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**Overcoming stress and anxiety: examining the impact of fixed vs growth mindsets amongst African American high achievers**

Julie Sumner

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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

OVERCOMING STRESS AND ANXIETY: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF FIXED VS  
GROWTH MINDSETS AMONGST AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH ACHIEVERS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Julie Sumner

July, 2022

Ebony Cain, Ph.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATIONS

We did it, Mom!!! After losing you, I decided to conquer my grief with this goal. A goal that would increase my knowledge to help others and honor you. I felt your encouragement and presence every step of the way. I love you now and forever.

To my bonus dad Attorney John C. Floyd III. You changed the trajectory of my life. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for being my friend. I am grateful, and I love you.

To a group of young people that I love very much. Abbe, Ashley, Breonne, Dimingus, Jacques, Justin, Kinaya, Nia, Noah and Robi. I believe in each of you. Follow your dreams and pursue them with haste. Life is too short and fleeting to waste. The sky is the limit! xoxo

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

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| Pepperdine Graduate School of Education and Psychology<br>EdD (Organizational Leadership)<br>Dissertation: “Overcoming Stress and Anxiety: Examining the<br>Impact of Fixed vs Growth Mindsets Amongst African American High<br>Achievers” | 2021 |
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| MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIAN I, LA COUNTY                                    | 2018 |
| PRAXIS II PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELOR CERTIFICATION                   | 2015 |
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| Grief Consultant - Private Practice  | 2019 - Present |
| Scientific Research Manager - Pepperdine GSEP                                | 2019 - 2021    |
| Co-Founder - YANA Life Improvement & Prayer Buddy Apps                       | 2019 - Present |
| Organizational Consultant - UCLArts and Healing                              | 2019           |
| Organizational Consultant - Resolutionaries Nonprofit                        | 2018           |
| Pepperdine University Disability Department                                  | 2017           |
| Academic Advisor - Archdiocese of Washington DC                              | 2012 - 2015    |
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## ABSTRACT

A rapidly increasing number of Americans suffer from stress and anxiety (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2018; American Psychiatric Association, 2020). It is even more prominent among stress afflicted adults now that we are experiencing civil unrest and a pandemic. Without tools to implement and maintain a growth mindset, those who suffer will struggle with negative thoughts, behaviors, and results (Bergland, 2017). The purpose of this research is to disrupt the cycle of negative energy that leads to social ills and fixed mindsets by developing a structured method to practice positive thinking and goal achievement. This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study surveyed African American females who are high academic achievers to understand if a growth mindset impacts their ability to overcome obstacles and accomplish goals, as well as the tools they use, if any, to implement and maintain their perspectives. Due to the pandemic and CDC guidelines, an electronic survey was selected to ensure the participants and the researcher's safety. The data collection was triangulated. Using this strategic juxtaposition of multiple data sources allowed the study to achieve greater rigor and validity (Cohen et al., 2000). The data revealed a growth mindset has a direct impact on how the sample faces challenges. Furthermore, we learned that the participants manage their stress and anxiety by having a positive attitude, practicing gratitude, setting goals, and visualizing and affirming positive outcomes. Based on the results, the AGGVA (Attitude, Gratitude, Goals, Vision, Affirm) framework was developed to help society overcome obstacles and achieve their goals.

## **Chapter One: Overview of The Study**

This phenomenological study aims to address the growing number of Americans suffering from stress and anxiety. In 2014, nearly 1 in 5 American adults reported living with anxiety (Rosch, 2014). In 2018, data revealed that approximately 40 million adults in America suffer from either stress or anxiety (Newman, 2018). More recently, the 2019 Gallup Report found that Americans are among the most stressed people in the world (Gallup, 2019). Stress and anxiety stifle growth and decrease a person's motivation when attempting even the smallest task (Bergland, 2017). Each is directly related to negative perceptions, behaviors, and results (Bergland, 2017).

Although anxiety and stress are closely related, they are, in fact, different (Anxiety and Depression Association of America [ADAA], 2018). Stress is a natural response to challenges like difficult situations at work or making an important decision. Stress is a sudden emotion of pressure and strain (Gibbons, 2012). Many people will experience stressful situations as threatening (Pedersen, 2018). A stressful situation can lead one to believe that their resources for coping with challenges exceed the demands placed upon them (Gibbons, 2012). Excessive stress is known to do bodily harm; it increases the risk of ulcers, strokes, and heart attacks (Gibbons, 2012).

While anxiety is an extended reaction to stress (Bergland, 2017), it is defined as an emotional state of inner turmoil accompanied by nervous behavior and unpleasant feelings of dread (Bergland, 2017). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) reports that anxiety is accompanied by extreme fatigue, muscular tension, and problems with concentrating. It is distinguished by immense feelings of doubt, fear, and worry (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

When anxiousness is experienced regularly, that is a clear indication an individual may be suffering from an anxiety-related disorder (APA, 2013). In agreement, the ADAA (2018) reports

that anxiety or stress can become a disorder when the negative feelings, inner conflict, or doubtful self-talk begin to affect other areas of a person's life. With what is known, it is essential to investigate the early programming that contribute to the self-doubt, inner turmoil, and fixed mindsets that so many are experiencing. If people can identify unconscious patterns that possibly lead to the stress and anxiety, then they can begin to change the trajectory.

### **Early Programming**

Social, generational, and cultural norms contribute to one's mindset (Chen, et al., 2013). They dictate from an early age what people are and are not expected to do (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). When programmed expectations conflict with one's core values and independent desires; stress, and anxiety occur (McDonald & Crandall, 2015).

Social norms are defining contributors to human behavior (Gelfand et al., 2017). Social norms are holistic representations of acceptable group thought and behavior (Chung & Rimal, 2016). When a person begins to develop into their own person, inner conflict can occur if thoughts and values differ from programmed norms (Johnson, 2018).

Research finds that a person's self-perception and self-image change to fit their environment (Chen et al., 2014). For instance, a person knows they are gay, but pretends to be straight around his family and friends because they do not agree with his lifestyle. The person will experience inner turmoil, stress, and anxiety. According to McDonald and Crandall (2015), when social norms conflict with one's true authentic self, it is polarizing and stunts a person's growth. Heine (2015) found the same to be true with cultural norms.

There are cultural groups within a social group (Heine, 2015). A church congregation is a social group that is made up of smaller cultural groups such as families or organizational members. Culture encompasses the social behavior and norms found in societies (Macionis &

Gerber, 2010). People learn culture through the processes of socialization (Macionis & Gerber, 2010) which can become a balancing act between perceived emotional closeness and expectations (Luotonen & Castrén, 2018). Many families struggle with this when assimilating to a new environment (Luotonen & Castrén, 2018). Some members insist on practicing traditions they have always followed, while others wish to embrace the traditions of their new environment.

Likewise, helpful generational norms can give people a positive blueprint to follow, while harmful generational norms subconsciously program and shape a person's mindset (Hernández et al., 2016). From ambition and drive to addictions and incarcerations, generational norms influence thoughts and behavior (Hernández et al., 2016). Johnson (2018) conducted a study on 2nd-generational homelessness. The study reports that the adult children of homeless parents that now live-in homeless shelters themselves, find comfort there (Johnson, 2018). The participants believe that living in a shelter is easier than believing they can achieve anything better (Johnson, 2018). Similarly, Murat (2017) found the same trend among 2nd generational homelessness in his research. He concludes that early programming or norms that conflict with a person's actual desires causes stress, anxiety, and fixed mindsets (Murat, 2017).

## **Mindset**

What is a mindset? According to French (2016), a mindset is a person's worldview or life philosophy. It represents the cognitive processes activated in response to a given task (French, 2016). Yolles and Fink (2014) define mindset as a way of thinking and behaving that is often predetermined and held by groups of people. The terms mental inertia or groupthink refers to this phenomenon (Keijzers et al., 2018). Going against a group's early programming can be extremely terrifying and challenging (Keijzers et al., 2018). Doing so goes against the human need to fit in and belong (Tay & Diener, 2011). When this occurs, most people are not equipped with self-help



techniques to stay positive, and they give up on the notion of improving their lives (Tay & Diener, 2011).

Mindsets are relevant to this study because they impact the way people deal with situations. There are different types of mindsets. This study's focus is on fixed and growth mindsets, each coined by Dr. Carol Dweck (2012) when researching success. Dweck (2015) argues that a growth mindset allows a person to live a more productive, prosperous, and less stressful life. As opposed to people with fixed mindsets, who tend to attribute dilemmas and challenges to a lack of ability, and view their possibilities as hopeless (Boaler, 2013).

A growth mindset enables an individual to improve their life by teaching them to change their thoughts and beliefs (Dweck, 2006). Those with growth mindsets believe that their success can be developed with constant effort and practice (Dweck, 2012). They have a strong belief in their ability to conquer challenges (Duckworth, 2016). They are willing to step outside of their comfort zones, learn new skill sets, and be resilient goal achievers (Duckworth, 2016). People with growth mindsets work hard despite setbacks (Dweck, 2006). Their self-talk includes the word yet (Murat, 2017). For example: I will someday be a great pianist, I just haven't mastered my desired level of achievement yet.

In contrast, people with a fixed mindset tend to think that their resources, qualities, and capabilities are limited and carved in stone (Dweck, 2006). People with fixed mindsets struggle to surpass what they have been programmed, told, taught, or seen in previous generations (Murat, 2017). They are known to stress and worry more than the average person (Duckworth, 2016). For instance, if a person with a fixed mindset tries something new and does not do well, they think that they are not good at it, and they give up (Duckworth, 2016). Their natural response is to flee the situation or task (Boaler, 2013). A fixed mindset approach leads to inequalities and low achievement, especially amongst minorities and females (Boaler, 2013). Dweck (2012) concurs that fixed mindsets play an essential role in the underachievement of minorities and females.

American women between the ages of 18 and 49 reported being 57% more anxious than men in the same age group (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2017). This explains why fixed mindsets and low achievement are most prevalent amongst women. A study conducted between 2017 and 2018, found a significant increase in the number of women diagnosed with a stress-related disorder (Pedersen et al., 2018). Of the women included in their research, female millennials are reported being the most stressed (Pedersen et al., 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In today's highly connected society, people are constantly bombarded with negative energy. As a result, the United States has seen a drastic increase in the number of people suffering from anxiety and stress (APA, 2020). Research finds that prolonged stress or anxiety leads to advanced psychological disorders (Schroder et al., 2018). Conventional wisdom shows that there are tools to alleviate negative thoughts and feelings (ADAA, 2018). Yet, people do not utilize the techniques to practice positivity and personal development nearly enough (Newman, 2018).

Because people are not utilizing the self-help techniques often enough or at all, they begin to develop fixed mindsets. Individuals with fixed mindsets have limiting beliefs about themselves, their attributes, and expected outcomes (Dweck, 2015). In direct opposition, research reveals that people with growth mindsets are not likely to experience levels of chronic stress or anxiety (Dweck, 2015).

Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck developed a process to implement a growth mindset that has proven to be successful with students in classroom settings. The process requires the teacher to encourage the change within their students by providing the appropriate environment, direction, and praise (Newman, 2018). Students express that they earn higher grades in school and feel happier after learning growth mindset techniques (Newman, 2018).

This research seeks to examine if the process used to implement a growth mindset in students can be tailored for adults riddled with worry to practice and experience the same gratification.

### **Purpose Statement**

This transcendental phenomenological research explores the lived experiences of African American female academic high achievers and extrapolate methods they use to help those living in distress. Because anxiety and stress lead to ailments that stop people from achieving their dreams and goals, this study aims to combat stress and anxiety by disrupting the cycle of worry, fear, and doubt. Insights retrieved from the participants and reviewed literature will contribute to the development of a structured process that will enhance self-awareness, self-confidence, and achievement.

The study explores the mindset of African American female academic high academic achievers with doctorates to discover what strategies they use to practice positive thinking and goal achievement. The sample of African American females was chosen because their demographic suffers from anxiety or stress-related disorders the most. Despite being included in the demographic of minority women deemed to suffer from stress and anxiety, these women have reached the height of academic success. The data retrieved from these participants can be extrapolated across and utilized by all demographics.

### **Personality Statement**

Marvin Gaye's "What's going on" was the anthem in my home as a child. Besides being my parent's generational hymn, it embodies my reasons for pairing my master's degree in Psychology with a doctorate in Organizational Leadership. I want to help the masses. Something inside of me, my Christian upbringing, or the civil rights stories at our dinner table compels me to research methods to help people experiencing hardship.

Being raised in a middle-class African American neighborhood and attending majority White parochial schools in Washington, DC, influenced my unique understanding and love for all people. After graduating from Morgan State University with a bachelor's degree in Communications, my first job was on Capitol Hill as Scheduler for California Congressman Ronald V. Dellums. I was the gatekeeper. I learned how to take verbal abuse from constituents, lobbyists, and other hoi polloi with a smile. While discussing his schedule, he would also discuss the plight of Americans and the World. He did most of the talking. I did the listening and wondered, "what's going on?"

After my stint on the Hill, I opened several hair salons, which I eventually closed to care for my mother during her prolonged illness. While I daily trekked to different health facilities, I noticed a continuing pattern; whether it was the salons, The Hill, or my role as primary caregiver, the underlying theme I saw was stress and anxiety not being adequately dealt with. Before coming to Pepperdine, I worked at an upper-middle-class parochial school and an inner-city school. Again, I saw how the burden of challenges overwhelmed both students and parents, leaving both parties stressed and anxious. These scenarios sparked my interest and motivated this research on personally developing ways to overcome obstacles and achieving goals.

My *raison d'être* is to teach others how to become the best versions of themselves. I want to encourage others to keep fighting and never give up. I want to inspire others to understand and believe that: "No weapon formed against thee shall prosper" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Isaiah 54:17). This drive has shaped this study's research topic and research questions. I am on a quest to discover a self-help system for people that are not equipped with tools to conquer their stress and anxiety—exploring how African American female academic high achievers manage to accomplish extraordinary heights while counted as members of the group that suffers the most would significantly contribute to mental health and self-help research.

One aspect of my identity in relation to the research that can enhance the data and possibly indicate bias is my being an African American female. A member of the demographic that suffers the most from stress and anxiety. Besides, I am an African American female in pursuit of a doctorate. My identity aligns with the chosen sample, which could indicate bias. However, it also gives me privileged access to the participants. The researcher is a part of the studied sample, which gives privileged entrance into the world of the group she is studying (Bourke, 2014). A researcher from another demographic can be seen as an invader and will find the group to be guarded and less vulnerable (Bourke, 2014). My access gives power to my positionality because it allows me to continuously consider all of the moving parts. This process of reflexivity heightens my awareness as the researcher on how I can influence the research. The process will also enhance the study's integrity because the participants will feel at ease when answering questions.

### **Research Questions**

Below are the proposed research questions. The researcher finds the questions significant to develop an in-depth understanding of the sample's perspective on their mindset and methodological approach to achieve their desired goals.

- RQ 1: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers' ability to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals?
- RQ 2: How do African American females who are academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety?

### **Methodological Approach**

The researcher of this study explored how to help the growing number of Americans, especially minority women, suffering from stress and anxiety. The theoretical framework, Mindset Theory is the foundation of this study's design. The research goal was to create a

convenient, easy to use process for those who are burdened with negative thoughts.

Utilizing a transcendental phenomenology approach, this research aimed to better understand human experiences. It is a philosophical approach that focuses on the textural and structural descriptions of the research (Moustakas, 1994). The textural descriptions explore what people experience, while structural descriptions focus on how people experienced it. Thus, the research questions examine what mindset approach the high achiever's use and how they utilized tools to implement and maintain such mindsets.

A qualitative survey was conducted. The survey methodology is an efficient means of gathering data from a population (Moustakas, 1994). The survey will extract insights based on the sample's lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Open-ended survey questions were asked because they provide exploratory data that can reveal unforeseen opportunities, trends, issues, or quotes (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This approach also gave participants the freedom to express their true feelings about the subject (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

### **Researcher Assumptions**

Assumptions stated in this section of Chapter 1 addresses limitations. The researcher is aware that assumptions may affect the study but will not attempt to control it. The three assumptions related to this study include the following:

- The sample or members of the sample may not have growth mindsets. It is possible that a person with a fixed mindset can be a high achiever if they only participate in areas that come naturally to them. A person's achievements can also be attributed to privilege, as opposed to continuous effort. When a person is given titles and promotions based on this, they often take it for granted.
- The sample may be motivated by adverse events. Anger can fuel motivation in some people. Those with a competitive nature can become inspired by doing better than others and being the first in the race.

- The sample may not utilize self-help techniques to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. It is also possible that the group does not rely on or believe in religion/spirituality (R/S). A person can become a high achiever without self-help tools or an R/S belief system.

These assumptions may go against the researcher's hypothesis, but they do not limit factors that will affect the study's outcome. Should the assumptions be correct, the retrieved data will still be vital for future research.

### **Delimitations of Study**

Unlike assumptions, a study's delimitations give complete control to the researcher (Simon, 2011). The delimitations enable the researcher to decide on the study's topic, research questions, and theoretical perspectives, as well as the sample, sample size, and tools used to implement the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The researcher's final decisions create the study's boundaries (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This study is bound by the following specifications:

1. This research seeks to discover a simple process to practice positive thinking and goal achievement to help the overwhelming number of American's suffering from stress or anxiety.
2. A phenomenological qualitative survey with open-ended questions will be conducted to learn how academic female high achievers experience positive thinking and goal achievement.
3. The sample will consist of ten African American women that have earned doctorates.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A theoretical framework is based on theories or relationships between things, whereas a conceptual framework is constructed by the researcher to solve and find solutions to a problem (Creswell, 2013). The conceptual framework transcendental phenomenology is used in this study

to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American females with doctorates. The goal is to learn their mindset and achievement methods to provide a process for those suffering from stress and anxiety to practice how to change their mindsets and achieve their goals.

