

*Getting stuck in life happens. Not! Another Self-Help Book is a conversation you wish you'd had sooner to help you find your way forward. With these life-affirming personal growth ideas, you may never need another self-help book.*

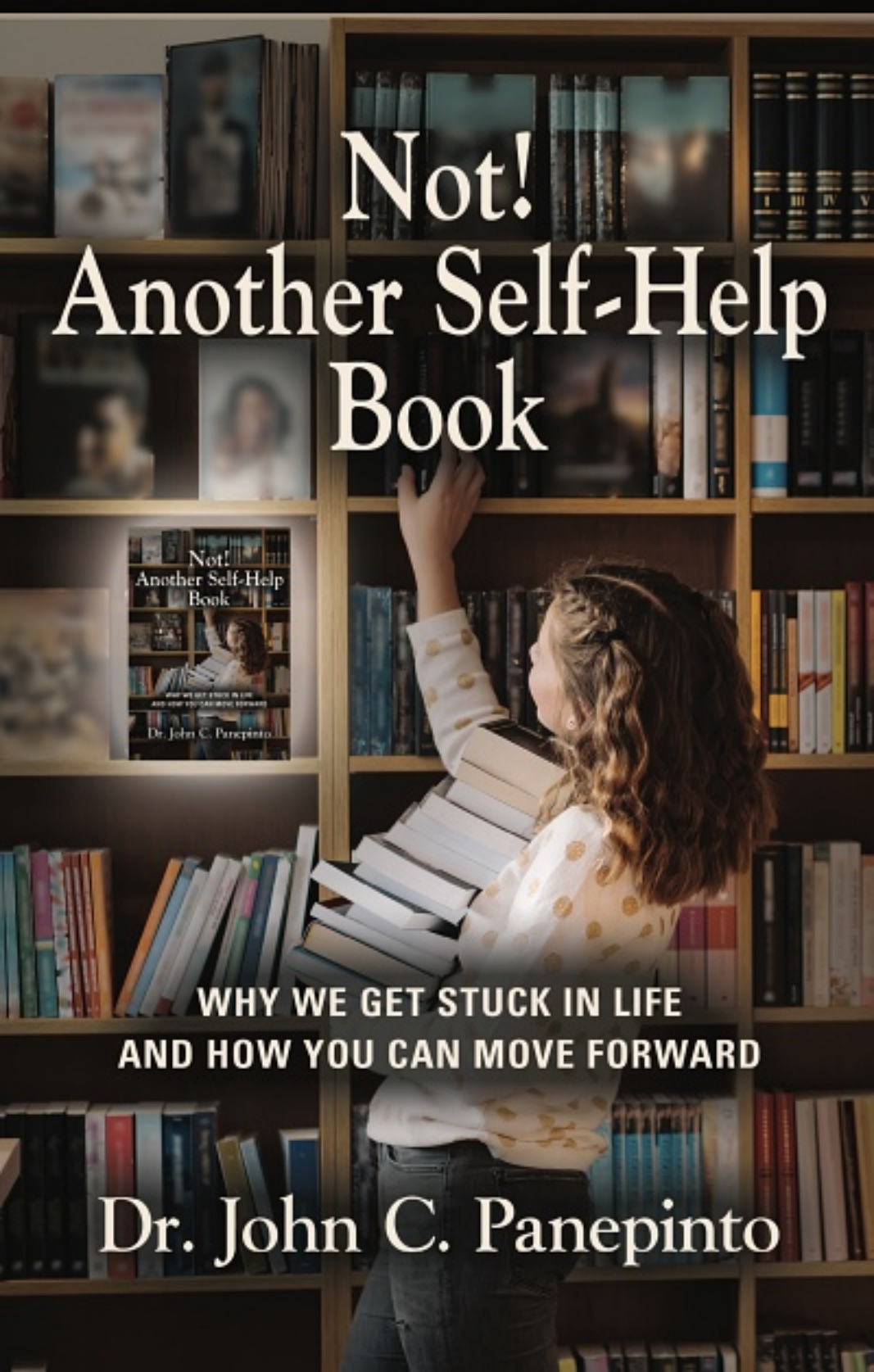
**Not! Another Self-Help Book:  
Why We Get Stuck in Life and How You Can Move Forward**

By Dr. John C. Panepinto

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# Not! Another Self-Help Book



**WHY WE GET STUCK IN LIFE  
AND HOW YOU CAN MOVE FORWARD**

**Dr. John C. Panepinto**

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*Dr. John C. Panepinto*

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## Introduction

The self-help industry thrives in good and troubled times. The niche serves the many who learn best in the quiet, personal spaces they choose. Seekers seek topics that speak to them. Many want to learn about themselves and handling the complexity of everyday life. And many want to learn how to get *unstuck*.

