself* or *There's no point in going to that party; you're awful at making new friends.*

Fixed-mindset thoughts keep you in your comfort zone—so it makes sense that you'd want to listen to them. If you give up in situations where you may fall short, or pretend stressful things aren't there, you probably feel relieved ... but it doesn't last long. Unfortunately, in the long run, these strategies are guaranteed to backfire. Listening to your fixed-mindset thoughts stops brain change before it even begins. The more you

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act in line with fixed-mindset thoughts, the less you will try out new ways of coping. You'll miss out on chances to problem solve or seek support when obstacles come your way. All of this prevents your brain from forming different connections and growing in helpful ways.

On the other hand, growth-mindset thoughts tell you that things may be tough, but you can problem solve, persevere, and seek support anyway. In other words, stress and struggle are actually opportunities for growth and change. Growth-mindset thoughts are the ones that might tell you *It may be embarrassing if I say the wrong answer in class, but my teacher can help me solve it if I don't get it right away;* or *I'm worried I'll feel alone at that party, but maybe if I practice talking to new people, it'll get a little easier.*

Listening to growth-mindset thoughts can be intimidating, because it means putting yourself in situations that are stressful (at first) or where you're not sure you'll succeed. But it also makes you more likely to learn new ways to solve problems, stand up to your fears, get the support you need, and create different brain connections when you weren't sure you could.

Fixed mindsets trigger thoughts like *I can't change, so I won't bother trying.* Listening to these thoughts makes you feel safe in the short run, but they prevent you from growing over time.

Growth mindsets trigger thoughts like *Change is hard, but it is possible, simply because of how the human brain works.* Listening to these thoughts can feel uncomfortable or scary in the short run, but they make positive change possible.

activity 3 * beliefs that do (and don't) boost brain change

for you to do

Below are examples of setbacks that many teenagers experience. After reading Jared's story, brainstorm what a fixed mindset might say and tell each of these other teenagers to do. Then, brainstorm what a growth mindset might say and tell each to do.

Jared loses a tennis match at his first major tournament. He feels really disappointed in himself. He has team tryouts next month, but he's really not sure if he's going to get a spot on the team.

Jared's fixed mindset might say: I've proved I'm bad at tennis! There's no way I'll make the team if I didn't win this match.

And tell him: I should stay home instead of embarrassing myself at tryouts. If I stop trying, at least others won't see me fail.

Jared's growth mindset might say: After playing this match, I know there are a few things I can improve before tryouts next month. I still have a few weeks, so I bet my serve could get a lot better!

And tell him: I should see if anyone I know would be willing to practice with me this month.

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Carla gets a D on a major science test. She feels devastated. There's another big test in three weeks, which gives her a chance to improve her grade in the class.

Carla's fixed mindset might say: _____

And tell her: _____

Carla's growth mindset might say: _____

And tell her: _____

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It's lunchtime on the first day of school. At her last school, Kiki usually sat at a table by herself. Kiki tries to find a place to sit in the lunchroom, but she's afraid no one will want her at their table. She sees a few people from her history class at one table to her right.

Kiki's fixed mindset might say: _____

And tell her: _____

Kiki's growth mindset might say: _____

And tell her: _____

Auditions for the school play are tomorrow. Dan sees himself as a pretty shy person. He has never acted before, but he thinks it might be fun. If he does try out for the play, there's a good possibility he won't get a part.

Dan's fixed mindset might say:

And tell him:

Dan's growth mindset might say:

And tell him:

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A classmate is having a big birthday party this week, and Nicholas is invited. Nicholas wants to make new friends in his grade, but he typically avoids these parties because he gets nervous talking to large groups of people.

Nicholas's fixed mindset might say:

And tell him:

Nicholas's growth mindset might say:

And tell him:

more to do

Think about a time when you were scared or nervous about doing something important to you; for example, trying out for a sports team or a play, starting a conversation with a new (potential) friend, or performing or presenting in front of an audience.

Share as many details about the situation as you can. Focus on how you were feeling, and the thoughts you were having when you were feeling the most scared or nervous.

Now imagine that a friend of yours is facing the same situation you just talked about.

What is a fixed-mindset thought your friend might have in that moment? (Remember: fixed-mindset thoughts tell you to give up when life gets tough, and to ignore or avoid things that upset you.)

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What is a growth-mindset thought your friend might have in this moment?

(Remember: growth mindset leads to thoughts like *Change is hard, but it is possible, simply because of how the human brain works.*)

What advice would you give your friend to help them listen to their growth-mindset thought instead of their fixed-mindset thought?