Husserl (1931) identified the research approach transcendental phenomenology to understand human experiences better. Later, Moustakas (1994) translated it into a qualitative method. The research approach focuses on the essence of the study and structural and textural descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2013), the textural descriptions explore what people experience, while structural descriptions focus on how people experienced it. This research focuses on the lived experiences of the sample, not the researcher's view of the experiences. To accomplish this, the researcher used a method called bracketing, which blocks out personal assumptions.

No permission from any organization is needed to gain access to the subjects. The risks are minimal; there may be discomfort answering survey questions or/and a lack of interest. There may also be fear related to anonymity. However, to minimize the risk, participants are made aware via the consent form that they will remain anonymous and can withdraw from the study at any time. Subjects will receive the consent form after being selected to participate. The investigator will be the only one with access to the email account in which all correspondence will take place. Once the consent forms have been signed and returned, the participant will receive an email with a link to take the survey anonymously.

A transcendental phenomenology (TPh) is the logical approach for this study. Below explains how it strongly aligns with the research questions and the goal.

- TPh aligns with the research questions by providing insight from the sample's lived experiences. Through qualitative research, transcendental phenomenology adds dimensions to human experiences (Moustakas, 1994). By calling for the researcher to set



aside bias in this study's epoche section, the genuine phenomena can emerge without clouded perceptions (Moustakas, 1994).

- Furthermore, the approach strongly supports this study's goal. Transcendental phenomenology's aim is to disrupt current structures, making achievements possible (Moustakas, 1994). The ultimate goal of this research is to develop a self-help system based on the retrieved data.

Alternative Methodologies explored for this study were ethnography and the case study approach. Below explains why neither is deemed appropriate methods for this study:

Ethnography is a set of qualitative methods in which the researcher observes a group's social interactions. Ethnography's focus is on the behavior of cultural groups in social settings and developing an understanding of how individual members perceive their own behavior during those times (Dewan, 2018). Dewan (2018) found that when an individual's behavior is observed and self-reported, data is constrained because of their group members' expectations and judgment. Although this study's sample consists of a specific culture, ethnography is not suitable for this study because of time and budget constraints involved with observing participants in different locations. Observing the participants' social interactions is another reason ethnography was eliminated. The researcher's focus is directed more on the participants' personal experiences throughout their achievement journeys.

A case study can be deemed an appropriate methodology for this research. However, this method was not chosen either. Case studies involve a thorough and in-depth examination of a particular person, group, event, or thing (Yin, 2013). Because the researcher's quest is to examine the essence and lived experiences to help solve a problem, transcendental phenomenology was again deemed the best-suited framework for this study.

## **Operational Definitions**

Operational definitions describe how a study's variables are measured (Sager, 1973). The researcher will measure the methods and frequency in which participants practice positive thinking to achieve their goals. Thus, positive thinking and high achievement are the two variables that are defined in this section.

### ***Variable One***

Positive thinking and growth mindsets are strongly aligned (Dweck, 2012). Those with a growth mindset maintain positive thoughts and believe that with consistent effort, they can develop the intelligence or talent necessary to accomplish their goals (Wood et al., 2009). In this study, positive thinking is defined by the method and frequency in which the sample uses motivational self-help techniques to implement and maintain a growth mindset.

### ***Variable Two***

High achievers have a vivid vision of their goal, coupled with a strong willingness to expend intense and continuous effort in pursuit of it (Mouratidis & Lens, 2015). Achievers work through obstacles and conquer goals in spite of circumstances (Beuke, 2011). In this study, high achiever is defined as an African American female with a doctorate.

Final Definition: In this research, positive thinking is defined as the frequency of practicing motivational self-help techniques to implement and maintain a growth mindset. While high achiever is defined as African American females that have earned doctorates.

## **Significance of Proposed Research**

The findings of this study will contribute significantly to the field of social sciences and organizational leadership. Psychology is a social science that seeks to capture generalizations regarding the mental function and behavior of individuals. Simultaneously, the ability to distribute the researched process to masses of people contributes to academic research in

organizational leadership. Companies, universities and helping professionals can use the method to motivate and check in with employees, students and clients.

This study's outcome will add insight and knowledge to the existing body of literature. Current studies focus on specific self-help tools and strategies. This particular research sets out to combine the proven self-help techniques in a seamless process that can be practiced daily. The data retrieved from the high achiever's survey answers will provide which of the proven motivational tools they use, how they use them, and how often they use them. After the data is analyzed, the researcher will formulate a convenient, easy to use life-improvement model that all demographics can use to practice positivity daily.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions stated in this section of Chapter 1 addresses limitations. The researcher is aware that assumptions may affect the study but will not attempt to control. The three assumptions related to this study include the following:

1. The sample or members of the sample may not have growth mindsets. It is possible that a person with a fixed mindset can be a high achiever if they only participate in areas that come naturally to them. A person's achievements can also be attributed to privilege, as opposed to continuous effort. When a person is given titles and promotions based on this, they often take it for granted.
2. The sample may be motivated by adverse events. Anger can fuel motivation in some people. Those with a competitive nature can become inspired by doing better than others and being the first in the race.
3. The sample may not utilize self-help techniques to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. It is also possible that the group does not rely on or believe in religion/spirituality (R/S). A person can become a high achiever without self-help tools or a R/S belief system.

These assumptions may go against the researcher's hypothesis, but they are not limiting factors that will affect the study's outcome. Should the assumptions be correct, the retrieved data will still be vital for future research.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher addresses the number of Americans suffering from stress and anxiety. Stress-related mental disorders strongly correlate to the growing number of those experiencing inner conflict and fixed mindsets. This chapter discussed the alarming reports that 1 in every 5 American adults are living with anxiety (Rosch, 2014) and approximately 40 million adults in the United States suffering from a stress-related disorder (Newman, 2018). This chapter also discussed the American Psychiatric Association's 2017 survey that finds two-thirds of Americans experience high levels of stress and anxiety. In 2018, the same poll was repeated, and results showed that anxiety increased another five percent (Newman, 2018).

Every American adult, at some point in life, will be or know the 1 in 5 suffering from stress or anxiety. What will the country look like if these numbers continue to increase? Will tent cities and school shootings become the norm? Medicine that addresses mental disorders are available today more than ever before, yet the number of people suffering from anxiety and stress-related disorders has reached an all-time high.

This chapter also gives a brief overview of early programming that contributes to the inner conflict that can cause stress, anxiety, and fixed mindsets. Examples of how a person's values and desires can conflict with programmed norms and expectations are provided. The conflict causes inner turmoil because it goes against a person's human need to belong.

In addition, the researcher discusses the chosen framework and methodology used to conduct the proposed study. As well as the study's design, research questions, instrumentation, language, and objectives. This chapter also includes the research delimitations, assumptions, and operational definitions.

The proposed sample for the study is also discussed in this chapter. Because female minorities are twice as likely to suffer from stress and anxiety, the researcher chose African American females with doctorates to explore how they practice positive thinking and goal achievement. The expectations are that the data from this population of high achievers can be extrapolated across all demographics.

In this study, the researcher will examine: How mindset impacts the success of academic female high achievers and what techniques academic female high achievers use to develop and maintain a growth mindset. Mindset studies that solely focus on women are scarce. Studies on growth and fixed mindsets often direct the teachers and parents on how to impart a growth mindset in students. A process or method for adults to develop and maintain a growth mindset has yet to be developed. It is expected that this study's findings will do two things: contribute to the field of organizational leadership academic research, and the field of social science. Research on adults implementing and maintaining a growth mindset will enhance the established research on growth mindsets.

In Chapter 2 of this study, a thorough examination of the most relevant literature on this topic will be discussed. The research will delve deeper into the problem, personal development, and proven techniques used to elevate one's thoughts and behaviors. Written goals, mood monitoring, visualization, positive affirmations, and practicing gratitude are the techniques that will be explored. The researcher seeks to find if the above five tools combined and incorporated into a daily routine can assist in changing one's mindset from fixed to growth.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology. The research questions, instruments, the process of retrieving the data, and ethical considerations, as well as assumptions and delimitations, are detailed in this chapter. It is apparent in this section that every component of the study's design is framed by the mindset theory.

Chapter 4 will present the study's findings and data analysis. The research report comes to a close with Chapter 5, where the conclusions and recommendations are discussed. A list of the references and appendices with relevant records and visuals will complete the dissertation.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Stress-related disorders are the most common and pervasive mental health disorders in the United States (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2017). The previous chapter reports that Americans are suffering from stress and anxiety more than anywhere else in the world. Anxiety, an extended reaction to stress (Bergland, 2017), evokes emotional feelings of doubt, fear, and worry (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Data shows a steady increase in the past decade, with approximately 40 million adults in America reporting they are suffering from stress or anxiety (Newman, 2018). Minority females are suffering twice as much as men (Newman, 2018).

On a quest to help alleviate the growing number of Americans suffering from stress and anxiety, the researcher conducts a thorough examination of the most relevant literature on this topic. This review is organized around four themes within the literature: (a) Mindset Theory; (b) Social, Cultural, and Generational Programming; (c) Personal Development; (d) Self-help Techniques. The researcher's goal is to help reverse the increasing number of Americans suffering from anxiety and stress by finding a daily process people can use to change negative thoughts and behaviors to positive thoughts and behaviors.

The literature on mindsets helps the researcher to determine if and how a person's mindset impacts their happiness and success. Stanford University Psychologist Dweck (2006) found that a person's mindset plays a prominent role in stress relief and achievement. While researching the psychology of success, Dweck coined the terms fixed and growth mindsets. This is a significant theme in the literature because her research determined that with practice, students are able to change their mindsets (Dweck, 2006). When the change became habitual, the students experienced happiness and increased goal achievement in the classroom (Boaler, 2013).

This data leads the researcher's exploration to determine if adults can also experience happiness and increased goal achievement if they are provided with self-help techniques to implement and maintain a new mindset.

The literature on social, cultural, and generational programming will help determine if, and how mindsets are developed. This data will aid in getting to the root of one's inner-conflict and negative thinking. It is a significant theme in the literature because identifying where the source of one's stress and anxiety originates is the starting point for alleviating perceptions and structuring new beginnings (Pedersen et al., 2018). Embracing obstacles and continuously putting forth an effort to overcome them is the foundation for achievement (Dweck, 2015).

Personal development is also a significant part of this research. Personal development heightens emotional awareness, increases confidence by developing an individual's potential, and enhances the quality of life (Aubrey, 2016). The literature on personal development will explain methods and techniques that people can practice decreasing negativity and increase positivity. Focusing on personal development is the key to improving one's life and propels a person to thrive (Nyatyowa, 2017).

Once a person determines that they want to change, they must arm themselves with proven self-help techniques to make the desired change occur. This section of the review will examine the effectiveness of widely known motivational tools. This topic is a significant theme in the research because the data retrieved can be compared with the sample's thoughts and experiences on utilizing the techniques on their journeys.

## **Mindset**

Some of the earliest documented research on mindsets originated in the early 1900s (Gollwitzer, 2012). In cognitive psychology, a mindset is an activated response to a goal (French, 2016). Buchanan and Kern (2017) agree that a person's mindset reflects their values, attitudes, and beliefs, which dictates their ability to achieve a desire, task, or goal. Likewise, Seaton (2018) says a mindset is a



person's perspective on outcomes and consists of an individual's self-talk about their capabilities, qualities, and chosen approach to tasks (Seaton, 2018). A mindset is a person's perception of what is attainable (Dweck, 2012).

There are different mindsets across disciplines (French, 2016). There are theories on global mindset, political mindset and entrepreneurial mindset to name a few. While researching success, psychologist Carol Dweck developed a mindset theory and coined the terms fixed mindset and growth mindset (Seaton, 2018).

### **Fixed and Growth Mindset**

Dweck describes a mindset as a programmed self-view that dictates decision making and worldviews (Dweck, 2012). She and her colleagues determined that a person with a fixed mindset assumes that abilities and knowledge are set in stone and relatively fixed (Dweck, 2012). A person with a fixed mindset does not believe that intelligence can be enhanced. Instead, they believe that a person is born with intelligence and talent, or they are not (Boaler, 2013).

According to Dweck (2010), an individual with a growth mindset understands that abilities and knowledge can be developed. They believe that they can become more intelligent and talented with the right attitude, self-help tools, and consistent effort (Dweck, 2012). For instance, a person's mindset influences how they deal with obstacles, such as betrayal or demotions. When individuals with a growth mindset are faced with such obstacles, they embrace the challenge to achieve in spite of the circumstance. They understand that disappointment and setbacks are opportunities to grow.

Most of the fixed and growth mindset research occurs in academic settings. Data reveals that growth mindsets advance academic learning and achievement (Buchanan & Kern, 2017), while fixed mindsets caused students to give up and not try (Dweck, 2015). This theory is continuously proven in studies that teach growth mindset to teachers and students (Buchanan & Kern, 2017; Dweck, 2012; Seaton, 2018).

Despite the proven research on fixed and growth mindsets, there is an ongoing debate about human nature versus nurture (Gutiérrez, 2014). Human nature describes a person's built-in traits, skills, and identity, as opposed to one's ability to change, adapt, and grow (Gutiérrez, 2014). While some people believe traits are fixed by nature (Francis & Kaufer, 2011), others argue that one's characteristics, traits, and abilities develop with practice and effort (Dweck, 2012). According to Chen et al. (2014), the nature versus nurture debate matters. It matters if people believe that their traits are fixed by nature, or if they can learn and nurture different traits (Chen et al., 2014). This data is relevant for the researcher to note that this thought pattern not only differentiates those with fixed and growth mindsets, it also appears applicable to those suffering from stress and anxiety versus high achievers.

Data also reveals that stress and aggression in students significantly decreased after being introduced to growth mindset techniques (Yeager, et al., 2013). As the students began to utilize the growth mindset interventions in the classroom, the association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms decreased (Yeager et al., 2013). With a blueprint, and self-help tools, there is no reason to believe that those suffering from stress or anxiety can develop a growth mindset.

### **Components of Dweck's Growth Mindset Theoretical Framework**

Dweck argues that thoughts, behavior, and success must come from one of the two mindsets: growth or fixed (Seaton, 2018). Anyone with a fixed mindset feels hindered by challenges and less likely to pursue them (Duckworth, 2016). A person with a fixed mindset thinks that their abilities are limited and cannot change (Seaton, 2018). A fixed mindset mandates that someone should only strive for things they are good at, and what comes naturally to them (Dweck, 2012). A person with a growth mindset, on the other hand, thrives on challenges and views failure as an opportunity or a steppingstone to achieving their goals (Seaton, 2018).

A study conducted by McWilliams (2015) sampled students entering high school.

McWilliams had the students answer a questionnaire before the school year began, and again halfway through the year, to determine if they had a fixed or growth mindset. Results showed the students with a fixed mindset struggled with new subjects, while those with a growth mindset thrived (McWilliams, 2015). Improvement was seen when the students with fixed mindsets were exposed to techniques that implement growth mindsets (McWilliams, 2015). The more the students are exposed to growth mindset techniques, the more they believe that they could grow and improve (Dweck, 2010). They begin to realize that there are numerous ways to cultivate and improve (Dweck, 2012). The students with growth mindsets know that practice and persistence are the keys to their academic improvement (Seaton, 2018).

Challenges, obstacles, effort, and accepting feedback are all components of Dweck's growth mindset theoretical framework. This section of the literature review briefly describes each component:

- *Challenges* - People deal with problems differently. Those with a fixed mindset avoid challenges because they tell themselves that failures define them (Heggart, 2015).

Individuals with a growth mindset see failures or problems as learning opportunities (Oxendine, 2014). Moreover, they report students embrace the challenge of learning to change fixed mindsets. Teaching students to change statements such as: I always fail math to growth mindset statements like I can succeed in math with consistent practice enhance growth mindsets (Oxendine, 2014). This is a method that all demographics can practice by reciting positive affirmations daily.

- *Obstacles* - While many think when they see a high achiever, the skill, talent, or characteristic of that person came naturally (Oxendine, 2014). Yet, data continuously reveals that goal achievement is rarely accomplished with ease (Dweck, 2012). When challenges and *obstacles* appear, it takes intense effort to overcome them (Oxendine,

2014). For instance, Michael Jordan (2009) is arguably the world's best basketball player. He was cut from the basketball team in high school, but he did not let that discourage him (Bregman, 2009). Michael Jordan claims "I missed more than 9,000 shots in my career and lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I have been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I failed over and over again in life, and that is why I succeed (As cited in Bregman, 2009)." Jordan's growth mindset and continuous practice makes him a high athletic achiever (Dweck, 2012).

- *Effort* - People with a fixed mindset perceived exertion as fruitless (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). While individuals with a growth mindset believe initiative is a mere step on their achievement journey (Dweck, 2006). Gladwell (2008) asserts it takes more than 10,000 hours to master a specific skill. Duckworth's (2013) research describes a 10year rule, which explains that those who excel in their fields spend at least ten years putting forth on the job *effort*. This rings true with pro golfer Tiger Woods. He encountered the obstacle of public humiliation after cheating on his wife. During this time, his golf game hit an all-time low (Dweck, 2012). After acknowledging his challenge and adjusting his mindset, he once again became a respected competitor (Dweck, 2012). He never surrendered; instead, he put forth more effort (Dweck, 2012).
- *Accept Feedback* - People with a growth mindset embrace *feedback* (Francis, & Kaufer, 2011). They perceive it as an opportunity to learn, grow, and achieve their goals (Ackerman, 2019). Useful feedback tells what and how to improve (Gigante, et al., 2011). Dweck (2012) stresses the importance of teachers giving students feedback that enhances a growth mindset. Thus, if someone is not in an academic setting with a teacher to enhance a growth mindset, reciting positive affirmations is a way to give oneself feedback to enhance a growth mindset.

## **Growth Mindset Critique**

Moreau et al. (2019) argue that Dweck's research on growth mindset is not replicable. Reporting that Timothy Bates, a psychologist at the University of Edinburgh, tried to replicate Dweck's findings to no avail. One's performance in a cognitive task is not always dictated by hard work (Moreau et al., 2019). Rustin (2016) agrees that mindset theory studies show that the theory cannot be replicated nor shows any significance in achievement after examining the effectiveness of mindset interventions on academic achievement and contributing factors.