“Stuck-ness” remains a significant human developmental challenge and enigma. A part of living life. You can want to change and remain stuck. You can try many things and still end up on the off-ramp to wit’s end. While we never truly go it alone, self-help offers another voice and, hopefully, a “dialogue” of learning, letting go, and moving firmly forward.

At the center of *stuck-ness* and wanting to grow, or hoping for things “to get better,” is a question (or questions) that *have* to be answered. But sometimes we don’t ask the right questions.

This book is for you.

Sometimes we read several books, talk to friends, ask for advice (or search online), ask good questions—and still remain stuck.

This book is for you...

A final thought before I introduce the premise of *Not! Another Self-Help Book*: Chances are high that your motivation is real, your will is strong, and you have a sense of what has to change. If you’ve tried a few authors and worked “on your own,” and don’t seem to be making progress, all of the above qualities weaken—*except* the sense that something has to change. That

sense only gets *stronger*. And there's a possibility that you begin to think, "*It must be me.*"

It's *not* you.

People who really don't want to change don't do anything we've talked about so far. *Not* changing is a choice. But we exist within the human process of change. Every cell renews—head to toe, and we've done this in our life many times over. So, choosing *not* to change takes an incredible amount of energy and works against Nature.

It takes time and intense work to build walls, deny growth, not learn, not adapt, to maintain status quo relationships, to watch those who do change and grow as they leave, to not notice or give attention to contradictions and things that cause pain—and on the far end of the continuum—to think you are *right* about it all.

If you are here, then that is *not* you.

Let me give you a few good reasons for that...

Most, if not all, self-help books start each chapter with exceptions who, in their narrative, prove the book's premise. *They omit the many for the one.* You read on and hope you are in the right place because you also are "a one." You, too, are an exception, a unique individual. But the paradox is that you are born one *and* one of the many.

So, what's the resolution?

What questions do you ask?

One answer is to read more than one self-help book. Why?



We love a good story, and self-help books are full of great stories. We get hooked on the feeling of the story and seek the feeling. We immerse ourselves in the *feeling* rather than the actions and resolutions required to get unstuck.

When you are in it and feeling hopeful, it's hard to notice that *it is just* a feeling. It may feel like you are “doing” something, and you are—you're reading a self-help book. But change takes more than swallowing words, thinking positive, and visualizing your manifestations.

Hope matters, but often at the end of a good story we are still in the same place. Still in the same seat at the theater with an empty popcorn bucket and the last sips of a watered-down drink. The ice melted but not the *stuck-ness*.

Yes, we can learn from the experiences of others. But only if the experience matters to us. Only if there is a deep connection and we've had similar experiences. Only if we've learned all we needed to know in that complex story that leads up to the time when you started feeling stuck. In other words, if the main character in the “story” is an expert, and you are just a beginner or intermediate, the gap is too wide. You will leap...and fall.

Of course, there's a self-help book for that, too! Fail your way forward. Pick yourself up, brush yourself off and show up! Grab them bootstraps! Show some grit! Fake it till you make it!

Sure.

One step deeper...

A certain mindset pervades culture, so much so that you are in it and don't even know it. You are surrounded by it, immersed

in the belief system. These are scripts, ideas, expectations, and beliefs that run automatically and aren't *authored* by the individual. The mindset existed before you and has generations of repetition. This mindset is to our mind, like water is to the fish. *The only way you experience it is to be above it.*

Here's an example. Fill in the blanks with the first words that come to mind:

Go to \_\_\_\_\_. Get a \_\_\_\_\_.

Being above and making space takes time, curiosity, imagination—and practice. Being above the water for a fish means they are breathless. For us, we might experience a hitch in our breath if we make enough mental space to see the automated scripts within our societal mindset. *“How did I not know this?”*

But the societal mindset is not evil or unnecessary. We need ideas, beliefs, and expectations that hold us together and provide a structure for living within communities.

Still, there are certain scripts that *you* need to author. You need to be the authority in *your* life. This is not a rebellion, but a *creative act*. After all, it is *your* life.