4 minding your mindsets

for you to know

So far, you have learned that your brain is capable of incredible change and growth. As you build new connections in your brain through your actions, your thoughts change as a result. This means that growth-mindset thoughts are more likely to reflect reality than fixed-mindset thoughts. Nevertheless, it's easy to fall into fixed-mindset thinking ... and even start to believe those thoughts. In fact, this is an extremely common experience.

For this reason, it's critical to really get to know your own fixed-mindset thoughts. If you know how to spot them, you can talk back and stand up to them. You can replace them with growth-mindset thoughts that are truer, kinder, and *much* more helpful.

First, it's useful to start noticing situations that make you more likely to think and believe your fixed-mindset thoughts. For example, many people tend to think fixed-mindset thoughts when they are worried about making a mistake. Others notice these thoughts when they feel judged or criticized, when they are trying something hard for the first time, or when they're coping with extra life stress overall. You may notice more fixed-mindset thoughts in certain settings. For some people, school and academics can trigger lots of fixed-mindset thoughts (like *I'm stupid* or *I can't ever understand this*). For others, social settings and peers trigger more fixed-mindset thoughts (like *I just can't make real friends* or *I'm just unlikable*).

Second, fixed-mindset thoughts tend to include certain phrases that can make them easier to spot. For instance, these thoughts tend to involve lots of "I can't's." As in *I can't do this, so there's no point in trying*. These "I can't" thoughts tell you to avoid any and all possible setbacks or challenges. Another common phrase in fixed-mindset thoughts: "I am's" (and "I'll always be's"). As in *I am a failure* (or *I am a mess, I am awful, I am unlikable*). By saying you simply "are" one way or another, these thoughts can lead you

activity 4 * minding your mindsets

to believe that you're stuck permanently in place. This is how fixed-mindset thoughts can mask the control you really have over your actions, emotions, and thoughts.

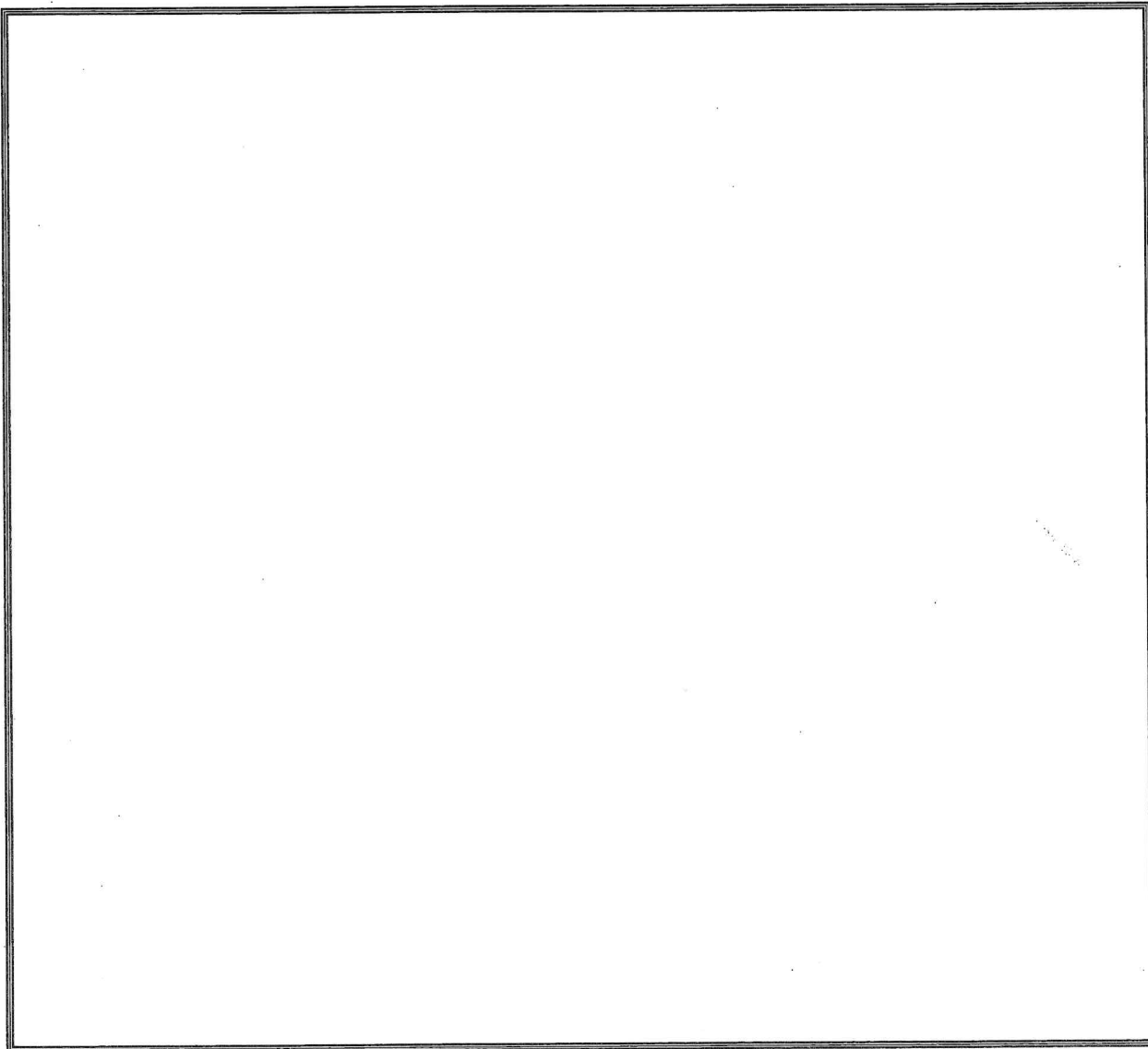
So, to summarize: Learning to spot your fixed-mindset thoughts is a critical first step toward standing up to them. Noticing the situations and phrases connected to your own fixed-mindset thoughts is a great place to begin.

