

How to Change

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Dialogue

You tell a story in the book about being halfway through your doctoral studies and getting a manuscript back from a journal.

His words to you:

| The worst thing you can do is sit on bad news.

How does self doubt get in our way?

| The average mental health metrics of students in leading social science PhD programs looked similar to those of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons.

Expectations shape reality.

| How we think about something affects how it is.

Advice giving. Max Bazerman --> Advice is offered sparingly and rarely unsolicited. More often, he allows students the chance to make their own suggestions. Encourages senior mentees to work with junior mentees.

Set ambitious goals, but allow yourself a limited number of emergency passes when you slip up.

Growth mindset.

Focus on personal experiences that make you feel successful or proud.

What have you changed your mind on?

Quotes

Even when they arrived with stellar recommendations, impressive academic credentials, and sky-high hopes, talented doctoral students often grew demoralized when they began facing critiques of their research, and many never recovered their footing. A few years later, I learned this pattern was widespread in academia. A survey that had just been released showed that the average mental health metrics of students in leading social science PhD programs looked similar to those of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons!

Research confirms the obvious: when we don't believe we have the capacity to change, we don't make as much progress changing. One study demonstrated that when trying to lose weight, people who report more confidence in their ability to change their eating and exercise habits are more successful. Another study similarly showed that science and engineering undergraduates with higher self-efficacy earn higher grades and are less likely to drop out of their majors.

The study's key revelation was simple, but profound: Our expectations shape our outcomes. This turns out to be a good summary of one of the most influential discoveries psychologists have made in the past fifty years—that how we think about something affects how it is. We now know that believing a useless sugar pill is medication alleviates many maladies, that attributing the butterflies in your stomach to excitement rather than anxiety will make you a better public speaker, and that believing that people expect you to do well on a test can improve your score.

Our beliefs can also redirect our attention. Take the housekeepers described above. If they started paying closer attention to the ways in which their work was like exercise, they may have interpreted their physical exhaustion more positively throughout a long workday, helping them press on.

Because George believed he was supposed to find a solution, he did. Because the housekeepers in Alia and Ellen's study viewed their work as exercise, they treated it that way, with positive consequences for their health. What we think we're capable of is crucial when it comes to behavior change.

Max had insisted that there wasn't anything special about him that helped his students succeed. It was something special about his students. When I emailed asking for his mentoring secrets, he'd explained that his students ranged "from very smart to spectacular." His unshakable faith that each student he advised had remarkable talents, I now realized, was a bedrock of Max's advising success. As Max's students begin to confront the challenges that are inevitable in any competitive career, they rarely grapple with the kind of doubt that plagues most who pursue a PhD because of Max's unshakable faith in them. Next to the unwavering love of my parents, there was probably nothing I felt more secure about in my twenties than the fact that my adviser believed I was destined for success. Max made it clear to all of his students that he knew we'd succeed. And, lo and behold, we did.

While it might seem like she'd be tempted to take a mulligan even when things aren't dire, the opposite is true. Most weeks, Marissa never uses one. She told me that she always sticks to her workout schedule at the beginning of the week in case something more important comes up later, and when it doesn't, which is most of the time, she finds herself running all seven days. It eventually occurred to Marissa that maybe, just maybe, her personal approach to nipping self-doubt in the bud whenever she faced a minor failure could be used to help all of us get a little better at achieving more. After all, if we allow ourselves the occasional do-over, we might avoid crises of confidence when we encounter inevitable setbacks.

The chance to declare an emergency proved invaluable. A whopping 53 percent of those in the mulligan group hit their goal, compared with just 26 percent in the (objectively identical) easy category and 21 percent of participants with the seven-days-per-week goal.

A related line of research, initiated by the Stanford psychologist Claude Steele in the 1980s, has shown that engaging in self-affirmation—focusing on personal experiences that make us feel successful or proud—can improve our resilience in response to threats. Self-affirmation exercises can even improve the decision quality of stigmatized groups.

Research has also shown that even the way we compliment people can boost or break their self-confidence. When someone is praised for a “natural” talent, they may develop a fixed mind-set, interpreting failures as a reflection of who they are and accepting defeat. On the other hand, someone who has been praised for their hard work will recognize that effort yields results. So don’t say, “That was a brilliant presentation,” the next time your employee nails a sales pitch. Instead, say, “I’m wowed by the way your pitches just keep improving.”