There are a few ways to notice, but these self-aware actions are not a part of the mindset I'm referring to. For if they were on the surface of awareness for all, the mindset would weaken or crumble. And aspects of our culture will not tolerate that. (*Hint: a 30-second advertisement during the 2024 Super Bowl cost \$7 million. Estimates of total ad expenditure hovers at \$650 million.*)

More on that specific mindset in a second, but I want to point out that you already know the aspects of your life you have to author, the ones you have to create for you to be fulfilled. Your fulfillment not only helps you but those around you. It's not a selfish act. It's a self-expanding act. You already know something isn't "right" because of one or all of these experiences:

- Sad without a specific reason.
- Feeling unfulfilled.
- Feeling like there is "something more to life."
- Hoping for something better but not knowing what it is.
- Don't allow yourself to get your hopes up.
- Feeling like you have far more untapped potential.
- Afraid to change or take risks.
- Think you are worth more but don't know how or why.
- Think you are worth less but don't know how or why.
- Seeking but always seeking in circles, ending up with the same feeling.
- Have difficulty looking within and reflecting on your life.
- Spend time passing time.
- Regret wasting time but move on to passing more time.
- Get busy just to be busy.
- Don't enjoy silence, solitude, or stillness.
- Spend a substantial amount of time with one or many sources of entertainment.
- Feel better when you buy something.
- Run up your credit card debt.

- Long for something you can't afford.
- You have more debt than assets.
- Your workday drags on.
- You lack structure in your day, week, month...
- You hit the snooze several times every morning.
- You compare a lot.
- You dread Monday morning all day on Sunday.
- Your overall health is not where you want to be.
- You don't like to think of the future.
- You never think of the future.
- You're in a "great job" but don't feel it's a good fit.
- Don't think you need goals.
- You start a lot of things but fade and don't finish.
- You're in a dead-end relationship.
- You want to be in a relationship but can't seem to meet the "right" person.

The list goes on. But the *tone* is the same. Something's not right and you know it. But you keep swimming. Keep swimming in the "feeling" of "not right" when the answer is a level above. It's not here and you don't realize that unlike the fish, you *will* be able to breathe up there.

Before we head to Chapter One, go back to the "fill in the blanks." What did you come up with?

Go to \_\_\_\_\_. Get a \_\_\_\_\_.

Did it have something to do with education and work? If you came up with something different, consider the previous question. Can you hear the words now? The words represent a basic cultural script because education and work are

foundational in the fabric of society. We all experience them in one way or another.

Again, it's not evil or bad. All you need to ask is: did you make enough space to notice the script? Did the script apply to you? Did it work for you? When you think of mindsets in this way, you are becoming *the* author of your life. You can keep the prewritten script (a choice) or write a new one (another choice). In both cases you have authored an action in your story.

It's amazing what a few words can do. When you become aware of mindsets, you begin to realize a few changes can make a world of difference. Because mindsets aren't the authority, and they are meant to serve something deeper within us...

More on that to come. To get ready for work in this journey together, two things:

Go to the kitchen. Get a cool drink.

### **A Word on Form**

This is not a self-help book of stories and successes. It's not about others or general templates or generic steps to follow. It's about you because only your answers and actions will apply to your life. It's a dialogue, a conversation about what matters most and whether you are living your life in a way that supports this. It's a conversation you typically don't get to—even if you want to. It's hard to find the words and the way to speak about what we value most. Or what it means to be truly fulfilled.

Love and intimacy matter, yet how often do we have a deep conversation about this? How often do we talk about the future

without worry, anxiety, or as a time when we will *finally* be happy? And then screens are a blink away. And a host of other distractions, opinions, and *free* advice.

As an author once said, we get caught in the thick of *thin* things. Busy-ness trumps connection, being, and becoming. Regardless, the future will happen. We make choices each day that take us another step into the future. But often we don't make the connection between the two: the choice and the future.

If we don't make the connection, then we never fully appreciate what it means to *become yourself* in the future. Times may be different, but as you will see, regardless of the era our core as human beings has *not* changed. What we need most hasn't changed either.

The words in this short book are spoken directly to you. When I use "we" it simply means that the idea or concept applies to all. We are walking the same path.

I've kept this purposely short. Because the work requires deep reflection and clear intention. It's the only way to get unstuck. There isn't any room for small talk. Think of this as conversations that are hard and hard to get to. The ones you start to have with yourself when you can't sleep. The ones you wished you had earlier in life. The conversations that only happen when there's enough time to dive through the surface and into the deeper wells of being human. Not over a cup of coffee or lunch. Not with distractions. There's enough of that out there only a thumb or click away.