## **Social, Cultural and Generational Programming**

With what is known about fixed and growth mindsets, this section delves into how mindsets are developed. Programmed social, cultural, and generational norms contribute to developing one's mindset (Chen et al., 2014). Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (10th ed.) defines norms as a set standard usually derived from a large group, and a behavior pattern or typical trait of a social group. Whether positive or negative, early programming or norms impact thoughts and behaviors (Chen et al., 2014).

Studies show that social norms have a significant influence on one's mindset (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). Generational norms dictate one's mindset (Johnson, 2018), which children perceive and take on themselves (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). According to Heine (2015), cultural norms determine what is acceptable based on dated tradition.

## **Social Norms**

McDonald and Crandall (2015) report that throughout history, social norms have a significant influence over one's mindset. Social norms are a defining characteristic of human psychology (Gelfand et al., 2017). Across the globe, there is a basic human need for social acceptance; thus, people subconsciously adopt their social group's values and beliefs (Bandura, 1997).

Because social norms dictate decision making based on what is acceptable to a particular group, people experience inner conflict if their thoughts and values differ from the group (Bandura, 1997). Research reveals that prejudices are based on what is socially appropriate (Gelfand et al., 2017). People tend to adjust their behavior based on family, friends, and neighbors' expectations, even if the person may not authentically align (McDonald & Crandall, 2015).

An example of this is seen on social media sites. People experience extreme stress and anxiety when their social media comments or posts differ from the opinions or beliefs of their community (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Such situations can lead to cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Cyberbullying decreases self-esteem, increases negative emotions, and can lead to suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Moreau et al. (2019) argues that one's social environment and the company they keep overwhelmingly determines a person's success and failures.

### **Cultural Norms**

Early programming serves as a guideline for the way people are expected to think and behave (Heine, 2015). Each cultural group has its own set of traditions and values (World Health Organization, 2009), and they classify what is deemed as acceptable conduct in society (Heine, 2015). Cultural groups have unique practices and traditions. The differences are the essence of cultural norms. Social scientists find that culture plays a prominent role in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to reality (Lee et al., 2015).

Whether positive or negative, cultural norms program mindsets and moves people in the same direction. For the most part, these norms are rich and fruitful (Tsai et al., 2016). However, cultural habits can become a source of tension if they no longer serve a person in their current environment (Tsai et al., 2016). When a clash of expectations occurs, a person can suffer from

extreme guilt and depression (Lee et al., 2015). These situations limit a person's worldview, cause a fixed mindset, and diminish a person's drive to become the best versions of themselves (Lee et al., 2015). A person's cultural programming can become a burden (Lee et al., 2015).

Chen et al. (2014) finds this to be true in their research that compares a person's personality when they are with and without their cultural group. They discovered inconsistencies with their sample's self-reports regarding their values, and the sample's observed behavior when with their cultural group (Chen et al., 2014). The research team found that their sample's self-perception and behavior changed to fit the cultural environment (Chen et al., 2014). The team concluded that the perceptions of others within the same culture subconsciously dictate mindsets (Chen et al., 2014). If a person finds that their values as an adult are different from their culture's traditions and patterns of behavior, inner conflict becomes the likely result (Tsai et al., 2016).

### **Generational Norms**

During the great depression, psychologist Alfred Adler originated the concept of lifestyle, which he defined as a person's distinctive approach to facing problems in life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). He firmly believed that dreams and goals look forward; they do not limit themselves to unconscious programming or childhood experiences (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Dweck (2010) agrees but finds that many teachers and parents that say they endorse elevation and growth mindsets view their child's mistakes as problematic rather than helpful steppingstones. In these instances, the child no longer views their dreams and goals as plausible pursuits moving forward; instead, they see their attempts as problematic and develop fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2015).

Parents who see failure as crippling focus on their child's natural ability rather than their child's ability to learn (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). In turn, the child becomes an adult that believes they cannot excel beyond things they are good at (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). Parents

who consider failure as debilitating plants that in their children's subconscious, and they, in turn, take on the same fixed mindsets (Johnson, 2018).

Hernández et al. (2016) examined factors that relate to fifth-grade student's academic competency and expectations in a longitudinal study. Their findings reveal that generational status, whether financial, emotional, or social, has a direct effect on mindsets (Hernández et al., 2016). Most of the student's efforts mirrored their parents' achievements (Hernández et al., 2016). If the parents did not finish school, little effort was put forth by the students (Hernández et al., 2016). If the parents suffer from angst, stress, or anxiety, the students also took on the same emotions.

After reviewing the literature, social, cultural, and generational programming is something everyone experiences. For some, it can be debilitating while others have learned to identify the areas that may cause inner-conflict and discover ways to motivate themselves to achieve their dreams and goals, even if their groups may not agree.

### **Personal Development**

Personal development consists of formal and informal activities that heighten emotional awareness, develop potential, increase positivity, and enhance an individual's quality of life (Aubrey, 2016). To be effective, personal development requires methods, techniques, and an assessment system that people can practice and monitor daily (Vallacher et al., 2017). Personal development cannot be mastered over a specific time period; it is a continuous occurrence throughout a person's life (American Psychological Association, 2014).

Focusing on personal development is the key to improve one's life and can propel a person to thrive (Nyatyowa, 2017). There are four core steps to self-development; they include: Figuring out the personal desire, making the desire a clear goal, staying motivated, and increasing emotional intelligence (Nyatyowa, 2017).



## **The Psychology of Personal development**

After Alfred Adler determined the concept of lifestyle, which he defined as a person's distinctive approach to facing problems in life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964), he linked the concepts of personal development and psychology (Adler, 1956). A recent study set out to determine if personal development stimulates coping strategies and mental wellness (Haager et al., 2014). The researchers presented two groups of people with the same set of problems to solve (Haager et al., 2014). One group was exposed to positive thinking cues prior to the study; the other was not (Haager et al., 2014). The group that was exposed to the positive thinking cues worked on the problems until they were solved (Haager et al., 2014). The group that was not exposed to the positive cues stopped trying to solve the problem as soon as it became frustrating (Haager et al., 2014). The research team concluded that a positive attitude paired with positive self-talk are techniques that can assist a person's development, self-satisfaction, and growth (Haager et al., 2014).

Similarly, researchers Whitehall et al., (2018) concur that personal development skills are essential to positive thinking and goal achievement. It is recommended to track or monitor personal development milestones (Haager et al., 2014). The process will enhance emotional awareness, emotional management, and with time, emotional mastery (Whitehall et al., 2018).

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is an acquired skill set that enables a person to recognize and analyze their feelings, as well as the feelings of others (Cavazotte et al., 2012). They determined emotional intelligence is an awareness that gives an individual the ability to identify and empathize with one's emotions and the emotions of others. A person equipped with emotional intelligence can discern different feelings and appropriately label and respond to them (Cavazotte et al., 2012). While playing a significant role in cognition and behavior (Cavazotte et al., 2012),

it is proven that individuals with high emotional intelligence experience better mental health, job performance, leadership skills, and lives.

Along with growth mindsets and personal development, emotional intelligence is a skill that can be developed. According to (Kluemper, 2008), anyone can learn how to implement and maintain emotional intelligence. The person must be willing to continuously practice and put forth the effort to understand themselves and others, be receptive to feedback, and reinforce the new skills daily (Martins et al., 2010). Both thinking and feeling are critical components of emotional intelligence (Kluemper, 2008). When this skill is developed, people experience less stress and more positivity in their lives (Kluemper, 2008).

### **Positivity**

Positive thinking is the most effective practice when it comes to personal development and achievement (D'Aoust, 2012). Positive individuals can find encouragement from within, instead of depending on outside sources to validate them (D'Aoust, 2012). Napoleon Hill (1960) researched the lives of millionaires in the United States for 20 years. His findings concluded what people think about themselves, is what they become. The most successful people in the world practice many self-help techniques to ensure their happiness and achievement. Hill (1960) contends, positive thinking is the essential daily habit utilized by high financial achievers.

In 2006, one of the most watched movies, *The Secret*, was launched. Data retrieved from *The Secret* and Napoleon Hill's book *Think and Grow Rich* stress the importance of positive thinking and the laws of attraction. The foundation of the law of attraction theory is based on the premise that positive or negative thinking brings positive or negative results into an individual's life (D'Aoust, 2012). The belief is that people's thoughts are made from energy and that energy attracts like energy. Thus, practicing positivity improves relationships, health, and wealth (D'Aoust, 2012).

To garner more intelligence on positive thinking and personal development, it is useful to understand two terms: neuronal circuits and the law of vibration.

Neuronal circuits or informational highways: A person's brain comprises many cells and more than 10 billion neurons (Purves et al., 2018). When a neuron is full, it reaches out to other neurons creating a neuronal circuit, also referred to as the information highway (Purves et al., 2018). A brain's neural network can be thought of as a person's computer circuit. It signals how and when a person responds to situations (Purves et al., 2018). For instance, imagine a cook making several dishes while working on another project simultaneously. Due to the lack of focus, the cook burns their hand. At that moment, the brain creates a new neuronal circuit that will activate a trigger to avoid cooking altogether because of the unfortunate mishap. The cook then develops a new self-limiting belief. Personal development requires a person to understand the origin of negative thoughts. A person can reprogram the neuronal circuit by telling themselves that cooking is not dangerous if I am careful and focus on what I am doing.

The law of vibration: every feeling creates vibration. The law of vibration states that everything, whether seen or unseen, is the foundation of a vibrational frequency (Proctor, 2015). When a person vibrates at a particular frequency, they attract the same frequency (Proctor, 2015). Thus, if a person makes positive thinking a personal development habit, they will vibrate in a high positive frequency and attract people and situations with the same vibration.

Positivity and personal development result in growth, even when a person is faced with challenges (D'Aoust, 2012). Growth is not always easy. Growth can take a person out of their comfort zone and face their fears (Purves et al., 2018). The process teaches valuable lessons that mold a person to become the best version of themselves and experience rewarding lives (D'Aoust, 2012).

## **Achievement**

What is an achievement? The American Psychological Association (2018) defines achievement as the attainment of a goal. Similarly, Beuke (2011) defines achievement as acquired knowledge or skill. Describing an achievement as an accomplishment that can be documented and celebrated.

What is a high achiever? A high achiever is a person at the top of any field. Chefs, attorneys, professional athletes, or educators are examples of various areas in which people can become high achievers. High achievers are willing to expend maximum effort over long periods to accomplish their goals (Beuke, 2011). They are equipped with a strong drive to achieve something important to them that brings gratification after completing a series of demanding challenges (Locke & Latham, 2019). In the next section of the literature, the techniques used by high achievers are explored.

## **Self-help Techniques**

Self-help is defined as a personalized process of using techniques to help resolve an issue, acquire a new skill, or end a bad habit (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Self-help techniques are tools used to improve oneself and overcome obstacles without the assistance of others (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1999). Similarly, Sieber et al., (2019) defines self-help tools as strategies that help change thoughts and patterns of behavior. Developing new habits requires self-help techniques, dedication, and willpower (Sieber et al., 2019). Self-help techniques give people the opportunity to practice positivity and self-improvement at any time or place (Sieber et al., 2019). A recent study examined if personal development promotes the necessary will power required to accomplish goals (Sieber et al., 2019). The researchers learned that what people believe about the necessary willpower required to achieve their goals is based on their view of the goal as being easy or difficult to obtain (Sieber et al., 2019). The team's research concludes

that learning and practicing self-help techniques enhances an individual's willpower and desire to achieve (Sieber et al., 2019).

### **Mood monitoring**

Mastering your emotions with positive action, aids in mastering your mood, which allows you to control your destiny (Mandino, 1984). There are many benefits associated with positive emotions and attitudes (Armenta et al., 2017). Research finds that monitoring one's mood enhances physical wellness, work, and relationships (Donovan, 2016). Positive moods expand people's thoughts and behaviors to build upon their skill set and intellectual resources (Davies, 2017). Whereas negative moods, without fail, result in adverse outcomes (Davies, 2017).

Mood monitoring is a positive psychology technique used to improve mental health. When a person records their mood consistently, it heightens self-awareness and allows a person to identify attitude patterns and mood variations (Nicholas et al., 2015). Emotional well-being is an essential component of physical and mental well-being (Nicholas et al., 2015). Research reveals that mood monitoring is a practical self-help method, especially for people suffering from disorders such as anxiety, stress, depression, and bipolar disorder (Davies, 2017).

The latest method of recording moods is carried out within apps (Hume, 2011; McMillan, 2013), printable mood charts, and journals. Tracking moods help all people, regardless of their emotional states, to manage and change feelings of defeat, anger, or envy, to name a few (McMillan et al., 2011).

Dweck (2012) recommends embracing challenging thoughts and working with and through them. Ignoring or pushing negative thoughts and emotions to the side will manifest in an unwanted manner (Dweck, 2012). When negative thoughts and feelings are acknowledged, a person can challenge their validity and clear any resistance that enables them from staying

positive (Hicks, 2009). Tracking one's mood should become a daily habit to maximize personal development (McMillan, 2013).

### **Written Goals**

Bandura (1997) discovered that self-efficacy best describes why people from the same environment, with the same level of skills and intelligence, get very different results when setting out to achieve a goal. According to Bandura (1997), the most potent predictor of success is preparation and confidence because:

- They make a person expect to succeed.
- They enable a person to take risks and set challenging goals.
- They help a person to keep trying if at first, they do not succeed.

One must be willing to go great lengths to achieve a worthwhile goal (Mandino, 1984). Goal-setting theory is one of the most relevant theories in organizational psychology (Mandino, 1984). Locke and Latham (2019), who coined Goal-Setting Theory, found that higher performance occurs when goals are specific and intricate. According to Locke and Latham (2019): Challenging goals lead to increased effort, goals require persistence, and goals should be inspiring.

Peter Gollwitzer's mindset theory of action phases proposes that there are two phases to achieve a goal (Gollwitzer, 2012). The first phase is when a person selects a target with a cognitive determination to follow through (Gollwitzer, 2012). The second phase is referred to as the planning phase, where the person develops a blueprint to achieve the desired goal and writes it down (Deckers, 2018). Writing the desired goal, writing the plan to achieve the goal, and tracking the progress made along the way builds momentum and positive expectations (Gollwitzer, 2012).

According to Morisano et al. (2010), SMART goals are established by utilizing a methodology that makes your goals attainable. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound. It is recommended to write down and work through goals for maximum efficacy. The research team found that setting goals in this manner will eliminate generalities and guesswork, set a clear finish line, and track progress. Focusing on a worthwhile goal distracts negative thinking that arises from stress and anxiety (Gollwitzer, 2012).

### **Visualization**

Visualization clears the mind and allows people to only see and focus on desired goals (Burton & Lent, 2016). High achievers are armed with a vision and a blueprint (Corley, 2016). Their vision serves as a GPS or mind map used to get them from where they are to where they desire to be (Corley, 2016). Successful business leaders create a goal and a clear vision of what that goal will look like once it is accomplished (Mazo, 2015). Visualization fuels people with a relentless drive to accomplish what they set out to do (Mazo, 2015). Vision-boarding is a widely known strategy used to picture and plan an individual's desired outcome (Marotta & Rioux, 2018).

Vision boards inspire and help people to focus on what success and happiness look like to them (Burton & Lent, 2016). Vision boards empower individuals to create a map or action steps to get to their destination (Burton & Lent, 2016). Visualizations can center around career goals, health aspirations, or personal ambitions (Marotta & Rioux, 2018). Burton and Lent (2016) similarly claim that an individual's goals can be related to any desired pursuit and activity that can disrupt thoughts of negativity and doubt (Mazo, 2015).

Visualization causes one to reflect and maintain focus on what is important to them (Mazo, 2015). Positive visualizations illuminate a goal, aid positive thinking, and contribute to growth mindsets (Burton & Lent, 2016). Visualizing a goal throughout the day bolsters

confidence and performance (Mazo, 2015). When visualization is coupled with a personal goal and positive affirmations, the probability of success increases (Mindtools, 2020).

### **Positive Affirmations**

Positive affirmations help to mitigate the effects of stress (Wood et al., 2009). They are used by mental health professionals to successfully treat people with depression and low self-esteem (Wood et al., 2009). Research finds that repeating short positive affirmations strengthens problem-solving skills among the chronically stressed, bringing them to the level as those with low stress (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). Reported benefits of reciting positive affirmation are increased confidence, control of negative feelings, and improved productivity (Mindtools, 2020).

Reciting positive affirmations is a repetitive exercise that reprograms thinking patterns (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). When a person begins to believe the affirmations, positive changes occur (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The motivational repetitions dramatically improve an individual's life by being a good source of encouragement and calm. Furthermore, positive affirmations are proven to boost optimism, self-esteem, and conscious effort (Wood et al., 2009).

According to Cohen and Sherman (2014), people have a fundamental need to maintain self-respect and personal acceptability, but often look for that confirmation from people outside of themselves. Positive self-talk has lasting benefits that reinforce one's view of self-adequacy (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). A word used by people with a growth mindset in their self-talk is “yet” (Dweck, 2012). An example of what they may say is: “I will one day own a daycare center, I just have not achieved it yet” (Dweck, 2012). That statement implies that even though the goal is out of reach now, with effort, it will be achieved (Buchanan & Kern, 2017). Positive self-talk and affirmations inspire needed self-respect and personal acceptability (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Dweck (2010) and her research team have proved that praising a student’s effort is a strong predictor of their success. It is important to emphasize that effort should be applauded, not



the achievement (Buchanan & Kern, 2017). Affirming the child's achievement hinders the child (Buchanan & Kern, 2017). It causes them to have a fixed mindset because it implies, they should only be applauded for things they are naturally good at, as opposed to implying they will be good at whatever they set out to do if they are consistent and work hard (Dweck, 2012).