for you to do

Everyone experiences fixed- and growth-mindset thoughts at one time or another. A key step toward acting opposite to your fixed-mindset thoughts is noticing when they appear. Creating an image of your fixed mindset may help with this. It can give you some place, image, or picture of *who* and *what* you're standing up to when fixed-mindset thoughts emerge.

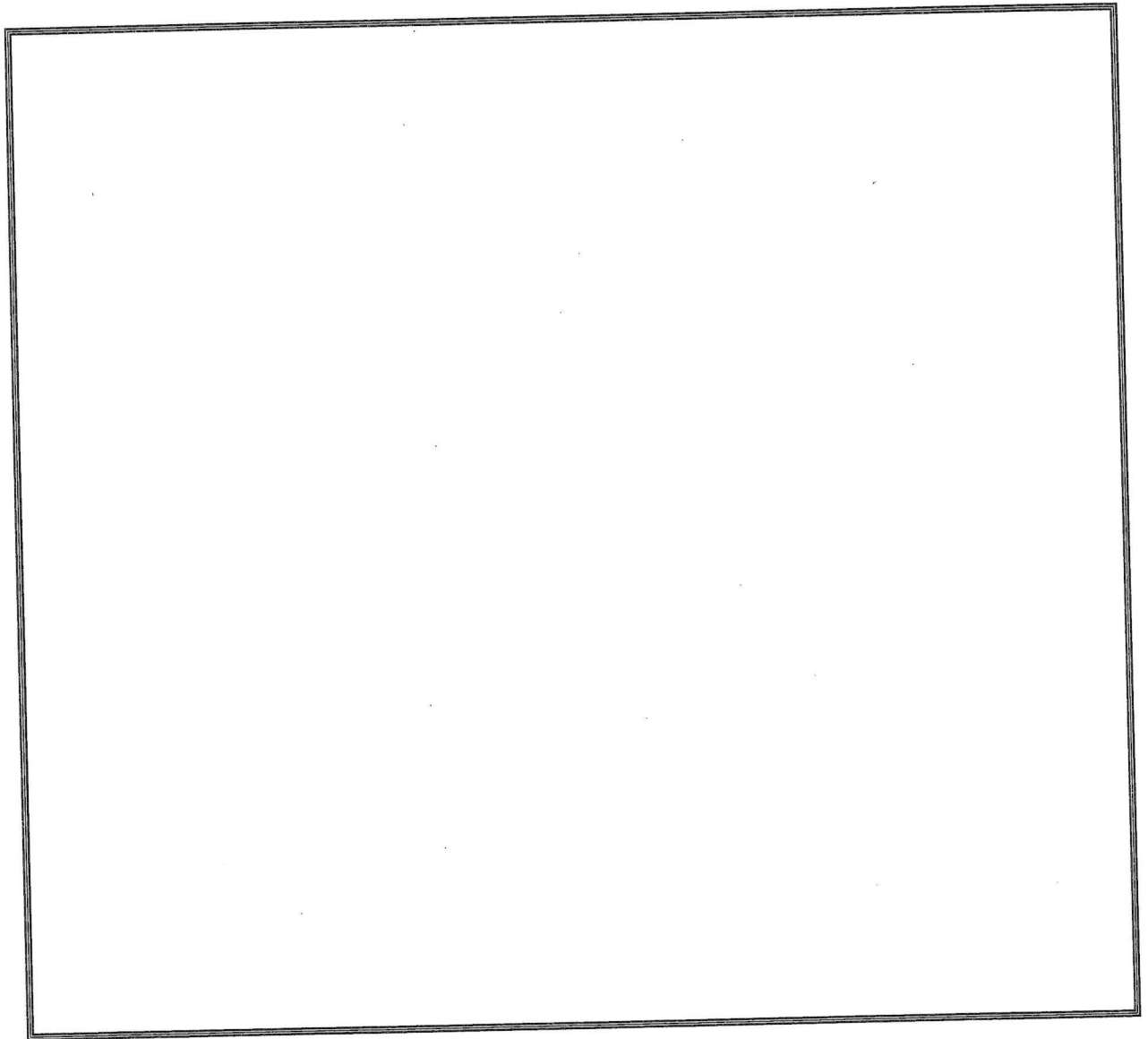
activity 4 * minding your mindsets

Name and draw your fixed mindset: the part of you that tells you to avoid and stay away from stress, to give up when things are uncertain, and to avoid things that scare you.



activity 4 * minding your mindsets

Name and draw your growth mindset: the part of you that reminds you that you're capable of change, even if things are hard in the moment—and the part that stands up to your fixed mindset.



more to do

Once you have a better idea of what these fixed-mindset and growth-mindset thoughts look and sound like, it's important to figure out when and where they tend to happen for you. That's the next important step for shifting these fixed-mindset thoughts into growth-mindset thoughts.

At the website for this book, <http://www.newharbinger.com/45571>, you can download a log to use for keeping track of when and where you catch yourself having fixed-mindset thoughts. Print enough copies so you can track for three days, and try to do at least one thought one per day. Here's an example:

Date: October 4

Location: In the locker room

What happened? I thought about trying out for swim team, but I didn't make it last season.

What was your fixed-mindset thought? I didn't make it last time, which means I'm not a good swimmer. I can't make the team anyway, so why try?

How did you feel when this happened? I felt pretty hopeless—like I would never make the team no matter how hard I tried.

What did you end up doing? I told the coach I wasn't trying out for the team this year.

After you've kept track for three days, look back at your log, and answer these questions:

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When do fixed-mindset thoughts tend to show up for you? What is happening during these times?

Where do fixed-mindset thoughts tend to show up for you? (Example: *Every time I pass the locker room by the pool.*)

Now pick one of your fixed-mindset thoughts from your log and write it down here:

What might your growth mindset say to stand up to this thought?