If this sounds serious—it is. It's your life—and the life that's speaking to you from deep inside.

The form of the book is like an upward spiral. Each chapter offers some basics and information that provides an understanding for the next chapter's work. Some of these concepts may seem impersonal or "scientific." But they represent important growth concepts that we all share. Think of each of the concepts as ideas, structures, and tools you will use and build on.

Importantly, this experience is like being at the movies. If you don't see it all the way through it won't make sense. You'll be left with a different story and a different meaning. And probably remain stuck. And stuck-ness may try to get you to stop. Put the work aside. Distract you and steal your attention. Tell you it's not going to work. So, make a promise to see this through and fully engage with each chapter.

Every concept presented has substance in research and clinical experience. The resources are noted at the end of the book but are purposely not in the content (except on rare occasions when it fits the purpose). If you are speaking with someone heart to heart, you don't bring up someone else's story or start with, "Well, studies have found..." Both of those take you out of the position of authority.

You are the author of your life. And this is a dialogue between us to empower you to start authoring your truest story.

A word about format:

- Words that are bold, italicized, or in quotations are meant for emphasis on key words, ideas, and direction. They are meant to stand out as they would if we were in person and having this dialogue.

- Repetition: We learn best with repetition. Important ideas are repeated throughout, often in italics or bold font, and meant for internal practice.
- Capitalized words. These words are meant to be understood at the Universal level. Such as the difference in the word beauty when describing a person, and Beauty as a Universal and Fundamental Value. Also, I've capitalized "Future Self," an important concept in this book, so that we think of ourselves in the future as real as our present Self.
- When necessary, I will use "they" rather than he or she to convey that the concepts apply to all.

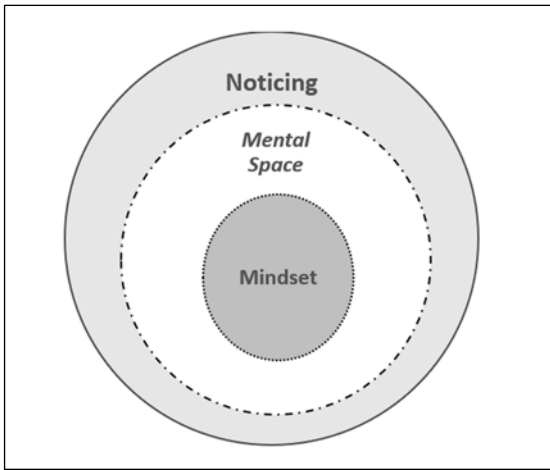


## Chapter One: Am I Missing Something?

Change requires a change in mindset, because actions and habits are connected to a system of values on many levels. They are interconnected in the structure of the mindset and making only one simple change may lead to growth—or another experience of *failure*. Think of New Year’s resolutions...

To change a mindset, first you have to understand its purpose—how and why it’s become a habit. To understand a mindset, you have to notice a few things. Which means you have to make the *mental space* to notice. This is the same as the visual process of making the just right space to read these words. Too close and everything is blurry. Too far and even by squinting you still can’t make out the words.

Noticing is very different than judging or analyzing. *Noticing* is a curious and observant state and not a preconceived *notion*. You notice rather than filter out what you don’t want. You notice the forest *and* the trees.

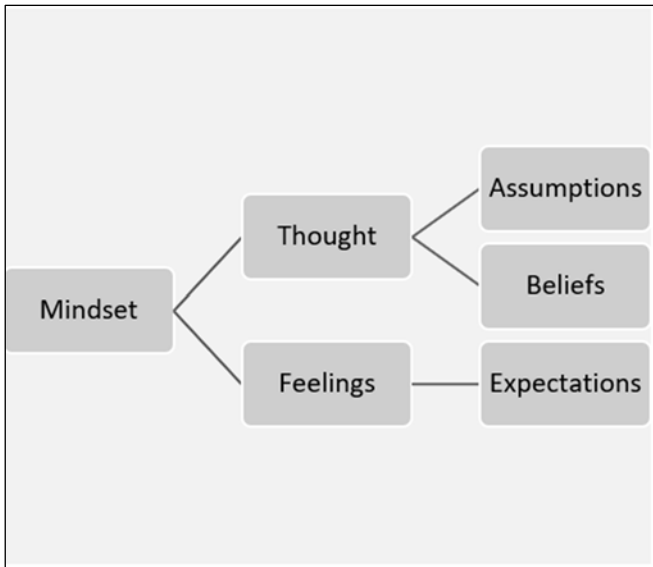


When you dig into a mindset, the first task involves noticing the process. What’s happening and what is the quality of the process? Is the reason for the process clear? Is there room for learning, changing, and adapting? Does the process grow and improve? Or is the mindset just repeating itself?