For instance, if a teacher tells a student after getting a perfect score on a math test that they are a math genius, it implants in the student's mind that math is something that comes with ease, and they do not have to practice to improve. Eventually, as time goes on and the same student does not do well on a future math test, it can be devastating because the student did not think that a math genius would not do well in math. The shock the student experiences can cause them to feel defeated, and their effort decreases (Buchanan & Kern, 2017).

Using the same scenario, if the teacher applauds the student for the amount of time they studied or the amount of effort put forth to get the perfect score, then the teacher is empowering the student with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2010). Applauding the student's effort leads them to believe that they can achieve anything if they work hard and practice (Dweck, 2006). Praising the effort, instead of the achievement implements positivity and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2010). The student's self-talk will now affirm that with effort, they can accomplish what they desire; they just have not achieved it yet.

Dweck's (2006) research on fixed and growth mindset proves that the way a teacher speaks to students changes the student's mindset, self-talk, and levels of achievement. Thus, the same concept must apply to adults who are battling stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts. Positive affirmations directly impact motivation levels (Wood et al., 2009). Og Mandino, the author of one of the world's top selling books, *The World's Greatest Salesman*, instructed his readers to repeat for 30 days and nights the affirmation: I will persist until I succeed (Mandino, 1984). Incorporating positive self-talk into a person's daily routine releases any resistance that is blocking an individual from their desires (Hicks, 2009).

## **Gratitude Journaling**

Evidence proves that a positive attitude, especially an attitude of gratitude, plays a vital role in motivating people to engage in positive behavior and improve their lives (Parker, 2019). Gratitude is defined as feelings of appreciation or thanks (Lambert et al., 2012). Gratitude inspires effort, elevation, and humility (Armenta et al., 2017). Expressing gratitude increases positive thoughts because it allows a person to focus on what they currently possess and have achieved, as opposed to focusing on difficulties (Armenta et al., 2017).

Gratitude journaling is an adaptive evolutionary technique that is imperative to a person's progress and wellbeing (Chopik et al., 2019). Practicing gratefulness regularly relieves depressive symptoms (Lambert et al., 2012). Known primarily as a diary to write down things for which one is grateful, gratitude journals are used by those who wish to focus on the positivity in their lives (Chopik et al., 2019).

The ability to reference gratitude entries during stressful times can alleviate pain and change a person's expectations (Nezlek et al., 2017). According to recent research, happy people are motivated to dismiss challenges and inspire them to remain happy (Parker, 2019). Nezlek et al. (2017) argues there is a strong correlation between gratitude, wellness, happiness, and kindness. In addition to increasing happiness, gratitude journaling is a powerful weapon to defeat negative thoughts (Armenta et al., 2017).

## **Trauma, Religion, and Spirituality**

African American Women endure extreme grief and trauma (ADAA, 2018). According to ADAA (2018), more than any other demographic in America, African American Women have little to no health insurance, which leads to multiple comorbidities as they age. The lack of adequate health care and other socioeconomic factors contributes to dire health issues (APA, 2017). African American women have higher unemployment rates than white women and continue to earn significantly less than their male counterparts (Gallop, 2019). While Black

women have a rich history in community leadership, they are underrepresented in all governments. These disparities contribute to the population's vulnerability, poverty, anxiety, and stress (Gallop, 2019).

Empirical research has purported a strong, positive, significant relationship between religion/spirituality (R/S) and psychological well-being in some populations. African American women who incorporate R/S in their lives have better mental and physical health (Lambert et al., 2012). R/S is viewed as a culturally appropriate mechanism that enhances social support and increases faith. Lambert et al. (2012) found that R/S generally leads to positive outcomes among trauma survivors.

### **Trauma**

R/S's benefits after traumatic events are determined by one's access to R/S resources and how often one exercises their faith. The relationship between religion/spirituality (R/S) and older African American cancer and HIV survivors has received much attention in recent years (APA, 2020). Among these older African Americans, religion or spirituality are considered blanket terms that describe church activities, one's belief in God, and their support based on their relationship with God (APA, 2020). Similarly, young adults with histories of adversity and severe mental illness conceptualized spirituality and religion as an intimate relationship with God and the beliefs that maintain that relationship. It is found this as the most effective intervention for this demographic combined cultural sensitivity with religion and spirituality.

### **Hope**

Religion and spirituality inspire hope, especially in the African American community. According to *The King James Version of the Bible* (1611/2022): When our souls are cast down, and in turmoil, we must ask, "Why?" We must then tell ourselves to hope in God. In times of despair, African Americans lean on the scriptures. Scriptures are recited and passed down in churches and homes. African Americans with high levels of R/S cling to faith to counter

negativity (Paranjape & Kaslow, 2010). The scriptures are a reminder that amid chaos and confusion, all things can be done through Christ, who strengthens them (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Isaiah 54:17) They tend to trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not on their own understanding (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Proverbs 3:5, 2022). To further explore these claims, the researcher examined the correlation between R/S and the self-help tools most used by high achievers finding strong correlations with each technique:

### ***Attitude/Mood Monitoring***

While it is found that many suffering from stress and anxiety have not yet learned to master their emotions, others have found the key to rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks: for this is God's will concerning you (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, 2022), is a verse recited daily by a group of women in South Africa that live in impoverished communities with no foreseen way out (McLea & Mayers, 2017). O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good (*King James Bible*, 2022, Psalms 118:1-18), is another frequently recited verse. Overall, the research reports that spirituality and attitudes of gratitude increased the samples creativity and resourcefulness (McLea & Mayers, 2017).

### ***Goal Setting***

I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Philippians 4:13, 2022), and No weapon formed against me shall prosper (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Isaiah 54:17, 2022) are examples of verses that contribute to the development of a growth mindset (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). It is reported that verses like these diminish stress and empowers goals (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Spirituality defeats negativity and encourages people to delight in the Lord (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Psalms 37:4, 2022) and expresses how people need to press toward goals with never ceasing faith (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Philippians 3:14, 2022).

## ***Visualization***

As a vision of the goal begins to crystalize, and thoughts of despair start to dissipate, one should write the vision and make it plain upon tables; although we may not be aware of a vision's appointed time, it will speak, and not lie, wait for it, because it will surely come (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Habakkuk 2:2-3, 2022). Visualization, paired with reading, listening to, and reciting biblical affirmations, increases maximum efficacy in actualizing goals by instilling faith and confidence (Wiechman & Magyar-Russell, 2009).

## ***Positive Affirmations***

God's word repeated as spiritual affirmations is a culturally relevant coping mechanism among African American women (Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Research found that female cancer patients who repeat spiritual affirmations strengthen their relationship with God and trust in God's plan (Wiechman & Magyar-Russell, 2009). This process led the women to experience posttraumatic growth (PTG); a positive psychological change that occurs after struggling with extreme challenges (Wiechman & Magyar-Russell, 2009).

## **Technology**

Is technology an option to practice positive thinking and goal achievement? Critiques of wellness apps suggest that many of them are not user friendly and do not respect the user's privacy (Stoyanov et al., 2015). In agreeance, others say the personal improvement apps do not offer practical exercises to solve a user's problem (Kumar & Mehrotra, 2017). Likewise, a team of researchers concluded in their recent study that although mobile apps for wellbeing have grown exponentially in recent years, their effectiveness cannot be determined because there are no scientific app assessment tools (Stoyanov et al., 2015).

Contrary to the critiques of technology and self-improvement, other researchers are finding these apps are beneficial. Yeager et al. (2019) conducted a national study that reveals a growth mindset improves achievement. They concluded that developing a cost-effective, scalable

self-help app that can implement a growth mindset and improve achievement outcomes needs to be a global priority. Neary and Schueller (2018) argue that wellness and improvement apps offer opportunities to practice self-management, achievement, and wellbeing. These apps are a new phenomenon that provides convenient and cost-effective solutions to relieve stress or master a new habit (Yeager et al. 2019).

Researchers Cole-Lewis and Kershaw (2010) proclaim that a psychologist, life coach, or therapist will find wellness and improvement apps are a useful tool for clients to practice skills and engage in assignments between sessions. They are revolutionizing approaches to wellbeing (Carey et al., 2016). Research shows these apps demonstrate positive results in self-management (Cole-Lewis & Kershaw, 2010), behavior change, and preventative health and clinical care (Carey et al., 2016).

There is an array of wellness and life improvement apps surfacing that specialize in specific areas (Davies, 2017). Researcher Donovan (2016) examined the efficacy of attitude or mood monitoring apps. The app users can identify their current emotions and pinpoint factors that are contributing to that feeling (Donovan, 2016). If a user reports feeling of sadness, anger, or worry, the process heightens one's awareness of what triggers the negative thoughts and emotions (Davies, 2017). This activity initiates the cognitive process of self-awareness and allows the user the opportunity to practice changing their thoughts and mastering their emotions (Davies, 2017). This method is very similar to Dweck's (2012) process of teaching educators how to change a student's mindset from fixed to growth.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, four themes were examined: (a.) mindset; (b.) social, cultural and generational norms; (c.) personal development; and (d.) self-help techniques. It was discovered that fixed and growth mindsets are reliable indicators of achievement (Duckworth, 2016), while social, cultural, and generational norms are found to be significant contributors to early mindset

programming (Chen et al., 2014). Personal development literature revealed that emotional intelligence, positivity, and achievement are vital components to improve one's life. The chapter ends with a discussion on proven self-help techniques and methods in which they are used.

The mindset section of this literature review discovered that a mindset predetermines the level of one's success (Buchanan & Kern, 2017). A person's mindset reflects their thoughts and beliefs, which dictates their ability to achieve the desired goal. To address the issue of so many Americans' suffering from stress and anxiety, the researcher sought a mindset theory opposite of one that represents sadness and despair to determine the thought patterns and practices of the hopeless and the high achiever. On that quest, psychologist Carol Dweck's research on success and achievement was discovered.

Dweck (2012) describes a mindset as a programmed self-view that dictates decision making and worldviews. However, in 2006, Dweck coined the terms fixed mindset and growth mindset (Seaton, 2018). A growth mindset assumes that challenges can be conquered with effort and determination (Dweck, 2012). A fixed mindset assumes that skills and intelligence are set in stone and fixed (Dweck, 2012). A person with a fixed mindset rarely attempts something new or stressful because they do not believe it is possible (Dweck, 2012).

Social, cultural, and generational norms were explored in the second section of this chapter to discover if they contribute to the development of one's mindset (Chen et al., 2013). The literature defines norms as the standards, traits, and behavior patterns derived from a large group or a trait taken to be typical in a social group (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). Studies show that social norms have a significant influence on one's mindset because they influence decisions one would not necessarily choose without societal pressures (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). Generational norms dictate one's mindset (Johnson, 2018), which children perceive and take on themselves (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). Cultural norms and expectations program what is

acceptable based on lifestyle and tradition (Heine, 2015). If an individual's values as an adult differ from their culture's attitudes and patterns of behavior, then they are likely to experience inner conflict and a fixed mindset (Tsai et al., 2016).

After developing a clear understanding of how initial mindsets are programmed, the literature turns to personal development. Personal development consists of components that are essential to positive thinking and life improvement (Whitehall et al., 2018). Within this section, emotional intelligence, positivity, and achievement are discussed.

The final exploration of this chapter examines proven self-help techniques identified in the reviewed literature that increases personal development and influences a growth mindset. According to Mouratidis and Lens (2015), happiness is directly aligned to being motivated by a personal goal, visualizing the desired outcome, affirming the expectation, monitoring mood, and gratitude journaling (Mouratidis & Lens, 2015).

Mood monitoring is a positive psychology technique used to improve mental health (Nicholas et al., 2015). It is found to be most effective when a person records their mood, on a regular basis, to help identify patterns in how their mood varies (Nicholas et al., 2015). Monitoring one's mood is a self-help method for individuals suffering from disorders such as anxiety, stress, depression, and bipolar disorder (McMillan, 2013). Many studies find an efficient method to record moods is carried out within apps. Dweck (2012), suggests embracing negative thoughts and feelings with a can-do attitude and McMillan, (2013) concurs. Reporting that tracking one's mood daily is a habit that will maximize personal development (McMillan, 2013).

Focusing on a worthwhile goal distracts negative thinking that arises from stress and anxiety (Gollwitzer, 2012). One must be willing to go great lengths to achieve a worthwhile goal (Mandino, 1984). Three theories based on goal achievement were reviewed in this research. Goal-setting theory, one of the most relevant theories in organizational psychology, found that higher performance occurs when goals are specific and intricate (Wrosch et al., 2013). Peter



Gollwitzer's mindset theory of action phases was also reviewed. The theory proposes that there are two phases to achieve a goal: selecting a target and developing a blueprint (Gollwitzer, 2012). Writing the goal, the plan to achieve the goal, and tracking the goals progress builds momentum and positive expectations (Gollwitzer, 2012). By creating SMART goals increases success. They are established by utilizing a methodology that makes goals attainable (Locke, & Latham, 2019). It is required to write down and work through goals for maximum efficacy (Locke, & Latham, 2019). Collectively the different methods of goal achievement require a chosen process, focus, and commitment.

After reviewing the importance of managing one's mood and setting a goal, the researcher explored the self-help technique positive visualization, more commonly known as vision boarding. Positive visualization causes one to reflect and maintain focus on their goals and what it will look and feel like once achieved (Mazo, 2015). Visualizing goal achievement illuminates' possibilities and influences a growth mindset (Burton & Lent, 2016). Successful business leaders create a vision, affirm the image, and show a relentless drive to accomplish what they set out to do (Mazo, 2015). Vision-boarding is a strategy used to picture and plan the desired outcome. Thus, visualizing goals throughout the day bolsters confidence and performance, especially if paired with positive self-talk (Marotta & Rioux, 2018).

It is widely known that affirmations boost optimism, self-esteem, and effort (Wood et al., 2009). Reciting positive affirmations is a repetitive exercise that reprograms thinking patterns (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). When a person begins to believe the affirmations, positive changes occur (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The motivational repetitions dramatically improve an individual's life by being a good source of encouragement and calm (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Gratitude inspires effort, elevation, and humility (Armenta et al., 2017).

An attitude of gratitude plays a vital role in motivating positive thoughts and behavior (Parker,

2019). Gratitude journaling is an exercise that increases positive thoughts if practiced frequently (Armenta et al., 2017). The exercise allows a person to focus on what they currently have as opposed to what they do not (Armenta et al., 2017). It is recommended to consistently find at least one thing to be grateful for a day (Parker, 2019). Of the five techniques reviewed in this chapter, they all are proven to assist in changing thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

Can technology be a vehicle to practice self-help techniques succinctly? Studies show apps demonstrate positive results in self-management, behavior change, and preventative health and clinical care (Carey et al., 2016; Cole-Lewis & Kershaw, 2010). The literature revealed there is an array of wellness and life improvement apps that specialize in specific developmental areas using a specific self-improvement technique (Cole-Lewis & Kershaw, 2010). The research did not, however, discover an improvement app that consists of multiple developmental techniques for users to practice for maximum efficacy (Carey et al., 2016).

The next chapter in this research is the methods section. The proposed methodological approach is described in detail. A thorough discussion on the selected instrumentation, the participants, and ethical considerations is also conducted.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Restatement of Research Purpose**

This study addressed the unprecedented number of Americans suffering from anxiety and stress. Without a structured method to implement and maintain a growth mindset, those that suffer will continue to struggle with negative perceptions, behaviors, and results. This research's aim was to disrupt the cycle of worry and hopelessness that lead to advanced physical and mental health diagnosis by developing a structured method to practice positive thinking and goal achievement.

### **Restatement of the Research Questions**

The research questions have evolved intentionally during the study after vetting suggestions via dialogic engagement and further review of the literature. In search of data that can contribute to solving the problem, the following two research questions were constructed to guide the research design:

- RQ 1: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals?
- RQ 2: How do African American female academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety?

### **Research Methodology and Rationale**

A qualitative research design is appropriate for this study because of its systematic, dynamic, and engaging method of planning rigorous research that values context and criticality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It entails a critical understanding of how to plan a reliable, detailed, and intentional research design with the flexibility to include new methods required to be responsive and reflective of lived complexity. The central research questions guided the research cultivating a method of learning, reflecting, and engaging in dialog with a range of thought

partners. This study's investigator was mindful of this throughout the study by reflecting on acquired knowledge and engaging in dialogic expressions with their cohort, professionals in the field, and committee members. The study was conducted with complete transparency.

### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is referred to as a research method or a philosophy that is essential to understand the dynamics people have in common (Creswell, 2013). Transcendental phenomenology is a logical research approach to developing a possible solution to a problem (Moustakas, 1994). It was identified by Husserl (1931), to better understand human experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The first step in launching this transcendental phenomenological study required the researcher to set aside any prejudgments by using a systematic procedure called epoche, a Greek word that means to refrain from judgment (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher details their own experiences with the phenomenon in the epoche. This transcendental process allowed the researcher to see the phenomenon with a fresh perspective.

### **Epoche**

This section includes the researcher's personal experiences that may influence the study. The researcher acknowledges she is an African American female in pursuit of a doctorate that faces challenges regularly. She also acknowledges that she decided to pursue a higher education despite being challenged with grief. She noticed that focusing on her academic goal disrupted her consuming thoughts of loss.

Furthermore, she reports having a learning disorder, admitting that caused her to have a fixed mindset approach to academic pursuits previously. That mindset began to change when she determined and began to affirm "I can learn, I just learn differently." Her new growth mindset approach along with other self-help tools depleted any negative thoughts and created the confidence for her to successfully complete her doctoral course work. The growth mindset gave

her the insight to realize that it is okay if academic excellence is a challenge, because daily effort and the practice of positive thinking enabled her to reach the peak of academic achievement.

Within this epoche, the researcher's biases are revealed. The biases are left here in this section, allowing her to look at the data with transparency. This action completes the requirement to begin this transcendental phenomenological study.

