



# Growth Mindset

## Module One, Session Three

Welcome to our Performance Project Session on growth mindset. Whatever you think you know about growth mindset- you're probably right AND you probably underestimate it's impact on your riding.

In this session, I'm going to make a distinction between "growth mindset" and what I call, "performance mindset". I'm going to make a case for why riders should live in growth mindset rather than in performance mindset.

If you have a growth mindset, you're always looking for opportunities to grow. You see criticism and perceived "failure" as headlights, illuminating your path. You're resilient, because you're always adapting. You have a sense of what Carol Dwek, Author of Mindset, calls a feeling of, "not yet." You perceive yourself as always on a learning curve and do not define yourself by your current results.

If you have a performance mindset, you focus on performance instead of learning. You interpret criticism or failure as reflections of your value or competence. You tend to judge yourself as good or bad, right or wrong. You make the same mistakes and get the same results over and over because learning is blocked by pressure and self judgement. This mindset leads to believing that you're a victim of your situation, other people, your environment, the judge, your bad luck or your trainer. You are more focused on how others perceive you than on what you believe about yourself. We all think this way at times and there is, of course, a place for prioritizing performance in riding. It's just that when we have a performance mindset during daily training sessions, in lessons and at clinics it creates pressure and tension. It interferes with our ability to be open, learn and have fun!

One year, I was riding in a regional dressage championships. I'd been doing pretty well with this particular horse all season, usually scoring in the high sixties or low seventies. As you may know, there are at least two judges for championship classes. In one of them, I got two VERY different scores from the two judges. One was in the low seventies, pretty much on par with our usual and the other score was in the low sixties. There was a NINE percentage point difference between the two scores. This is not unheard of in dressage but it was unusual. I was predictably pissed off. My first reaction was to blame the judge who'd given me the low score. I spoke to other riders that day who were more than happy to make me right in my assessment of this judge and I was so upset that I didn't even read the test sheet. There was also the "poor me" voice in my head saying, "I always have the worst luck." "Why do I bother to work so hard and spend all this money." And "I'm never going to get any better."

About a week later. I'd gotten a little distance from the thing but I was still feeling bad. I wanted to stop thinking about it and feel better. I'd been so busy fueling the story in my head about the injustice and the BAD JUDGE that I hadn't bothered to ask myself what the truth was. Was it a bad, unjust, incompetent judge? Maybe. But it certainly wasn't serving me to THINK about it in that way. So. I read through the test sheet. I tried to do it from a neutral place. An interesting thing happened. The comments resonated with me. My horse had very elastic, fancy gaits. We created an impression of fluidity and harmony. BUT as I read through her comments, I realized that she had put her finger on the thing that I myself KNEW to be true. That he wasn't as honest through as he needed to be for the level. That I had been skirting around some of his conformational challenges and that there was a throughness issue that would need to be addressed before we could move up. She consistently nailed me for it instead of being romanced by the fancy trot. When I let myself read from a neutral place, I AGREED with her comments. Suddenly, I realized she wasn't "Out to get me" or "incompetent" as my own brain would like to label her. She was actually trying to help me. To shine a light on a path. She was actually doing a good job of her job! And now I was closer to getting where I needed to go in order to progress with my horse. I was even a little excited that what I had known deep down had been brought to the surface. This became a turning point in my training.

This is a simple, little story but I think it demonstrates the power of having a growth mindset. For a week after the show, I was stuck in a performance or fixed mindset. I was unlucky- a victim of my circumstances. The judge sucked. Which means that dressage judging in general was subjective and unfair. I felt disempowered to improve my circumstances and like I wanted to give up. Once I shifted to a growth mindset by getting curious, I was able to take responsibility for my own results. I was able to see the truth in the situation rather than looking through the lens of the false story I had been

telling myself. I was now in a position to learn and improve from what appeared, on the outside, to be a negative experience.

You can see evidence of a performance mindset in riders when they blame their horses for things. When they blame the judge for disappointing scores instead of asking what they can learn from them. When they label themselves or when they make judgements about themselves based on a performance instead of using it to learn and improve.

Having a performance mindset in your daily riding can cause you to plateau. It can block you from learning and it can create tension in your horse.

Curiosity is a GREAT way to shift from a performance to a growth mindset. In the example I shared a minute ago, I asked myself, how can I feel better about this and move on? What can I learn from this? What is the truth? Am I missing anything? Growth mindset first becomes a new way of looking at the world and then it becomes a habit.

Get curious about all the places in your life where you get stuck in a fixed mindset. Growth mindset isn't just something you pull out when you're dealing with perceived "failure". It's a way of thinking that leaves you open for adventure, growth and change in every moment!

Have fun with this!