This is subtle and the mindset, as a habit of mind, will *never* ask you to change.

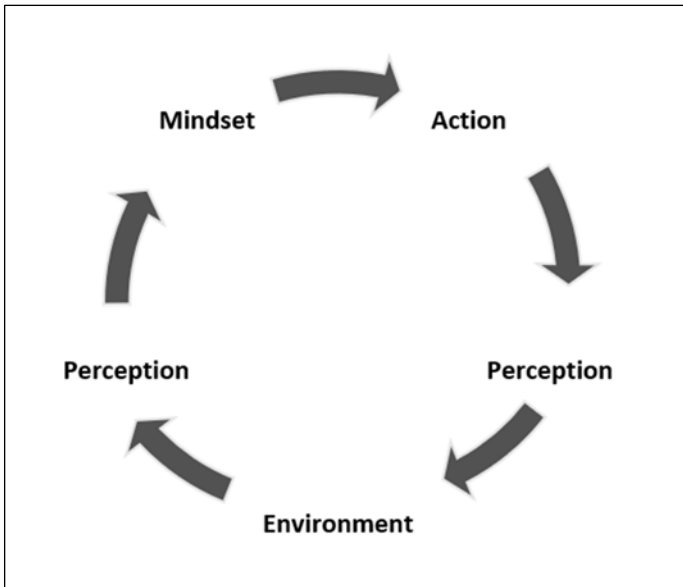
Next, what is the outcome or result? In other words, is the mindset perceiving and producing the expected outcomes? Do you “see” what you thought you’d see? Then, you ask, “Is this what I truly want to happen? Do I need or not need this?” “Or do I need to edit, adapt, or reframe?”

Whether or not we are aware of the choice, we *choose* our thoughts, we choose our patterns of thinking/feeling, and these patterns inform our *actions*. Do this long enough and with repetition in one or more situations and you have a... **mindset**.



In the image above, *all* levels are working *beneath* awareness. That's why we're noticing rather than just looking through our typical lens. We're trying to bring these levels into awareness. It's a start, but know that beneath assumptions, beliefs, and expectations are connections and unconscious material we can't even access. It's like the stuff of dreams.

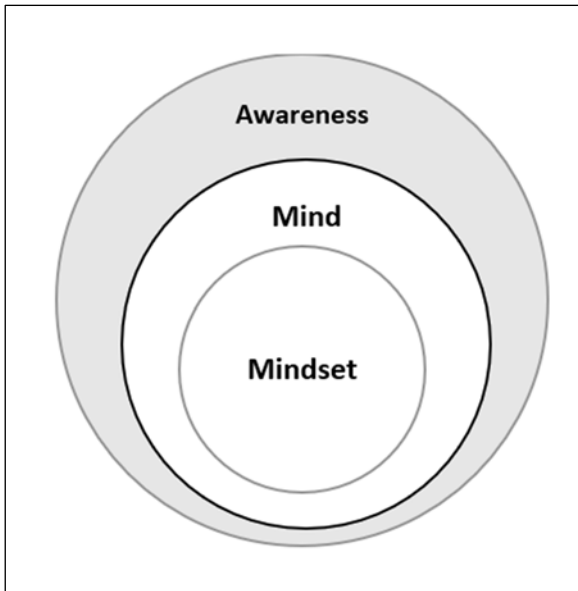
All this leads to:



The mindset offers an efficient cycle for interaction with your surroundings—people, places, and things. *But left to a habit, it won't change much.* And that's where trouble can start.

We have more than one mindset (different ideas/information/instructions/schemas about all sorts of things!) and we have *different* mindsets for different life roles and situations.

Above the mindset is the *mind*. You can *change* your mind. Above your mind is your *awareness*. It's the "you" that can observe your mind and its *content*. You can only change your mind with *awareness*. You can only change your mindset if you become more aware of your mind and how it's processing people, places, and things (including yourself).



