

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

A growth mindset is possible in 2021, even in the face of ongoing challenges, writes **ANGELA HEISE**.



The changes we have experienced over the past 12 months have left their mark, not only on how we navigate our environment but also on how we manage our internal worlds. It's one thing to not be able to travel and conduct face-to-face meetings, or to not get together in a group of people. It's another thing to adapt to one unexpected lockdown after another. How do you manage work and life when conditions change all the time, when nothing is certain?

Even though 'pivot' and 'disrupt' have become popular in our vocabulary in 2020, the stress of living in volatile times is taking its toll. Mental illness, depression and suicide are on the rise and it would be easy to succumb to an attitude of living day-to-day in a state of survival. Yet, human beings are resilient. We are made to grow. So instead of holding our collective breath and hoping that 2021 will somehow bring the world back to 'normal' (whatever that is), how about we focus on growth and develop the mindset that goes with it? While it's easy to treat 'growth mindset' as yet another popular expression, the fact is, unlike many other pandemic-trending words like 'quarantine' and 'social distancing', this term actually instills a positive attitude.

So how do you adopt a growth mindset? First, it's about getting out of the physical condition known as fight-flight.

Originally designed to occasionally activate our caveman survival mechanisms when a sabre toothed tiger attacked, constant stress can keep the sympathetic nervous system in a perpetual high. When you are in this adrenaline- and cortisol-driven state, thinking creatively and constructively about growth is almost impossible. The body has redirected blood and therefore oxygen that is crucial for thinking from the relevant brain areas to your arms and legs so you can fight harder and run faster. This can easily become a chronic condition and create a stress-driven biology.

It would be easy to assume you have no control over this, especially given that challenges keep coming. Fortunately, the remedy is within us: It's called the vagus nerve and you can actively manage it to tap into the growth mindset.

Running from the brain through the heart and lungs, connecting with all internal organs down to the abdomen and the digestive system, the vagus nerve has many different functions. The most important ones include carrying information to slow down the heart rate and breathing, reducing high blood pressure and activating digestion; all functions that are radically different when the sympathetic fight-flight nervous system is active. Stimulating the vagus nerve and with it the parasympathetic rest and di-

gest nervous system has been proven to be beneficial when we are stressed out, allowing us to productively mediate thoughts and emotions.

You can enhance the quality of the vagus nerve in different ways, some of which may surprise you:

- Breathe deeply and slowly
- Sing or hum
- Meditate
- Laugh
- Splash cold water on your face or have a cold shower
- Take probiotics to support the brain-gut axis

Once you know how to access a physical and mental state of calm, you will find that setting motivating goals and taking constructive action is much easier. When you reframe challenges as an opportunity, you will be able to step out of your comfort zone. And when you make mistakes and label them 'learning' instead of 'failure', you strengthen your belief in yourself. That's having a growth mindset.

With that in mind you will find that 2021, even mid-pandemic, is full of possibilities to thrive. **LSJ**



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