## **Data Sources**

Below, the population and the sampling strategy are discussed:

### ***Population***

The sample for this study were drawn from a population of African American females with doctorates. There is a clear, reasoned, and explicated rationale for why this group was selected to be a part of the study. This demographic has excelled as academic high achievers despite being a part of the largest demographic that suffers from stress and anxiety. There are no specific guidelines when determining a sample size in qualitative research. Creswell (2013) recommends a sample size of five to 25, and Morse (1999) recommends at least six for phenomenological studies. The researcher of this study anticipated a sample size of at least 10 participants.

### ***Sampling Strategy***

The main purpose of this transcendental phenomenological research is to examine the sample's lived experiences to discover solutions that address the problem (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell & Poth (2018), a sampling strategy relies on participants who are accessible, knowledgeable on the topic, and willing to participate. Data from this qualitative study can help to make important decisions and suggest applications to a broader population (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling was utilized to answer the research questions rigorously, ethically, and thoroughly and to achieve a multi-perspectival understanding that is valid and contextualized (Shahrokh & Dougherty, 2014). The investigator's decisions mandated

considerable thought, exploration, discussion, and planning to pursue sampling with intention and to achieve validity regarding representation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The researcher has engaged in multiple conversations with peers and mentors to get a range of critical perspectives on issues of inclusion and representation of the sample. The data retrieved from the sample and the review of literature will benefit academic research and social sciences.

### ***Data Collection Strategies and Procedures***

Using multiple data collection methods, the researcher conducted a literature review, and an online survey while participating in dialogic engagement with colleagues and mentors. Triangulating the data was a strategic juxtaposition of multiple data sources to achieve greater rigor and validity in a study. Conducting the online survey was a systematic methodology used to measure the population's views and characteristics. Bethlehem and Biffignandi (2012) concur that qualitative online surveys garner in-depth data about people's motivations and reasoning.

The snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants for the online survey. This transcendental approach structured this research with rigor and validity by following its methodology in a precise manner, with room for flexibility throughout. The flexibility enabled Validity through the collection and analysis of the high-quality data matched the goals, contexts, and realities of the research project (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012).

Both the advantages and disadvantages of conducting a questionnaire survey was explored. Finding that surveys are an efficient way to collect data from a range of people across locations, and responses can be easier to compile and analyze in comparison to other forms of data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Surveys are low cost, effective, and allow anonymity (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). They are carried out with limited effects on their validity and reliability; and the results can be easily quantified by either a researcher or through the use of a software package (Oppong, 2013). In addition, surveys gather significant amounts of information that can be collected from many people in a short period of time (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

There are, however, disadvantages of surveys. They do not tend to generate rich or contextualized data (Oppong, 2013). Thus, responses can be hard to analyze (Oppong, 2013). They can also be inaccurate because people tend to give socially acceptable responses even when the questionnaire is anonymous.

### **Site Selection**

The selected virtual setting was chosen for this study to minimize potential psychological or physical harm to the sample (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). While this study was initially designed to include a face-to-face interview format, the COVID 19 pandemic and CDC guidelines required the shift to an electronic survey. This change offers the benefit of using electronic surveys, which Groves et al. (2004), describe as both practical and efficient. Thus, after approved from the IRB to conduct the study, recruitment of the sample, and the return of signed consent forms, the participants received an email with a link to take the electronic survey anonymously. An electronic survey strongly supports the retrieval of data that directly responded to the research questions (Groves et al., 2004).

### **Participant Selection and Criterion**

African American females with doctorates participated in the study. This specific demographic was chosen because minority women in America suffer the most from stress and anxiety. It was essential to learn the experiences of this group to extrapolate across all groups that suffer. While there are high achievers across all disciplines, African American females with doctorates identify as women who have reached academia's peak—achieving what only 3% of all people have achieved globally. Because this demographic is among the adults that suffer from stress and anxiety more than any other American (American Psychological Association, 2017), discovering how they overcome challenges and obstacles significantly contributes to mental health and well-being research.

The researcher gained access to the participants via non-probability snowball sampling.

The nonprobability sampling technique requires subjects to recruit other possible subjects from their acquaintances (Cohen et al., 2000). The first selected participants were drawn from the researcher's personal contacts that she connected with via phone calls and email. Those contacts referred others that fit the demographic. Those referrals then recommended another set of possible participants. The procedure continued until enough participants were selected (Cohen et al., 2000). In the 5th Edition of *Research Methods in Education*, Cohen et al., (2000) details what snowball sampling entails below:

1. Establishing one or two initial contacts that meet the studies criterion. The researcher will initially ask personal contacts that fit the criterion.
2. Request the initially selected participants to identify potential participants.
3. The newly recruited participants are then asked to identify additional potential participants.
4. The process stops when:
  - a) The pre-specified sample size has been met.
  - b) All of the participants have been reviewed and meet the studies criterion.

Snowball sampling is a purposive method selected by the researcher because their quest was to find participants with specific experiences and specified knowledge. It was useful for this study because the sample is unique and not easily accessible. It also brings the possibility of increased representativeness by increasing the possible number of responses (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher developed a rapport with the sample during the selection and onboarding process via email. The rapport will occur through discussions on the research and the criterion to participate. Developing trust is the goal when building rapport. Establishing trust predicts openness from participants (Creswell, 2013). Because surveys are the primary data collection method, snowball sampling was implemented effectively using emails. The outreach email requesting participants included the following language: (See Appendix B).



### ***Identification, Justification, and Limitations of all Methodological Choices***

Snowball sampling is the most useful method for hard-to-reach populations (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Online snowball sampling can better detect target demographics and expand the studies' geographical scope (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Virtual sampling also increases the probability of responses in comparison with traditional methods (Creswell, 2013). Although the virtual sampling method can increase the number of potential participants, there is a chance a member of the target population may not have internet access. Participants who had internet access and fit the criterion took the online survey that averaged 10-15 minutes.

### **Instrumentation**

To gather data from the selected demographic, a survey was the chosen instrumentation (Creswell, 2013). Survey designs are an efficient means of gathering data from a population by providing descriptions of attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and beliefs (Creswell, 2018). Thus, the survey provided significant trends used as a proven scale for measurement (Creswell, 2018) that enabled the researcher to examine the practices and techniques of academic female high achievers with growth mindsets.

Open-ended survey questions were utilized to allow participants the opportunity to provide specific answers. This approach gives the sample the freedom to express their true feelings about the subject. An open-ended survey provides exploratory data that can reveal unforeseen opportunities, issues, or quotes. This approach will enable the researcher to gather the data required to develop an informed hypothesis quickly.

Surveys are the most used research tool in a questionnaire (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Questionnaires produce valid and reliable sample measurements and yield validity and reliability; therefore, the researcher used a questionnaire survey in this study. Because questionnaire surveys are the most used self-report instruments, the researcher ensured the measures are carefully constructed, reliable, and valid (Creswell, 2013).

The online survey consisted of questions that address the study's main research questions. The questions took multiple forms such as short-answer questions, multiple choice, or essays, which is typical in qualitative research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The questionnaire started with broad questions on the topic and moved toward more specific and narrow inquiries. Questionnaires have a significant impact on how a person will answer, therefore, the survey's wording were carefully constructed and written.

### **Electronic Survey Process**

The electronic survey tool is found to be more efficient than written data (Groves et al., 2004). Additionally, the organization and management of electronic data has shorter completion time frames (Groves et al., 2004). Furthermore, this method by design protects against the loss of data (Bethlehem & Biffignandi, 2012). The survey questions were drafted by the researcher and refined after dialogic engagement with committee and peers to enhance the validity and reliability.

After the sample expressed an interest in participating, they received an email stating the goal of the research. The second email had a consent form that explained the process in relation to the protection of human subjects, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell, 2018). The first 17 participants that met the criterion were surveyed.

Once the IRB approved the study, the participants received a third email with a link to take the survey anonymously. The researcher designed the survey on SurveyMonkey, an online survey development software service company. The company will notify the researcher via email every time a survey is completed. Survey Monkey's analysis page will show summaries for each question, which gives the researcher the opportunity to analyze the responses and compare the findings with previous research. Within the site, the researcher was also able to structure charts and graphs. Using Survey Monkey, enhanced accuracy and secured storage of data.

## **Survey Design**

The researcher drafted the survey questions and then revised them to enhance the validity and reliability after dialogic engagement with committee members and peers. The researcher also conducted a pilot survey with two members of her cohort to test if participants would understand the questions. This process also provided the opportunity to revise and enhance the survey questions. According to (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), having members of the population take the survey beforehand increases the study's reliability.

Each process enabled the researcher to define the relationship between the research and survey questions clearly. The survey questions related to RQ 1 answers if the participants have fixed or growth mindsets. While the survey questions associated with RQ 2 identified methods the sample uses to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. The finalized research and survey questions (See Appendix D).

## **Data Organization and Management**

Data management is imperative to this qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The subjects were assured that their confidentiality and anonymity are appropriately handled. Because researchers are legally bound by the IRB to protect the participant's identity (Hall & Feltner, 2004), all data was carefully handled and stored to protect the integrity and the anonymity of the participants.

Survey Monkey, the online company that will conduct the survey, will store data as it comes in. The password protected the Survey Monkey account that only the researcher knows. The researcher has the option of transporting data as it comes in or all at once. The data will be exported to the researcher's private email that is also secured by a password. Both the consent forms and data retrieved from the surveys were stored and organized in digital files. Because the surveys are electronic, no paperwork needed to be protected. All the documents will be backed up and protected by a password that only the researcher can access.

Before the survey launch, the researcher also carried out a pilot study, a small-scale experiment that increased the study's reliability by having members of the population take the survey beforehand. The more times a process can be replicated, the more likely the study is reliable (Cypress, 2017). The pilot survey test if participants understood the questions, allowed the researcher to make any needed adjustments.

### **Visual Maps**

The visual maps below connect the study's goals and purpose to answer the research questions. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological research is to explore the lived experiences of African American female high academic achievers and extrapolate methods they use and develop a self-help system to ease the stress and anxiety experienced by millions of Americans living in distress.

- RQ 1: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers' ability to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals?
- RQ 2: How do African American female academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety?

The goal of this research is to develop a self-help system to ease anxiety and grief. The researcher conducted an electronic survey to investigate African American female academic high achievers' mindsets and lived experiences. This demographic was selected because they are a subgroup of the population that suffers from stress and anxiety the most yet have experienced extreme heights in the world of academia. The snowball sampling method will be utilized to recruit subjects to participate. By triangulating the data, the validity, and the probability of having the research questions answered are increased.

## **Generalizability**

When deciding upon the sample group for this study, the generalizability was strongly considered. Generalizability is essential to this study because the research goal is to learn from the sample's lived experiences and extrapolate the findings to help other populations. In 2018, African American women reported suffering from stress and anxiety more than any other adult in America (ADAA, 2018).

In the literature review of this proposal, we learned that high achievers with growth mindsets were not born with the gift of overcoming obstacles. Instead, they put forth continuous practice and effort to achieve despite challenges (Dweck, 2012). Because the sample experiences the same hurdles, the data retrieved is relevant and applicable to the overall population. Thus, the sample is an adequate representation of the population of interest.

Before March 2020, the topic of stress, anxiety, and mindsets likely did not resonate with most people. However, there is strong resonance as the pandemic does not discriminate. Everyone is vulnerable to life-threatening disease. If an individual has not been affected, they know someone who is. The added pressures in today's society are inevitable. This research resonates and is generalizable because of its ability to influence, impact, and move people from a state of doubt to a state of hope. Thus far, what is known indicates data retrieved from the sample of African American female academic high achievers generalizes the research and will likely resonate with all United States citizens.

## **Validity and Reliability**

Several methods will be utilized to increase this study's accuracy. Increasing validity will describe whether an instrument or procedure measures what is proposed (Creswell, 2013). This study's validation strategies map onto and inform the research questions and goals. The researcher triangulated methods of retrieving essential data by reviewing scholarly articles, participating in peer debriefings, and conducting a questionnaire survey to construct validity.

Should the strategies used share the same outcome, the results are valid (Morgan, 2019). While no data source is absolute, each has an element of truth. When strategies are triangulated, validity is strengthened (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher carefully selected the adult population that suffers the most from stress and anxiety in America to increase external validity. Doing so ensured the data retrieved can be generalized and extrapolated to other demographics. To increase internal validity, both participant validation and dialogic engagement occur throughout the process. Participant validation is a research strategy that clears any uncertainty between the researcher and the sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, both parties were transparent and kept in touch for clarification. Dialogic engagement, another validation strategy used in this study, allows for debriefing and feedback from peers and mentors. It helped the researcher to become more objective and eliminate researcher bias on previous assumptions by providing a view of the topic from a different perspective (Chen et al., 2014).

The researcher will use reliability as a measurement tool to generate consistent and steady results, a prerequisite for validity. The methodology is clearly explained to address this study's reliability. Thus, future research can replicate the process and find similar results (Yin, 2013). The process entails a thorough investigation of previous research on the subject matter, conducting an electronic survey, and utilizing ethical and methodological techniques to analyze the data. With careful consideration of both internal and external validity, the researcher is confident that:

1. The results will reflect a relationship between variables and the results.
2. The results will be generalizable to most other populations.

## **Human Subject Considerations**

Pepperdine's Graduate Schools' IRB requires that all research methodologies be reviewed and approved prior to beginning the process (Hall & Feltner, 2004). This procedure is to explore any risk and ensure the safety of all subjects involved. The participants in this study will be emailed a consent form that explains that they are not required to complete the study, and they have the right to withdraw at any point (Creswell, 2018). The online survey tool used in this study poses no possible risks to the subjects. To minimize the subject's fear of data being revealed, the researcher was the only one with access to personal data and ensures confidentiality.

The IRB is tasked to protect the confidentiality of all subjects by removing any identifiers (Hall & Feltner, 2004). Researchers are legally bound to shield a subject's identity and responses. The subject's identity and survey results were safeguarded throughout the study and destroyed three years after publishing (Hall & Feltner, 2004).

Once the participants received the email link to the online survey, they were able to log on to the survey site with complete anonymity. The survey company will notify the researcher by email every time a survey is completed. The researcher was able to retrieve the data without knowing which respondent it came from. The survey responses and all correspondence related to it was stored on the researcher's private computer.

## **Proposed Analysis**

One of the main steps in qualitative research is data analysis (Creswell, 2013). By following the qualitative data analysis mandated, the researcher reviewed, summarized, generalized, and interpreted data accurately to report and explain the researched phenomena (Chen et al., 2014). The researcher examined, identified, and interpreted the data's themes and patterns to determine how they addressed the study's research questions (Chen et al., 2014). In the findings section, visuals like charts and graphs explain the data to the audience.

Upon the completion of each survey, SurveyMonkey's text analysis tool helped to categorize the survey responses. While many computer programs help analyze qualitative data, the researcher was mindful that the software could not efficiently code or replace human conceptual analysis (Leach, 2018). Thus, the researcher performed the content analysis with the preloaded themes reported by the survey service.

The researcher personally read and coded all of the responses to each survey question while developing essential themes or data groups. Upon completion, the researcher revisited the responses to see if the data could be categorized into more themes. While the survey host's analysis saved time and was invaluable, the personal review and refinement ensured the proper translations occurred.

Creswell's (2018) 5 step Data Analysis Process was followed to connect the phenomenon and the data. The steps include:

1. Organizing the data. The researcher retrieved the survey responses and compared them with the data found in the literature review.
2. Memoing. Noting similar themes provided the opportunity to discover potential patterns and refined thinking over time, which enabled fluid coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
3. Coding. In this phenomenological qualitative research, coding associated significant ideas with the data of interest, which created a narrative that linked relationships between the concepts (Leach, 2018).
4. Developing interpretations. The researcher repeatedly analyzed and compared themes to formulate new theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Feedback from the researcher's dissertation committee inspired the interpretations.
5. Presenting the data. As required, a formal report with visuals was prepared to present the final research findings. The data is presented in a structure that starts with the broader findings and ends with specific details (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



## **Means to Ensure Study Validity**

Qualitative validity refers to how well scientific research measures what it sets out to accomplish (Elster, 2017). In agreement, Pryor (2014) reports validity in qualitative research means that a study's findings must reflect the topic or situation accurately. It is essential that the data be certain and supported by the evidence to ensure validity (Creswell, 2018).

This study's researcher will make every attempt to remove personal bias from the study. In qualitative research, a concept used to halt research bias is referred to as reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflexivity is a process used in this study to implement self-awareness checks throughout (Elster, 2017). The researcher is aware of personal preconceptions and will not let them interfere at any stage of the research (Elster, 2017).

## **Plan for Reporting Findings**

A qualitative survey was selected to gain a deeper understanding of the study's topic from an individual's perspective. The methodology used and discussed in this chapter successfully addressed the research questions. The subject's insights will contribute to academic research and provide American's suffering from stress and anxiety a blueprint to practice positive thinking and goal achievement.

To help the readers understand the significance of the survey, the researcher will highlight common patterns and themes in the findings section. Graphs, charts, and other visuals will be included to represent the data. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), using visuals illustrates the relationships and ranks of information. When reporting the findings, the researcher will report the data and avoid making any claims about the results.

## **Issues/Concerns**

There are no foreseen issues or concerns about representation for the site, participants, or the researcher in relation to the study topic, goals, and setting. The online setting was an ideal format for accomplishing the study's goals. It is cost effective and efficient. While offering the

participants a comfortable and convenient environment to be open and honest. This site was the ideal format for accomplishing the study's goals.

This chapter provided a cohesive outline of this study's methodology. It discussed the chosen participants, strategies, tools, data collection and analysis methods. The implementation of the methodological approach and the findings are discussed in Chapter 4.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Introduction**

Building on Dweck's success theory used in classrooms, this phenomenological qualitative study set out to address the rapidly increasing number of Americans that suffer from stress and anxiety, which ultimately leads to fixed mindsets. The research aimed to see if adults can experience the same success as students by self-implementing a growth mindset. Followed by developing a structured method for the demographic of sufferers.