But when we are **stuck** in a mindset, we don't notice the **content** of our mind. We are **not aware** of our mind. We don't have the contents of our mind to examine (thoughts, feelings, actions). **WE ARE THE CONTENT.** I repeat, we *are* the content...but we **don't notice** that we are.

This idea is critical. If you are *stuck*, you live mostly in content without noticing the content has put a veil over your mind and awareness. Which means *you are* the content of your mind, and you don't even notice.

For example, how many times have you heard: "I am \_\_\_\_\_." The blank represents the *content*.

- I am sad.
- I am angry.
- I am a teacher.

- I am late.

All of these—and there are many more, compress awareness and make it very difficult to *notice*. You immerse into the content—the thought, the feeling, the state, the situation, the mood...

Every one of the words that fill in the blank is the *content* of mind and *not* the mind.

You might argue, “So what? We all get what it means.”

Well, that’s the *script*. It’s automatic. You get what it means but aren’t *mind*ing the script—it runs without higher levels of awareness and...

We *become* the script. We are no longer authors—we’re actors.

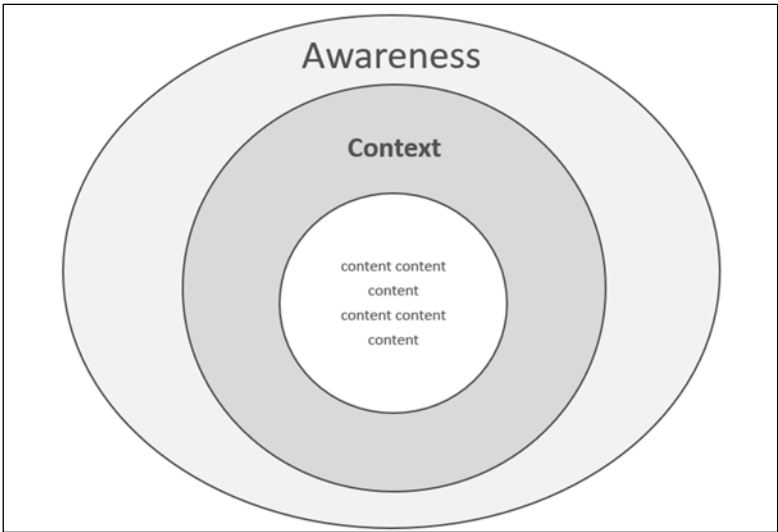
And the script keeps *awareness* out of the frame. We can’t *mind* the business right in front of us because the script has taken over. We become the content—the thought, feeling or action.

If we replace the descriptors above with other types of content, you begin to see how muddled it can be if we are unaware:

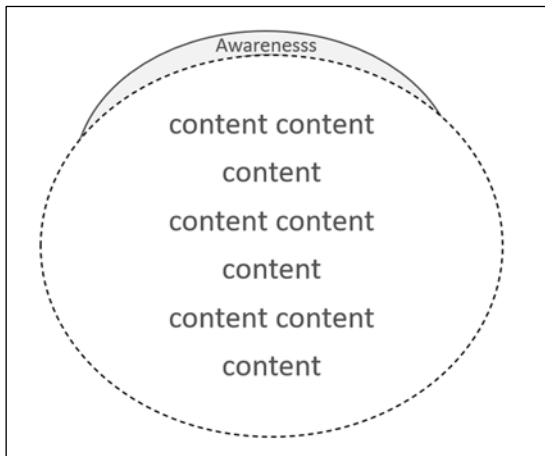
- I am a pencil.
- I am a taco.
- I am a light bulb.

Sounds funny. But the meaning is fundamentally the same in each list. You’re saying that you *are* the *content*—the thing, state, thought, or feeling. But how can you be the content when *the mind’s content is always changing, temporary, and a noun?*

Here’s an image of awareness of context and content:



Here's what it looks like when we are immersed/lost/consumed by content (thoughts, feelings, sensations, status, things):



Notice "context" is overwhelmed by content and we barely are "aware." This is what living in a "having mode" is all about—

and how it feels (more to come on Having and Being Modes). Imagine the difference between the two levels of being represented by the images. In the first, we *have* a sense of who we are in the greater context and can use, manipulate, learn from, or dismiss content. We are truly in a “being mode” and *choose* the content in the moment. And choices are based on *value*.

