

June 18, 2018

# Instead of ‘finding your passion,’ try developing it, Stanford scholars say

*The belief that interests arrive fully formed and must simply be “found” can lead people to limit their pursuit of new fields and give up when they encounter challenges, according to a new Stanford study.*

<https://news.stanford.edu/2018/06/18/find-passion-may-bad-advice/?linkId=53398384>

BY MELISSA DE WITTE

While “find your passion” is well-intended advice, it might not be good advice.



A new study by Stanford psychologists examines the hidden implications of the advice to “find your passion.” *(Image credit: Getty Images)*

In fact, the adage so commonly advised by graduation speakers might undermine how interests actually develop, according to Stanford researchers in an upcoming **paper** for *Psychological Science*.

In a series of laboratory studies, former postdoctoral fellow Paul O’Keefe, along with Stanford psychologists **Carol Dweck** and **Gregory Walton**, examined beliefs that may lead people to succeed or fail at developing their interests.

Mantras like “find your passion” carry hidden implications, the researchers say. They imply that once an interest resonates, pursuing it will be easy. But, the research found that when people encounter inevitable challenges, that mindset makes it more likely people will surrender their newfound interest.

And the idea that passions are found fully formed implies that the number of interests a person has is limited. That can cause people to narrow their focus and neglect other areas.

## **Applying mindsets**

To better understand how people approach their talents and abilities, the researchers began with Dweck’s prior research on **fixed versus growth mindsets about intelligence**. When children and adults believe that intelligence is fixed – you either have it or you don’t – they can be less resilient to challenges in school.

Here, they looked at mindsets about interests: Are interests fixed qualities that are inherently there, just waiting to be discovered? Or are interests qualities that take time and effort to develop?

To test how these different belief systems influence the way people hone their interests, O’Keefe, Dweck and Walton conducted a series of five experiments involving 470 participants.

In the first set of experiments, the researchers recruited a group of students who identified either as “techie” or a “fuzzy” – Stanford vernacular to describe students interested in STEM topics (techie) versus the arts and humanities (fuzzy). The researchers had both groups of students read two articles, one tech related and the other related to the humanities.

They found that students who held a fixed mindset about interests were less open to an article that was outside their interest area.

A fixed view may be problematic, said Walton, an associate professor of psychology at Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences and the Michael Forman University Fellow in Undergraduate Education. Being narrowly focused on one area could prevent individuals from developing knowledge in other areas that could be important to their field at a later time, he said.

“Many advances in sciences and business happen when people bring different fields together, when people see novel connections between fields that maybe hadn’t been seen before,” he said.

“In an increasingly interdisciplinary world, a growth mindset can potentially lead to this type of innovation, such as seeing how the arts and sciences can be fused,” added O’Keefe, who was the Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford, and is now an assistant professor of psychology at Yale-NUS College.

“If you are overly narrow and committed to one area, that could prevent you from developing interests and expertise that you need to do that bridging work,” Walton said.

## **Setup for failure?**

The research also found that a fixed mindset can even discourage people from developing in their own interest area.

In another experiment, the researchers piqued students’ interest by showing them an engaging video about black holes and the origin of the universe. Most students were fascinated.

But, then, after reading a challenging scientific article on the same topic, students’ excitement dissipated within minutes. The researchers found that the drop was greatest for students with a fixed mindset about interests.

This can lead people to discount an interest when it becomes too challenging.

“Difficulty may have signaled that it was not their interest after all,” the researchers wrote. “Taken together, those endorsing a growth theory may have more realistic

beliefs about the pursuit of interests, which may help them sustain engagement as material becomes more complex and challenging.”

## **Instead, develop your passion**

The authors suggest that “develop your passion” is more fitting advice.

“If you look at something and think, ‘that seems interesting, that could be an area I could make a contribution in,’ you then invest yourself in it,” said Walton. “You take some time to do it, you encounter challenges, over time you build that commitment.”

Dweck, the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology, noted: “My undergraduates, at first, get all starry-eyed about the idea of finding their passion, but over time they get far more excited about developing their passion and seeing it through. They come to understand that that’s how they and their futures will be shaped and how they will ultimately make their contributions.”

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