While there are a lot of studies that describe the relationship between a growth mindset and a students' success after developing a growth mindset (Dweck, 2012; French, 2016; Seaton, 2018), few studies address the extent to which adults experience the same achievement and gratifying outcomes in relation to a growth mindset. In search of data that can contribute to solving the problem, an electronic survey was conducted.

A total of 17 participants completed the electronic survey. I gained access to the participants via non-probability snowball sampling, a technique that requires subjects to recruit other possible subjects from their acquaintances (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). I initially reached out to five acquaintances that matched the criterion by phone and email. After agreeing to participate, I emailed them official invites, which requested they refer others that meet the requirement. Those referrals then recommend another set of possible participants, and the procedure continued until a sufficient number of participants were selected (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). To ensure the validity of the study, the goal was to get between six and ten participants. Within the first round of referrals, seventeen women were selected to participate.

Once the subjects were selected, they received an email invitation (see Appendix B), which summarized the research with a consent form attached. When the signed consent forms were returned,

the participants were emailed a link to anonymously take the survey. The electronic surveys enabled the participants to take it on their personal computer or smartphone.

Through my research, I identified three themes which are listed below:

1. All but one of the participants have experienced obstacles that trigger stress and anxiety.
2. Growth mindsets strongly impact the participants' achievement.
3. The participants use self-help techniques to implement and maintain their growth mindsets.

## **Setting**

Initially designed to include a face-to-face interview format, the Covid-19 pandemic, and resulting CDC guidelines required the shift to an electronic survey. This change offered benefits, which Groves et al. (2004) describe as practical and efficient. The selected virtual setting also minimizes potential psychological or physical harm to the sample (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

The participants first received an initial email inviting them to take the survey. Once it was agreed they fit the demographic to participate, they were emailed a consent form. Once signed consent forms were returned, subjects were emailed a link to take the electronic survey anonymously. Both the initial invite and the consent form discussed participants being able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants agreed to be volunteers and provided all of my contact information should they have any questions or concerns.

## **Demographic**

African American females with doctorates participated in the study. This specific demographic of minority women in America suffer the most from stress and anxiety yet have overcome obstacles and achieved the heights of academia. It is essential to learn the experiences of this group to extrapolate to other groups that suffer. While there are high achievers across all disciplines, African American females with doctorates identify as women who have reached academia's peak, achieving what less than 3% of all people have achieved globally (US Census,

2016). Below are the two research questions constructed to guide the research design.

### **Restatement of Research Questions**

- RQ 1: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals?
- RQ 2: How do African American female academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety?

### **Data Collection**

A literature review, an online survey, and dialogic engagement with colleagues and mentors occurred using multiple data collection methods. Triangulating the data collection method was a strategic juxtaposition of various data sources to achieve greater rigor and validity in this study (Cohen et al., 2000). The online survey was a systematic methodology used to measure the population's views and characteristics (Groves et al., 2004). The qualitative online surveys garnered in-depth data about people's motivations and reasoning.

### **Data Analysis**

When analyzing the data, irrelevant statements were discarded, while significant words were organized into themes. By examining, identifying, and interpreting the data's themes and patterns, I determined how they addressed the study's research questions. Upon the completion of each survey, SurveyMonkey's text analysis tool helped to categorize the survey responses. While many computer programs help analyze qualitative data, I was mindful that the software could not efficiently code or replace human conceptual analysis (Leach, 2018).

I read and coded all responses to each survey question while developing the essential themes or data groups. While the survey host's analysis saved time and was invaluable, the personal review and refinement ensured the proper translations occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then repeatedly analyzed and compared the themes to formulate new theories and develop interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

These codes were initially prompted by the reviewed literature and reinforced by the participants' responses. Because the codes are based on the sample of African American females, it's emic, which refers to a specific culture. The coding was also both inductive and deductive. Inductive because there was a guide of behaviors, I was in search of based on the Success theory. It was also deductive because I was not aware of how the demographic would answer the questions. The codes are strongly related to theory because the sample utilizes the same tools students found success with. My learnings strongly map onto the theory of success framework as well as the reviewed literature. Religion/Spirituality/Prayer is a component not included in Dweck's theory but emerged as a component utilized by the sample and found in the literature to be essential in overcoming obstacles.

More specifically, I used the 5 step Data Analysis Process to connect the phenomenon and the data. The steps included:

1. Organizing the data.
2. Memoing.
3. Coding.
4. Developing interpretations.
5. Presenting the data

The themes that emerged when coding are:

1. Attitude
2. Gratitude
3. Goal setting
4. Vision
5. Affirmations

## Results

The survey results responded directly to the research questions by revealing a growth mindset does impact the sample's achievement, and the strategies they use to conquer their fixed mindsets.

### Survey Questions

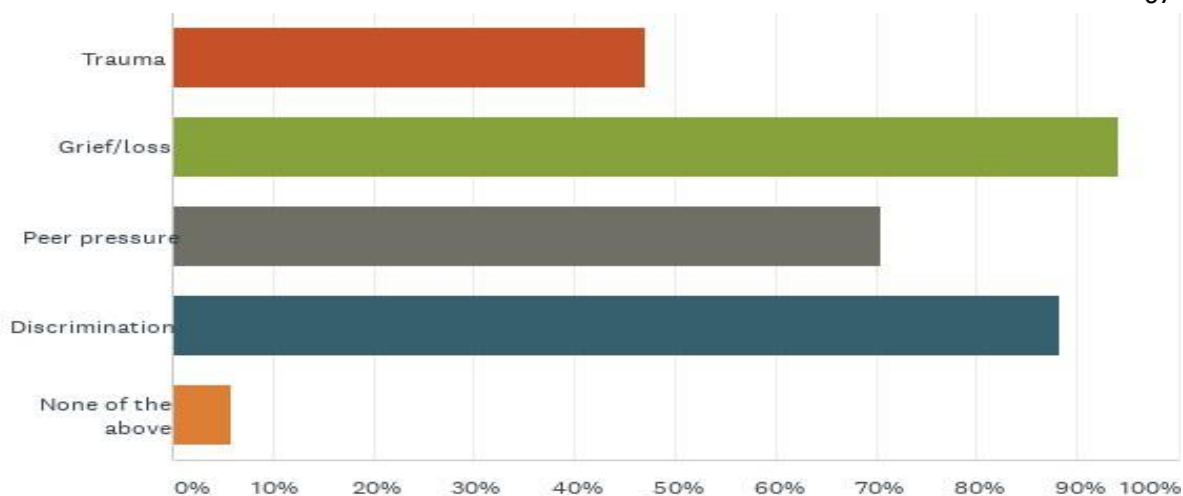
The electronic survey was designed with 16 questions. The first question was asked to confirm the demographic is a group that experiences stress and anxiety triggers. The second set of questions set out to determine if a growth mindset impacts the demographics achievement. The final set of questions explored strategies used, if any, by the group of high achievers to overcome challenges and accomplish their goals.

Question 1 asked the participants if they have ever experienced trauma, grief/loss, peer pressure, or discrimination. The data revealed that all but one of the participants had experienced at least one of the triggers. Figure 1 shows that 100% of participants experienced grief/loss, 93.75% experienced discrimination, 75% have experienced peer pressure, and 50% expressed experiencing trauma.

### Figure 1

#### *Stress and Anxiety Triggers*

Q1: Have you ever experienced any of the following?



The remainder of the questions are divided into two sets to address each of the survey questions. Data retrieved from the first set of questions answered RQ 1: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals? Those questions are:

1. How do define achievement?
2. How do you overcome stress and anxiety?
3. As a child, were you encouraged to embrace challenges or embrace what you do well?
4. People only achieve success when they are born with intelligence, skill and talent?
5. How do you currently feel about the challenges you have endured in the past?
6. When things seem difficult, you often?

The second finding determined that a growth mindset does impact the African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals. The question asking the group to define achievement gives insight into mindset. It determines if the mindset believes achievement is something that comes naturally or requires effort. Figure 2 is a cloud view of the most common words used by the participants. The core words retrieved are action verbs. Words that require a person to grow rather than stay fixed. The words displayed in Figure 2 indicate a growth mindset impacts the participant's success.



**Figure 2**  
*Word Cloud*



The second survey question designed to determine if a growth mindset impacts the participants asked how they overcome stress and anxiety. The data tells us the responses echoed similar sentiments. Instead of allowing stress and anxiety to overwhelm them, they consciously step away from the problem and focus on strengthening their mindset before tackling the issue. Proving that a growth mindset impacts the sample. The common themes are italicized in a few of the participant's responses below:

Respondent #2 answered:

There are several things I do to overcome stress and anxiety. I talk to family members or friends, especially those with a positive attitude. I try to surround myself with

positive and encouraging people. As a very religious person, I pray and seek guidance from the Lord. I read the Bible. I take the focus off of the stressful things. I try to separate myself from the things that cause me stress and anxiety.

Respondent #5 explained:

I overcome my stress and anxiety through acting upon my faith in God, as well as my belief in what is for me, will reveal itself in God's time, not mine. I also rely heavily on journaling.

Respondent #7 said:

Through prayer and faith. While

Respondent #10 contends:

Physical activity, such as taking a walk or just getting away from the desk (in the pre-COVID days), also helped.

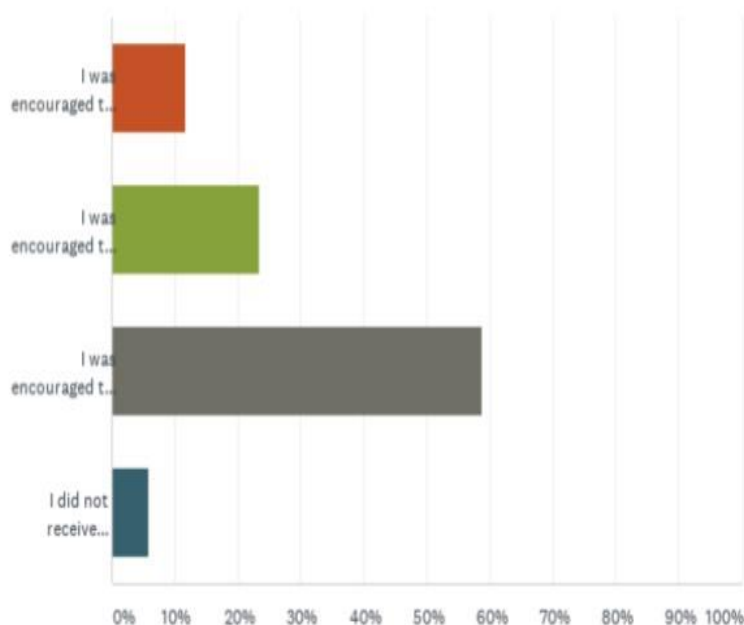
Respondent #14 responded:

Faith/prayer/worship, writing, reading, quiet time/reflection, nature, beach, family/friends, exercise, therapy.

The data retrieved from the third survey question investigates if a growth mindset impacts the sample's accomplishments ask: As a child, were you encouraged to embrace challenges or only embrace what you do well? Because the literature reviewed tells us that someone with a fixed mindset only embraces what they do well and someone with a growth mindset embraces challenges, we see that more than half of the participants have been programmed early on to know that challenges are not something you shy away from. That train of thought is a crucial component to developing a growth mindset. The sample's worldview of embracing challenges seen in Figure 3, again proves that a growth mindset impacts the demographics' ability to conquer negativity by not succumbing to or engaging with it.

**Figure 3***Growth Mindset Impact***Q4: As a child, were you encouraged to embrace challenges or what you do well?**

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



Powered by SurveyMonkey

Of the 16 participants, only one reports not being encouraged as a child, while four of the participants were encouraged to embrace what they do well. In contrast, two of the 16 participants were encouraged to only embrace what challenges them and nine, 56.25%, of the participants were encouraged to embrace both what they do well and what challenges them.

The data suggest that a high achiever's mindset impacts accomplishing goals that are not easily attainable. In response to the first research question: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals? The data revealed that participants' approach to doing things that do not come naturally to them will be challenging but can be overcome. That logic says that a growth mindset approach has enabled the demographic to thrive. This means that someone suffering

from stress or anxiety can increase the probability of achieving desirable outcomes by changing one's mindset from fixed to growth.

The follow-up question below asks the sample if they thought people can only achieve success if they are born with intelligence, skill, or talent. As you will see in Figure 4, only one of the participants agreed that success can only be achieved if a person is born with intelligence, skill, and talent. While two participants neither agreed nor disagreed. An overwhelming 13 of the 16 participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Their responses indicate once again that a growth mindset impacts the demographics' ability to overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

#### **Figure 4**

### *Growth Mindset Impact I*



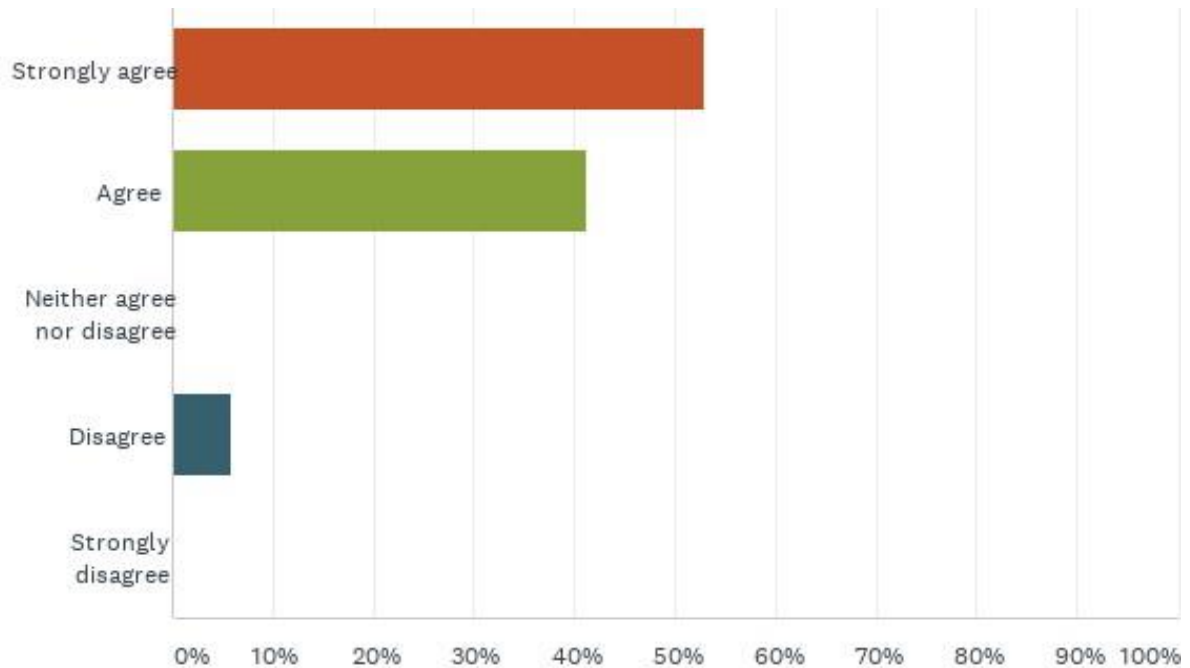
The researcher explored the above question in reverse to ensure validity. She asked the sample if intelligence, skill, and talent can be developed with hard work and dedication. Everyone surveyed, except for one in this group of high achievers, strongly believes goals are attainable with continuous effort.

In Figure 5 we see a visual validating that 93.75% of the participant's growth mindsets impact how they approach and defeat occurrences that challenge them.

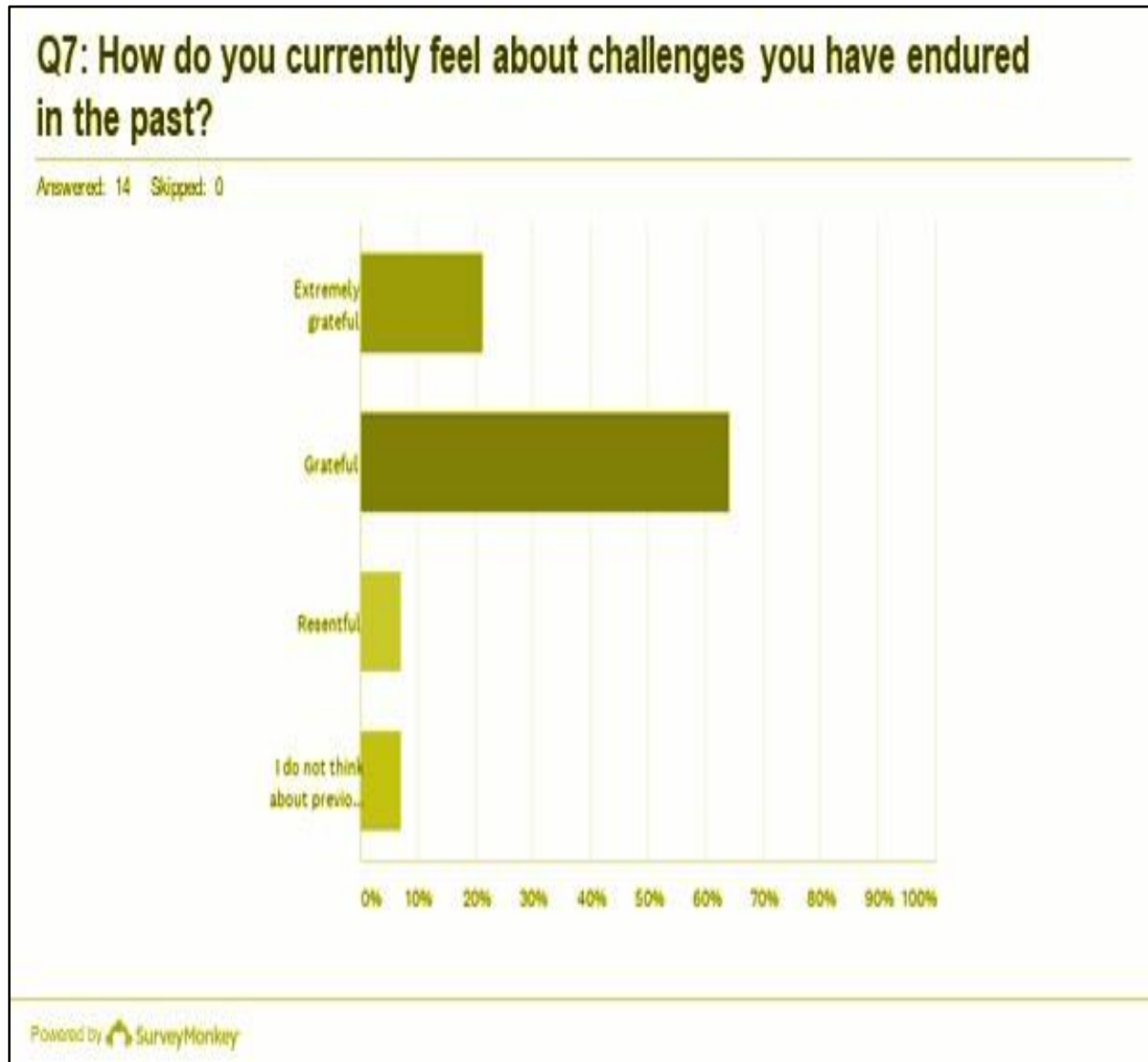
### **Figure 5**

#### *Growth Mindset Impact II*

Talent, intelligence, and skill can be developed with effort and practice.