In the second image we don’t *have* content—it *has us*. We *are* our thoughts, feelings, sensations, status, and possessions. Can you see how easy it is to lose our center, our meaning, our direction? And in this mode, we don’t have enough space to be aware of what’s happening. We are only aware that something isn’t right.

Finally, we aren’t nouns. Our names may be, but we are alive. By the way, this is why we forget names. They aren’t the person. The labels/names aren’t *alive*.

We are a *living* process. We are always *in* process. If anything, we can best be described as *verbs*. *Life is movement* in time. Everything flows. Time is like a flowing river, and we never step into the same river.<sup>1</sup> Stability is *in* the movement. The moment we stop the process, the flow, the movement, we no longer exist.

\*\*\*

In this book, we will begin by focusing on a particular mindset that feeds on *content* and has an incredibly significant impact on the feeling of *stuck-ness*. This mindset overlaps with many

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<sup>1</sup> Heraclitus. XLI- “Into the same river you could not step twice, for other (and still other) waters are flowing.”



mindsets all of which veil awareness and stunt growth. Untangling this mindset represents quite a few knots that need to be untied. Then you can begin to clear your mind and widen and deepen awareness.

Master this mindset and you get back to *having* a mind about things, truly *mind*ing the business of your life. You can get off the continuous not-so-merry-go-round of being stuck.

This mindset is prevalent in every aspect of daily life, and its message is pervasive and relentless. At first glance it even seems “normal.” Like a fish “sees” water. Individual lives, families, businesses, and empires are built upon this mindset. Its silent codes play loudly beneath the surface of awareness, dominate our language (and therefore how we think).

Yet carrying out its demands gives you a sense of satisfaction—even excitement! That’s the puzzle. It feels good, but like any feeling, it doesn’t last. It can’t. By definition, the mindset *needs to be continually fed*.

That’s the content, the stuff this mindset eats.

I have labeled the mindset we are talking the “**Attain and Obtain Mindset.**”

Seems innocent. Attain and obtain. And it’s not all bad if you notice it and have freedom of choice. But when the words become an automatic lifestyle, innocence won’t be found. Notice that both words reference something “**out there.**” The measurement and the goal relate to the external world. Here are some of the *inner* messages:

- You are your position.

- You are your role.
- Keep chasing because it's a race, and it's dog eat dog out there.
- You are your status.
- Your value is determined by your standing within a hierarchy.
- Values are created and something to gain.
- Your worth is your bank account or salary.
- Keep acquiring assets for a sense of security.
- You are doing well based on the labels on the items you possess.
- You are what you possess.
- I will be somebody when I have...
- I will be happy when...
- I will feel secure when...
- If only I had...
- If something feels missing—it must be *out there*.

There are many, many more, but you get the idea. On some level, you've been directed away from "*in here*" for so long that seeking became a journey away from the self within. The "who" that you are and are becoming gets farther from your true self. You've been pulled away from your greatest and most unique assets and pointed toward gains, status, labels, and things outside yourself. But the security we require to become our best selves never comes from "out there." It can't.

This doesn't mean individuals can't live within groups or have to do it all alone. And it doesn't mean the outside world is bad or doesn't have worth or things to pursue. It doesn't mean there

isn't a relationship between the internal and external experiences.

It's the "why" of the pursuit that matters.

Having a compelling "why" helps to clarify who you are becoming, who you are with, and what you are aiming for. You can separate what you genuinely want from what you've been *told* to want.

If this sounds familiar, *Attain and Obtain* is the mindset lurking below FOMO, the "fear of missing out." Or not measuring up (Imposter Syndrome). Or being anxious and not knowing why. Or why security is always shaky. Or seeing the future as frightening. Or feeling like whatever you do, it's never enough.

### **Stirring Beneath**

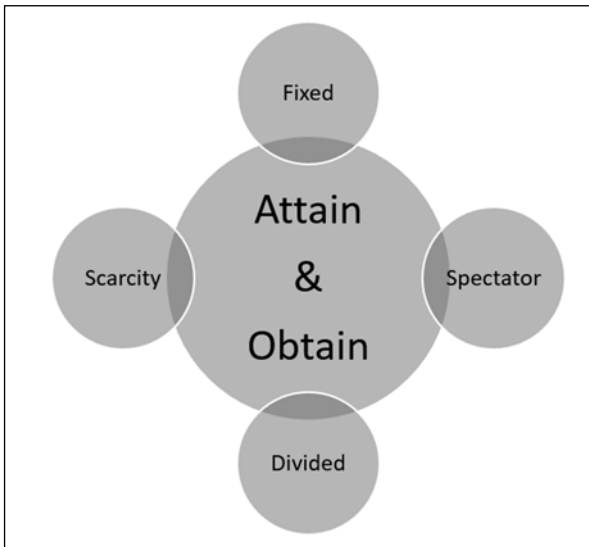
There are many mindsets and some overlap more than others. Still other mindsets either support or give birth to siblings of the mindset. In this case, the *Attain and Obtain Mindset* is supported by four mindsets that have lots of energy.

