

Why "find your passion" is bad advice

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Do you have a dream job? New evidence says that, rather than finding your passion, you should develop it instead.

The English language is full of well intentioned mantras. "Follow your [passion](#)" is a commonly peddled phrase, one that has really resonated with Millennials around the world.

If life were a Disney movie, then "finding your passion" would lead to The One—the dream job. Happily ever employed.

But much like Prince Charming with dashing good looks, a castle and the perfect ability to harmonise, we must wonder if dream jobs really exist. And could pursuing them be limiting our potential?

New research has found that our mindsets about interests and passions have implications for the way we navigate our world. They can influence how we explore opportunities and overcome challenges and may have implications for how successful our careers are.

The most interesting man in the womb

"I came out of the womb a musician" is the kind of expression you might hear from someone with a fixed mindset of [interest](#). Someone with a fixed mindset believes that interests and passions are inherent. They were born loving music, and they'll love music (and only music) until they die.

On the other hand, a [growth mindset of interest](#) embraces the idea that interests are developed. They can change, and with cultivation, they will grow. Someone with a [growth mindset](#) is more likely to think I've never tried playing a musical instrument, but that doesn't mean I can't give it a go.

It's a subtle but significant psychological difference.

[In a study](#) of 126 university students at Stanford University, it was found that students with a growth mindset were more likely to express excitement about a new topic, an eagerness to learn more about it and even consider pursuing a career in the field.

Students with a stronger, fixed theory were less enthusiastic about topics that fell outside their core interest.

But a willingness to explore novel areas is not where the influence of a growth mindset ends.

Does passion equal endless motivation?

Students with a fixed mindset of interest were more likely to believe that a person who had found their passion would be endlessly motivated to pursue it.

No challenge too great, no hurdle too high. And procrastination? Non-existent once you've found your passion.

But students with a growth mindset suggested otherwise. "I think that pursuing a passion is never simply easy and fun. It is challenging, and that is what makes the pursuit rewarding," reported one [student](#).

Which is all very well on paper. But what effect—if any—do these mindsets have on students when they tackle challenges in real life?

Theories of interest in action

"Early in college, students often take a class because the topic sparks their interest. Astronomy, for example, can seem fascinating. The vastness of space and the possibility of life in a galaxy far, far away beg to be explored," wrote the researchers.

"But what happens when the material becomes difficult, the concepts abstract and the mathematics challenging?"

Researchers began to answer this question by first piquing students' interest in black holes with a popular science video. This one, in fact:

When they asked the students how interested they were in black holes, the response (on average) was "fascinated".

But when the students were asked to read an academic paper on black holes, an interesting divergence occurred.

The paper in question, [Evidence for Black Holes](#), was not overwhelmingly difficult, said researcher Dr. Paul O'Keefe. It sat "in the sweet-spot of difficulty". But even this moderate challenge seemed to have a great effect on students with a fixed mindset, whose interest in black holes plummeted.

But for students with a growth theory? In spite of finding the article content difficult, their interest in [black holes](#) was maintained.

So what does this difference indicate?

Eggs, baskets, etc.

Because people with a fixed mindset believe passions provide motivation, when they inevitably come up against a challenge, they may begin to think this is difficult so it must not be right for me.

As the researchers write, "urging people to find their passion may lead them to put all their eggs in one basket but then to drop that basket when it becomes difficult to carry".

People with a growth mindset on the other hand are more likely to anticipate challenges and less likely to drop their interest when they occur.

Naturalising growth

When teachers read about this research that demonstrates the potential impact of growth mindsets, often their first instinct is to rush to organise more opportunities for students, says Paul. He says this is well intentioned but ineffective.

"What matters is not how many opportunities are provided but the motivation behind the exploration of opportunities. Are students genuinely exploring and experimenting? Or are they hunting down The One?"

"The message to find your passion is generally offered with good intentions to convey: Do not worry so much about talent, do not bow to pressure for status or money, just find what is meaningful and interesting to you." But the mindset that accompanies this message may actually undermine the overall development of people's interests.

It seems that telling people to find their passion might do more harm than good. It may be of greater use to help people develop a growth mindset and make them aware that having one puts you in a better position to navigate both school and work as well as any other interest you may have.

Is there a catchy mantra that will allow us to neatly package that information?

Probably not. But that doesn't matter.

Paul suggests it's not what we say but what we do that is most important in fostering this approach to life. If young people can see that their parents and teachers embody a growth [mindset](#), it will become natural for them to think the same way.

So let's show students that you don't need to find The One to be happily ever employed. If we can help them understand that interests can change and be developed, they just might live happily ever after.

This article first appeared on [Particle](#), a science news website based at Scitech, Perth, Australia. Read the [original article](#).

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