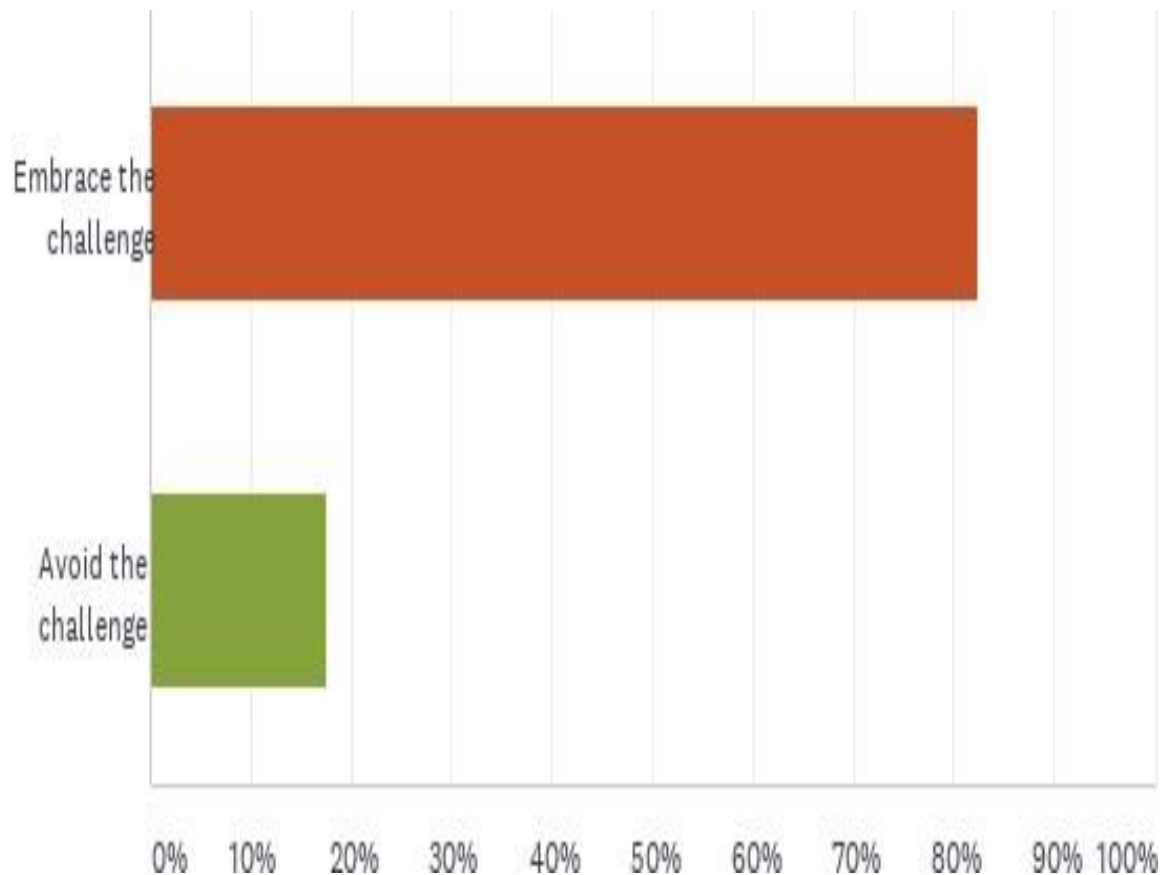
Delving deeper into the phenomenon, Survey question 7 asks the participants if they felt gratitude or resentment regarding their past challenges. We learned if a person embraces their challenge, they then experience gratitude for building a skill set that once seemed impossible. The data reveals that all but one participant was either grateful or extremely grateful for the challenges they have endured. Another one of the participants expressed blocking out the past. With 15 of the 17 revealing feelings of gratitude regarding their previous obstacles allows us to again conclude that a growth mindset impacts the sample's worldview.

**Figure 6***Growth Mindset Impact III*

The final question to determine the impact, if any, that a growth mindset has on the sample is survey question number 8, (see Figure 7), which also provides overwhelming evidence that this group of participants is impacted by growth mindsets. While three of the participants say, they avoid challenges, 13 of the 17 reports embracing rather than avoiding challenges.

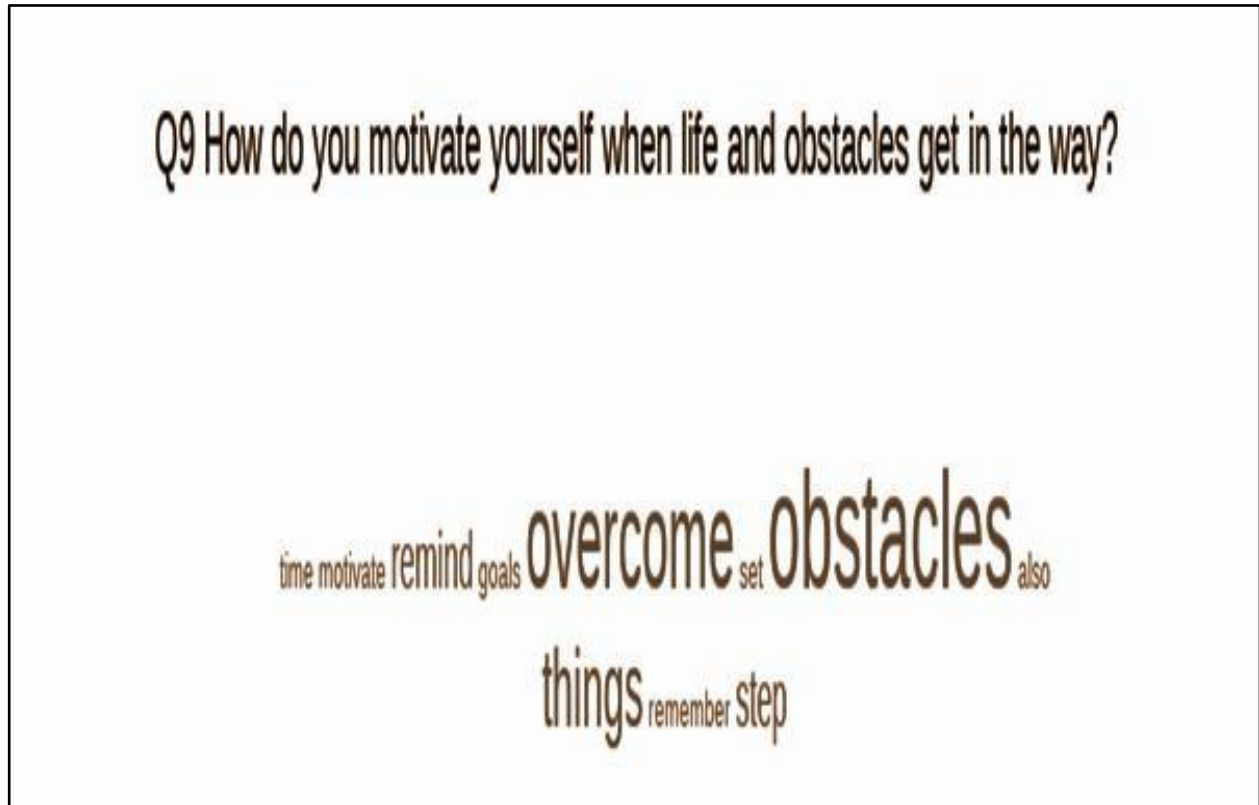
**Figure 7***Growth Mindset Impact IV*

Q8: When things seem difficult, you are often:

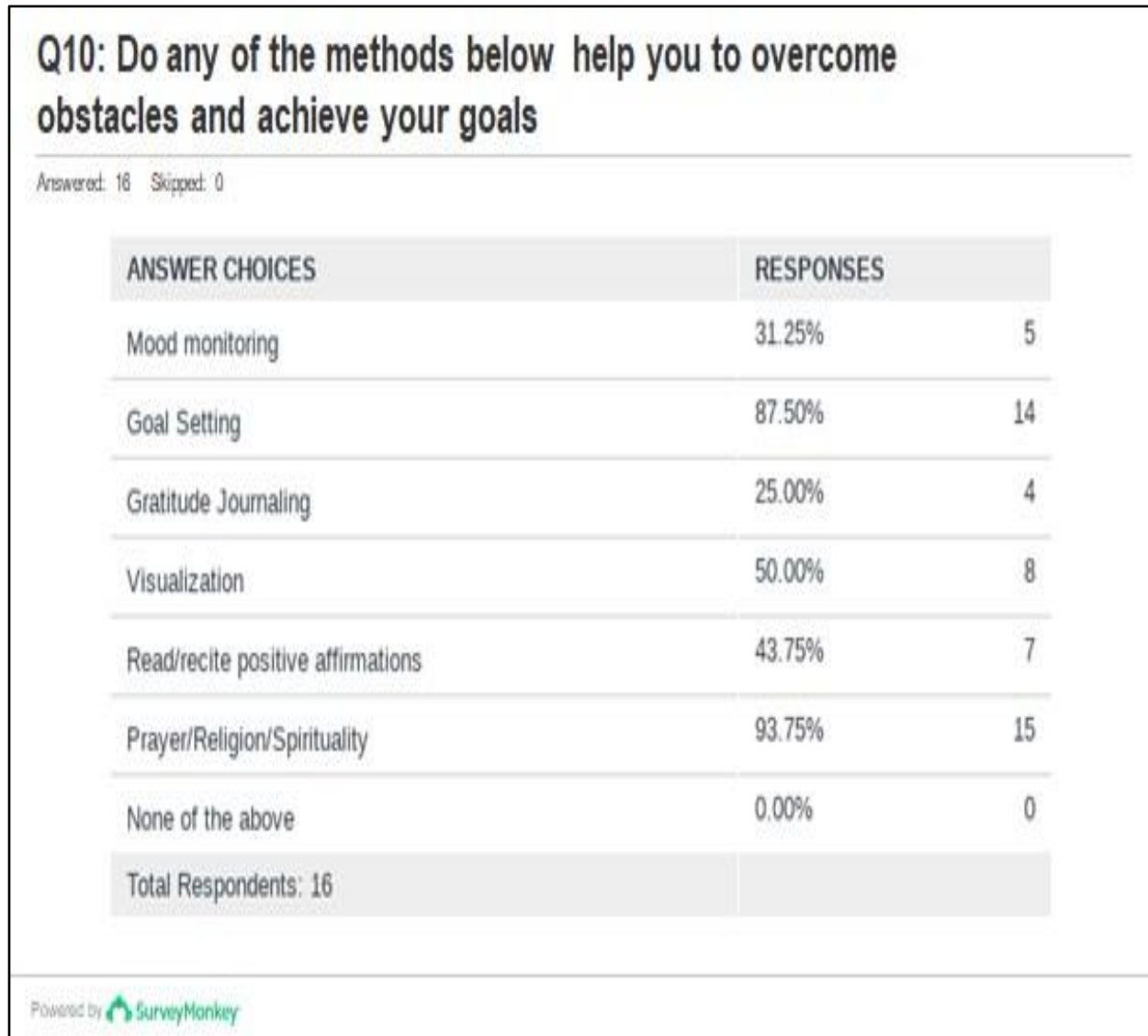


Research Question 2 asks: How do African American female academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety? The next set of survey questions were asked to the participants to address how they manage stress and anxiety. Question nine asks how they motivate themselves. See Figure 8, a word cloud that shows the most frequently used words in their responses, with the larger and embolden words representing the most mentioned. Besides the phrase obstacle, which is in the question, the terms overcome, remind/remember, and goals stand out.



**Figure 8***Word Cloud II*

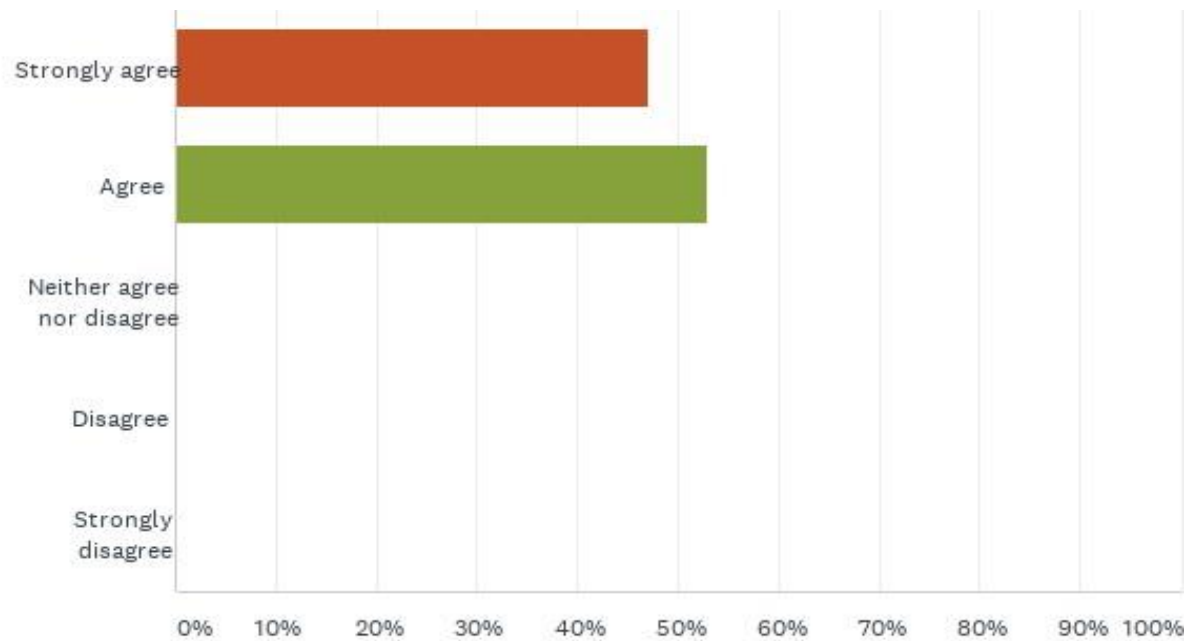
In the literature review, we learned the most effective and frequently used techniques and practices that motivate individuals include mood monitoring, goal setting, gratitude journaling, positive visualization, positive affirmations, and prayer/religion/spirituality. The group expressed they too utilize each of the five tools. Notice in Figure 9 that fourteen of the 16 participants said goal setting, while 15 report prayer/religion/spirituality are practices they rely on to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. 8 of the 16 participants envision positive outcomes. Seven ladies said reading and reciting positive affirmations help them. Mood monitoring is practiced by five participants, with four that utilize gratitude journaling to motivate themselves

**Figure 9***Motivational Methods*

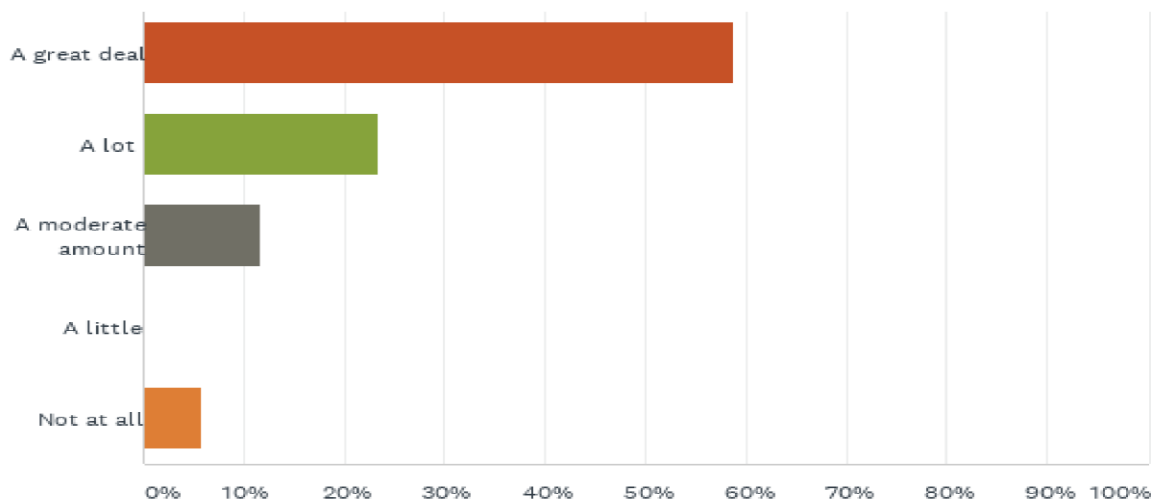
Although mood monitoring and gratitude journaling were the least used of the five explored techniques, the participants still communicate their importance. The responses to question number 11, (see Figure 10) finds that every participant said a positive attitude dictates positive results. Furthermore, the answers to question 14 (see Figure 11) revealed more than half of the participants share how gratitude influences their success.