This means they are so energized that you feel energized when you are seeing the world through the lens. Anytime you are energized in this way, your experience *feels* real and important. This underlies why change is hard. You get used to the feeling and it feels "right." It *feels* like you. But it can't be.

I won't go deeply into these four mindsets. Just being aware starts a shift in perspective. Almost immediately you will see how these mindsets underly the powerful *Attain and Obtain* way of seeing the world. Here they are in no particular order:

- Scarcity mindset
- Spectator mindset
- Fixed mindset
- Divided mindset

Here's how it looks:



Here's a brief summary of each:

- **Fixed Mindset:** Ability and Intelligence is not changeable. That's just the way it is. You get what you get. So, there's no use trying or giving extra effort for things that are hard and if I don't get it right the first time. I can't change.
- **Scarcity:** Not enough and not enough to go around. Anxious seeking because if you don't get it someone else will. You focus on what you *don't* have. You focus

on what is missing. Comparing is based on what others *have* and not some higher value.

- **Divided:** Believe that if I put things (feelings, thoughts, problems, conflicts) into compartments, they have no effect. There is no connection between roles in your life (professional, personal...). If you don't think about it, it doesn't exist. Wear a mask for each role. Inconsistent character and effort because it's situationally dependent. It's okay to work hard at work and do nothing or be attentive at home. Don't worry about the future, just think positive.
- **Spectator:** Extremely low risk-taking if any. Predictable and overly structured. Rigid boundaries. Avoiding and blaming. Settling. Waiting for something to happen that will change your situation. External locus of control. Luck plays a big part in life. Others are better. No plan for a sense of growth, mastery, or improvement.

Connect these to the *Obtain and Attain Mindset*, and you have a sense of “stuck-ness.” Because none of these ways of being align with our most fundamental needs and values.

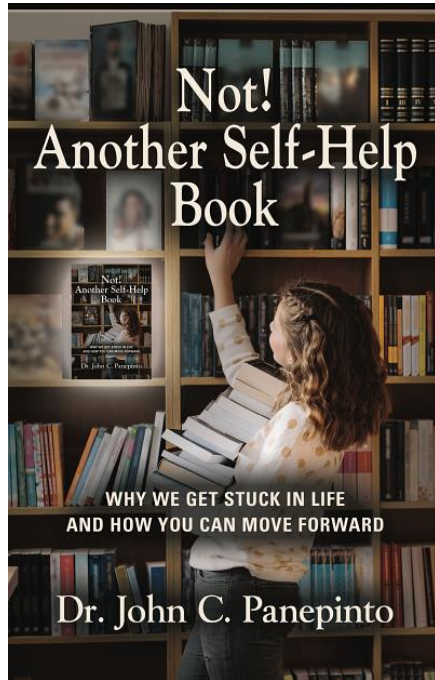
## **About the Author**

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LCMHCS, NCC, holds a doctorate in Clinical Psychology, and a master's in counseling. Dr. Panepinto has worked in clinical, educational, and private settings for three decades. He has been an educator, consultant, counselor, psychologist, and clinical supervisor from elementary to university level. From a developmental perspective, he has worked with clients through the lifespan from young children to adults.

Dr. Panepinto has authored articles and books on development, fatherhood, parenting, resilience, and sports psychology. His articles have appeared in *Tennis Pro*, *Attitudemag.org*, *Psych Central*, and the *New England Psychologist*. He authored and presented workshops on development, self-regulation, parenting, father involvement, the unique needs and attributes of boys, and resiliency. Dr. Panepinto has been a keynote speaker, including the Stay-at-Home Dads National Conventions.

His professional experience, along with being married and raising two children (now men!) have helped him to frame healthy development and well-being in a long-term and balanced perspective. This integrated approach to development informs his current practice of helping and educating others.

For more information or to contact the author visit his website: [DrJohnPanepinto.com](http://DrJohnPanepinto.com)



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