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How do you think you would feel if you had this thought instead of what your fixed mindset told you?

What do you think you would do differently if you had this thought instead of what your fixed mindset told you?

5

from beliefs to behavior change through goals

for you to know

Knowing your power to change and spotting your fixed-mindset thoughts are two critical steps toward positive everyday change. But how do you make the jump from “knowing” to “acting” toward the change you hope to see?

This activity will share some key steps to creating the changes you care about—specifically, by setting growth-mindset goals and making action plans for achieving them.

Growth-mindset goals have these important features.

They are stated positively. Focus on how you would most like to grow, act, or improve, instead of what you want to stop doing or feeling. For example, “I want to become *less* lonely” is a negatively stated goal; “I want to connect with people *more* by texting one good friend every day” is a positively stated goal. It’s pretty hard to take action toward that negative goal, but the positive goal creates a clearer path toward change.

They set you up to ACT when they are achievable, concrete, and trackable so you can tell when you’ve met them. Ask yourself these questions to check if your goal fits the ACT targets:

- Is your goal achievable? In other words, can you reach this goal in the near future? Many teens find it easiest to think about long-term, large, and faraway goals, like “I want to be successful in life” or “I want to make a difference in the world.” These are great goals but, in reality, reaching them means first reaching many (many!) smaller goals over time. Shifting your focus to smaller, in-between goals can help you take real steps toward long-term change.

- Is your goal concrete? Is it focused and specific enough for you to take action toward achieving it? (Example: “I would like to practice piano three times a week this month” instead of “I want to be a better musician.”) Making your goals more concrete gives you a better idea of how to get where you want to be.
- Is your goal trackable? Can you keep track of whether you have made the concrete changes you planned, at the *times* you planned to make them? (Example: “I’ll offer to help my mother out twice each weekend” instead of “I want to improve my relationship with my family this year.”) Setting trackable goals makes it easier to tell when you’ve accomplished what you’ve set out to do.

