



Your passion isn't waiting to be 'found'. You need to develop it

Taking this 'growth' view opens you up to possible new interests. **By Paul A O'Keefe**

IF YOU'RE bored with your job or looking to start the new year by finding a more fulfilling career, you may find well-meaning friends suggesting that it is time for you to "find your passion".

An Amazon search brings up over 500 life-improving personal development books with "Find Your Passion" (or variations on the theme) as their title. It is also a phrase that frequently crops up in motivational college graduation speeches – find something you love doing and work will never seem like work again.

Such advice is invariably well-intended, but is it actually good advice?

In recent research by the Yale-NUS College and NUS Business School, in collaboration with colleagues at Stanford University, we examined how the implied beliefs behind the phrase "find your passion" could actually narrow people's scope of interests and make it less likely they will pursue new ones.

Indeed, rather than find your passion, better advice would be to develop your passion.

To some, this might seem a minor difference in terminology. But the key is to understand that interests and passions are not within a person, simply waiting to be awakened or revealed. Instead they are typically developed through an active process that requires involvement and commitment. Having such a mindset can help people cultivate a wide range of interests and passions.

With Singapore's aim of becoming an innovation-based economy, this is particularly important. Multi-disciplinary thinking and the ability to make connections among diverse subjects are increasingly valued skills, so being open to developing and pursuing new interests is an essential first step.

In our research published in *Psychological Sci-*

ence, Carol Dweck, Gregory Walton and I examined how the hidden implications and beliefs behind "find your passion" can limit the breadth of people's interests and whether their interests will persist over time.

One such implication is that our interests and passions are inherent, already formed, and are therefore limited in number and waiting – like some dormant, mythical entity – to be discovered. Another implication is that once one's passion is found, pursuing it will be easy and pleasurable. However, once the inevitable challenges and roadblocks arise, this unrealistic expectation makes it more likely that people will lose interest.

Our studies examined two contrasting mindsets about interests and how people approach them. One mindset – a fixed mindset – takes the view that interests are fixed and inherently within us; the other – a growth mindset – takes the view that interests can be developed, often requiring investments of time and effort.

To test how fixed and growth mindsets impact interests, we recruited nearly 500 student participants to take part in a series of experiments.

In the first experiment, we used two groups of students, one who identified as primarily interested in science and maths subjects and another, in arts and the humanities. Both groups were then asked to read two articles we provided, one of which was tech-related and the other on the subject of literary criticism. So, everyone read an article within their interest area and one that was outside.

Prior to this, we had asked the participants to complete a survey aimed at assessing the degree to which each one subscribed to the fixed or growth mindset. The results showed that the more students agreed with the idea that interests are fixed rather than something to be de-

If you have a "growth mindset", you believe that interests can be developed, often requiring you to put in time and effort. You are open to new subjects and maintain interest even when the going gets hard. PHOTO: PEXELS.COM

veloped, the less they were interested in the article outside of their professed interest area.

In another study, we examined what would happen when we tried to spark a new interest. Students were shown a fun, animated video that presented an engaging discussion about black holes and the origins of the universe. Most reported that they found the video fascinating, but would that interest remain when engaging with it became difficult?

When the students were asked to read a specialist technical paper on the same subject, their interest waned. However, for the students who viewed their interests as fixed, the decline in interest was much sharper than in those who saw interests as capable of development. In fact, they tended to become uninterested in the subject.

Overall, our experiments showed that those with a fixed mindset were more inclined to quickly drop an interest if they saw it as unduly challenging. For them, the difficulty may have meant that it was not a true interest after all. Their mindset held them back from delving into new or different areas of interest.

In contrast, those with a growth mindset were open to new subjects and maintained a new interest even when it became hard-going. The difficulty they encountered was well within their expectations for developing an interest.

The findings from our studies suggest that using the right language matters when discussing interests.

If we want to encourage others to develop interests and passions, it is important to avoid creating mindsets that suggest it is a somewhat passive process. In reality, it can require effort and initiative, an open mind and heavy investments of time, energy and perseverance.

Being realistic that pursuing and developing one's interests can be difficult means people will be more likely to persist when exploring subject areas and less inclined to give up on them when faced with challenges.

In education, for example, students with a growth mindset might be more deeply engaged and enthusiastic, and achieve better learning outcomes. Likewise, by being open to new interests, there is more opportunity for them to build connections among different subject areas.

Our findings suggest that further research is needed to understand how growth mindsets of interest can be promoted to deliver a positive influence on people's careers and personal fulfilment.

This could prove particularly crucial in the formative years of school and university. If we are able to uncover the keys to encouraging a growth view of interests, students can be inspired to explore and devote time to developing a broad range of interests and passions, even when challenges arise. Instead of telling students to "find" their passion, let us encourage them to "develop" it.

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