They need to matter to you. They should reflect what you care about—whether that is connecting with friends or family, being kinder to yourself, or trying a new challenge. This helps you stay motivated to achieve them.

They involve a plan for spotting and coping with obstacles. Making change is challenging, and setbacks are part of the process. Sticking to growth-mindset goals means problem solving obstacles instead of avoiding them—by seeking support from others and thinking of new solutions—to get back on track and make the change you care about.

So overall, growth-mindset goals are stated positively, help you act, focus on what matters to you, and include problem-solving plans for when setbacks emerge. This may sound complicated, but creating growth-mindset goals takes practice, and struggles and setbacks are often part of the process.

for you to do

It can be tricky to create growth-mindset goals at first, but it gets much easier with practice. Read these examples, and then help each of the teenagers below create a growth-mindset goal that sets them up to act.

Aaron's goal: *I don't want to make a D in science class anymore.*

Rephrase Aaron's goal so it is stated positively: I want to do well in science class.

Is Aaron's new goal achievable in the near future? Tell why, or why not. Doing well in the class might be a longer-term goal. There are other interim goals to work toward, like setting up and keeping to a study schedule, before he reaches that long-term goal.

If Aaron's goal is not achievable, rewrite it to be more achievable: I will get help from my science teacher.

Is Aaron's new goal concrete? Tell why, or why not. "Getting help" from his science teacher is not very specific and could mean many different things.

If Aaron's goal is not concrete, rewrite it to be more concrete: I will get help from my science teacher during office hours.

Is Aaron's new goal trackable? Tell why, or why not. No, because his goal isn't specific about how often or how many times he's hoping to get help from his teacher during office hours.

If Aaron's goal is not trackable, rewrite it to be more trackable: I will get help from my science teacher during office hours once a week.

Why do you think Aaron's goal matters to him? Aaron wants to improve his grades in science class so he can feel better about how he's doing in school.

Name two people who can help Aaron with his goal, and tell how they can help:

1. His science teacher can help him during office hours.
2. His friend Caleb can encourage him to visit during office hours, even if he doesn't want to one week.

Now help these other teenagers create growth-mindset goals.

Macy's goal: *I want to feel less isolated from other people.*

Rephrase Macy's goal so it is stated positively: _____

Is Macy's new goal achievable in the near future? Tell why, or why not. _____

If Macy's goal is not achievable, rewrite it to be more achievable: _____

Is Macy's new goal concrete? Tell why, or why not. _____

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If Macy's goal is not concrete, rewrite it to be more concrete: _____

Is Macy's new goal trackable? Tell why, or why not. _____

If Macy's goal is not trackable, rewrite it to be more trackable: _____

Why do you think Macy's goal matters to her?

Name two people who can help Macy with her goal, and tell how they can help:

1. _____

2. _____

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Will's goal: *I want to be less shy in class.*

Rephrase Will's goal so it is stated positively: _____

Is Will's new goal achievable in the near future? Tell why, or why not. _____

If Will's goal is not achievable, rewrite it to be more achievable: _____

Is Will's new goal concrete? Tell why, or why not. _____

If Will's goal is not concrete, rewrite it to be more concrete: _____

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Is Will's new goal trackable? Tell why, or why not. _____

If Will's goal is not trackable, rewrite it to be more trackable: _____

Why do you think Will's goal matters to him?

Name two people who can help Will with his goal, and tell how they can help:

1. _____

2. _____

more to do

Now that you've practiced helping others create their growth mindset goals, let's try it out on a goal you would like to reach.

Write down a goal that matters a lot to you. Make sure it is positively stated, achievable, concrete, and trackable.

Circle the part of the goal that makes it a positive statement.

Draw a box around the part of the goal that makes it achievable.

Place a star next to the part of the goal that makes it concrete.

Underline the part of the goal that makes it trackable.

Setbacks often happen when we try to reach our goals. Name two people who can help with your goal when things get tough, and tell how they can help.

1. _____
2. _____

Now that you have your growth-mindset goal, use this log (or download a copy at <http://www.newharbinger.com/45571>) to track your progress toward your goal for the next five days.

activity 5 * from beliefs to behavior change through goals

| Day | What I did to move toward my goal | What I thought (including any growth-mindset thoughts) | How I felt |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|------------|
| 1 | | | |
| 2 | | | |
| 3 | | | |
| 4 | | | |
| 5 | | | |