**Figure 10***Positive Attitude*

A positive attitude dictates positive results:

**Figure 11***Gratitude and Success*

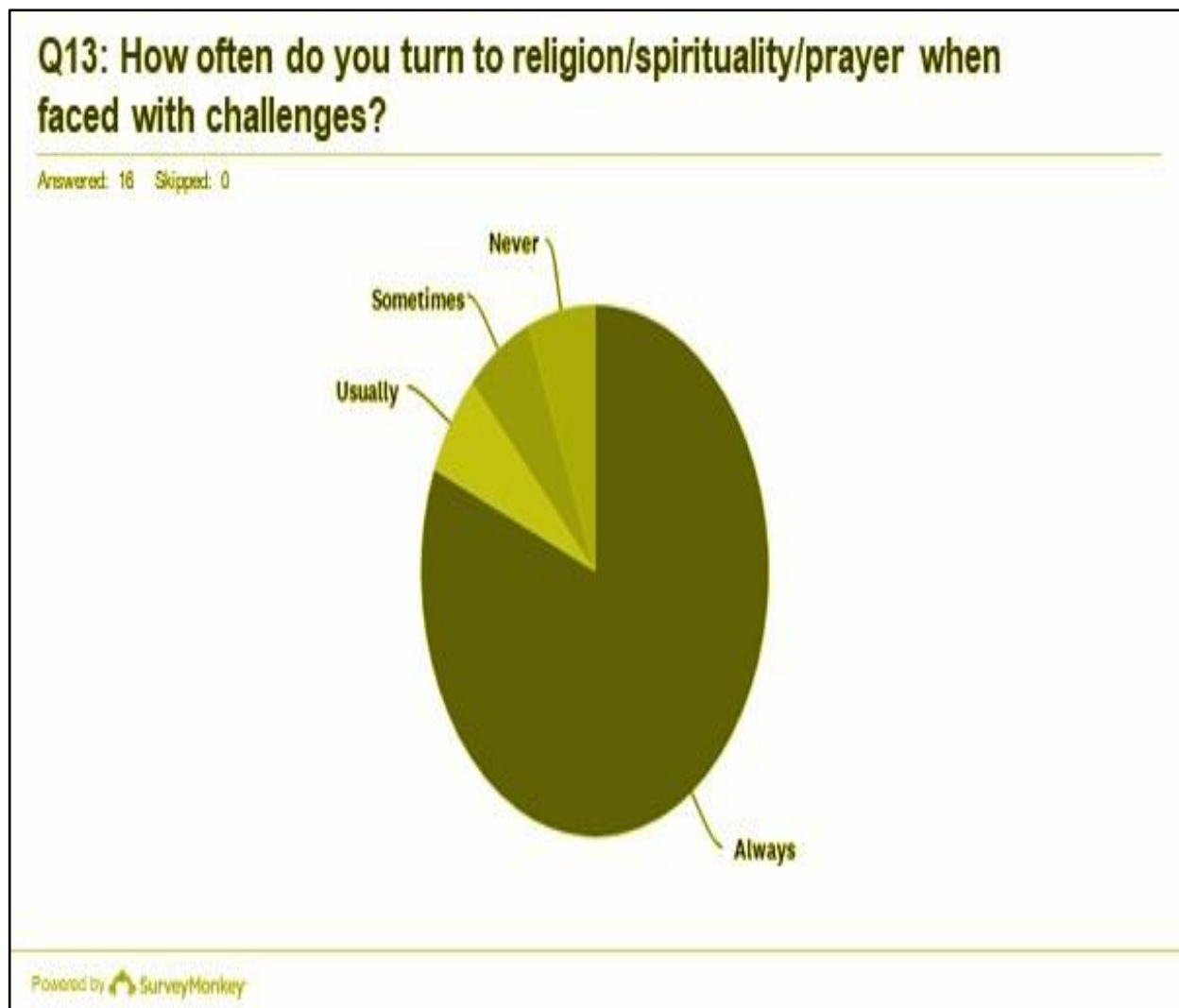
Q14: How does gratitude influence your success?



Because 92.86% of participants reported religion/spirituality/prayer as a practice they partake in when faced with obstacles, question 13, (see Figure 12) explored how often they rely on the approach when faced with adversity. Thirteen of the 16 participants said they always rely on this practice. One of the participants replied, usually. One responded they sometimes depend on the method, while one said they do not utilize religion/spirituality/prayer.

**Figure 12**

*Religion/Spirituality/Prayer*



Religion/Spirituality/Prayer is a component that is not incorporated into the growth mindset steps but found to be an extremely relevant practice in the literature review and the survey data. As stated at the beginning of this chapter:

1. All but one of the participants have experienced obstacles that trigger stress and anxiety.
2. Growth mindsets strongly impact the participants' achievement.
3. The participants use self-help techniques to implement and maintain their growth mindsets.

Each of the findings answers the two main research questions that led this research. In response to RQ 1: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals? The data revealed a growth mindset significantly impacts the demographic to conquer challenges and accomplish goals. In response to RQ 2: How do African American female academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety? The data reveals the demographic utilizes five self-help tools or strategies to manage their stress and anxiety. Four of the five (attitude, goal setting/effort, vision, and affirmations) strongly align with Dweck's Success theory components.

The component that is not included in Dweck's theory is religion/spirituality/prayer.

### **Summary**

This chapter gives a brief overview of the study; I detail the setting and demographic, restate the research questions, and describe the data collection and data analysis methodologies.

This study set out to address the rapidly increasing number of Americans suffering from stress and anxiety (ADAA, 2018; APA, 2020). To do so, an electronic survey was conducted. Considering the pandemic and CDC guidelines, this method was deemed the safest and most efficient way to retrieve data.

To discover more about this phenomenon, the sample for this study was drawn from a population of high achievers. African American females with doctorates were chosen as the sample because they have excelled as high achievers despite being a part of the largest demographic that suffers from stress and anxiety (American Psychological Association, 2018). While I anticipated a sample size of at least 6-10 people, a requirement for validity. I had a sample size of 17 and turned away participants after the survey closed.

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method. I reached out to five acquaintances that matched the criterion by phone and email. After agreeing to participate, they were emailed official invites, which requested they refer others that meet the standard. Those referrals then recommend another set of possible participants, and the procedure continued until a sufficient number of participants were selected (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). To ensure the validity of the study, the goal was to get between six and ten participants. Within the first round of referrals, 17 women were selected to participate. Upon being chosen to participate, email invitations were sent summarizing the research with a consent form attached. Once returned, a link to anonymously take the survey was emailed.

The data collection methods were triangulated by reviewing the literature, conducting an online survey, and participating in dialogic engagement with colleagues and mentors. Using this strategic juxtaposition of multiple data sources allowed the study to achieve greater rigor and validity (Cohen et al., 2000).

To analyze the survey responses, I used the 5 step Data Analysis Process to connect the phenomenon and the data (Creswell, 2013). The steps included:

1. Organizing the data
2. Memoing
3. Coding
4. Developing interpretations
5. Presenting the data

These codes are emic and were prompted by the reviewed literature and participant's responses. The coding was inductive because there was a guide of behaviors, I was in search of based on the Success theory. It was also deductive because I was not aware of how the demographic would answer the questions. The categories of codes were Attitude, Gratitude, Goal setting, Vision, and Affirmations. Except for one component, gratitude, the codes strongly map onto the Theory of Success framework and findings in the reviewed literature.

Because we learned that a growth mindset can be implemented and maintained, I designed a framework that builds upon Dweck's theory by combining the participants' methods to manage their stress and anxiety. The framework is coined the AGGVA model. It logically succinct the five components discovered in this study and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five of this research.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusion, And Recommendations**

### **Overview**

This study aimed to learn the lived experiences of African American women with doctorates. More specifically, the research sought to find how a growth mindset impacts the demographic, and the tools they use to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. The data revealed that: a growth mindset significantly impacts the participants' approach to challenges and goals, the participants retreat from stressful situations to replenish their attitudes with gratitude and prayer, and to overcome obstacles and achieve their desires, the participants set goals, envision positive results, and affirm that they will succeed.

### **Purpose of the Study and Restatement of Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to build on Dweck's Success Theory used in classrooms to see if adults can experience the same success as students by self-implementing a growth mindset. The goal was to develop a structured process that will enhance self-awareness, self-confidence, and achievement. To do so, the following questions led the research:

1. To what extent (if at all) does a growth mindset have an impact on African American female academic high achievers' ability to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals?

As well as:

2. How do African American females who are academic high achievers manage stress and anxiety?

Seventeen participants took an electronic survey. They were recruited using the snowball sampling method. The first five contacts that met the criterion were asked to contact five potential participants they know and asked them to participate. The process continued until the target number of participants were obtained. My goal was to garner ten to fifteen



participants. Fortunately, I was able to exceed that goal in the first round of snowball sampling. Dweck's success theory of mindsets was a befitting conceptual framework for this study because it emphasized the significance of how one's mindset dictates a person's personal development and achievement.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The study's findings strongly reflect the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. As Dweck (2012) points out, achievement is determined by mindset. A mindset is our worldview, our lens, our perception. How we view things predicts their outcomes. Chapter 2 reviewed countless studies and found that students can develop growth mindsets by changing their beliefs and implementing new strategies. When this occurred, the students not only shattered their belief that they could not excel, but they also accomplished their goals and experienced a greater degree of happiness (Dweck, 2009).

In those studies, teachers and parents are taught techniques to help students implement and maintain growth mindsets. The adults are led to help students to change their negative self-talk. For example: if a student says I will never pass math, fractions are so challenging. The student is prompted to change the statement to with effort and practice, I will master fractions and pass math. I just have not mastered it yet. That affirming language causes a shift in attitude. Eventually, the student learned to monitor their attitude/mood and dismiss negative thoughts. In addition to the affirming language causing awareness and a shift in attitude, it simultaneously sets a goal-I have not mastered fractions yet. Making mastering fractions the goal. Furthermore, the affirming language instills gratitude for the capabilities you do have and a vision of what is possible.

After developing an in-depth understanding of the direct correlation between success and a growth mindset, I pondered if adults struggling to accomplish their goals and improve their lives can learn to implement and maintain a growth mindset. I also wondered if adult high achievers across demographics utilize the same tools and techniques as the students to accomplish their goals. I discovered high academic achievers, in fact, use the same or similar practices. Based on the growth mindset tools, I designed a self-help model to alleviate stress and anxiety and assist in accomplishing goals.

### **The AGGVA Framework**

The AGGVA framework was designed as a theoretical framework to practice positive thinking and goal achievement. AGGVA, an acronym of the study's five themes, was designed as a sequence of self-help practices to defeat challenging circumstances. Each letter in the AGGVA in the Spirit model is discussed in relation to the reviewed literature and survey data.

#### ***Attitude***

Monitoring one's attitude or mood is a positive psychology technique used to improve mental health (Nicholas et al., 2015). In the literature and the survey results, we found that when a person records their mood regularly, it helps identify patterns (Nicholas et al., 2015). Checking in with how you are thinking and what your thoughts are focused on is a healthy way of alerting yourself to stay on a positive track.

When thoughts are negative, the mood check-in allows time to breathe, pray, and process the situation. This is a good practice has proven useful for all. Whether individuals suffer from anxiety and stress on a regular basis or not. One rarely achieves their desires with a negative attitude contends McMillan, (2013); and Hume, (2013). In times of despair, negative thinking is expected. Deciding how we respond to the negativity and for how long a choice is.

One decides if they will let negative thoughts, emotions, and circumstances control us or if we will control them. Monitoring one's attitude is the first step in the AGGVA model because our thoughts dictate our outcome.

To stop our pattern of negative emotions, write each issue on a clean sheet of paper. Find a scripture related to the topic and write it above the problem. Have this visual somewhere easily accessible. When negative thoughts occur related to the challenge, repeat the scripture as a reminder that no weapon formed against you shall prosper. Use God's words as armor to defeat stagnation, disappointments, and frustrations.

### ***Gratitude***

An attitude of gratitude plays a vital role in motivating positive thoughts and behavior (Parker, 2019). Therefore, it is the second step in the AGGVA in the Spirit framework. Data reveals that gratitude inspires effort, elevation, and humility (Armenta, et al., 2017). This study's participants overwhelmingly express gratitude is pertinent in their accomplishments, yet they admit they regularly utilize this technique. It is easy to focus on the worldly. We are bombarded and pressured to focus on it at every turn.

Within this step, if the model, gratitude journaling is suggested as an exercise. Consistently find at least one thing to be grateful for a day (Parker, 2019). Challenge yourself to write one gratitude entry an hour. Give thanks amid a storm. Find a positive in every negative. The attitude check-in exercise serves as a foundation for starting the gratitude journal. Should one struggle to find what they are grateful for, the scriptures found during the attitude check-in exercise will inspire thoughts of gratitude. One must arm themselves with an attitude of gratitude regardless of circumstance.

## ***Goals***

When you have an attitude of gratitude, it is easier to focus on a better tomorrow.

Whether one believes that their dreams are not possible or merely wishes that things will get better on their own are mistaken. Faith without work is dead (James, NKJV:2:20). Goals are a blueprint to achieving your desires. Focusing on a worthwhile goal distracts negative thinking that arises from stress and anxiety (Gollwitzer, 2012). One must be willing to go to great lengths to achieve a worthwhile goal (Mandino, 1984). Higher performance occurs when goals are specific and intricate (Wrosch et al., 2013). The third step of the AGGVA in the Spirit model requires writing down goals and consistently working towards them.

## ***Vision***

I grew up in Washington, DC, when the infamous Mayor Marion Barry was at the helm of the nation's capital. He implemented the Mayor's Summer Youth Institute that employed every youth in the city. At the start of each day, teens across the city recited in unity: If it is to be, it's up to me. Yes, I can. Yes, I will. That chant was followed by another. In unison, we chanted: If I can see it, I can achieve it. Any Washingtonian that grew up during the Marion Barry era can recite those affirmations without hesitation. Every teen from that era knew we needed to have a vision of a positive future.'

Visualizing a positive outcome illuminates' possibility and influences a growth mindset (Burton & Lent, 2016). One survey participant described achievement as "an accomplished goal that starts as a vision." Vision-boarding is an exercise recommended for this fourth step in the AGGVA model. The difference to this vision board is God's name should be in the center of the worldly material things one wants to acquire. This will relieve stress and anxiety by eliminating ego and relinquishing control.

## ***Affirm***

Affirmations change perceptions, boost optimism, self-esteem, and effort (Wood et al., 2009). The repetitive exercise of reciting positive affirmations reprograms thinking patterns (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). When a person begins to believe the affirmations, positive changes occur (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The motivational repetitions dramatically improve an individual's life by being a good source of encouragement and calm (Campbell, 2018).

Studies on fixed and growth mindset find that the way a teacher speaks to students changes the student's perspective and achievement levels (Dweck, 2006). In this study, the participants of high achievers reveal the same concept applies to adults who are battling stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts (Wood et al., 2009). Just as positive affirmations directly impact students' motivation levels (Wood et al., 2009), the sample reports affirmations strongly impact their success. Incorporating positive self-talk into a person's daily routine releases any resistance that blocks an individual from their desires (Hicks, 2009).

## **Findings linked Back to the Literature**

In chapter 2, four themes were examined: mindset; social, cultural and generational norms; personal development; and self-help techniques. It was discovered that fixed and growth mindsets are reliable indicators of achievement (Duckworth, 2016), while social, cultural, and generational norms are found to be significant contributors to early mindset programming that triggers stress and anxiety (Chen et al., 2014). Personal development literature revealed that emotional intelligence, positivity, and achievement are vital components to overcome challenges and improve one's life. Furthermore, the literature showed the efficacy of motivational techniques that align with the tools used to implement students' growth mindsets.

This section of the research compares what we learned in chapter 2 with the survey results revealed in chapter 4.

To determine if the participants have experienced stress and anxiety, as the literature suggested, the first survey question asked the participants if they have ever experienced trauma, grief/loss, peer pressure, or discrimination. All are factors that derive from the pressures related to social, cultural, and generational norms. 100% of the participants experienced one or more of the challenges. All of the participants report experiencing grief/loss. 93% have experienced discrimination, 71% have faced peer pressure, and 57% expressed experiencing trauma. As stated in this report's methods section, this demographic was chosen because they accomplished their academic goal despite being a subgroup of minority women who learned to overcome stress and anxiety.

### ***Mindset***

The literature on mindset revealed that a person's mindset reflects their perceptions, which dictates their ability to accomplish their desired goal (Buchanan & Kern, 2017). In 2006, psychologist Carol Dweck coined the terms fixed mindset and growth mindset (Seaton, 2018). A growth mindset assumes that challenges can be conquered with effort and determination (Seaton, 2018). While a person with a fixed mindset believes that skills and intelligence are set in stone and fixed (Dweck, 2012). Rarely attempting something that appears difficult because they do not think it is possible (Buchanan & Kern, 2017).

Mirroring the literature on mindsets, the findings from survey questions four through eight addressed the first research question: To what extent (if any) does a growth mindset impact African American female academic high achievers overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals? Thirteen of the sixteen participants report they embrace challenges and feel

grateful for them. Just as thirteen of the sixteen believe intelligence, skill, and talent can be developed with hard work and dedication. An overwhelming 15 of the 16 participants strongly believe goals are attainable with continuous effort. Data reveals that the participants' growth mindset strongly impacts their perceptions of success when challenged.

### ***Social, Cultural and Generational Norms***

Social, cultural, and generational norms were explored to discover if they contribute to developing one's mindset (Chen, et al., 2013). Norms are standards, traits, and behavior patterns derived from a large group to be typical (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). Social norms significantly influence one's mindset because they influence decisions one would not necessarily choose without societal pressures (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). Generational standards also dictate one's mindset (Johnson, 2018), which adult children perceive and take on themselves (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016). Similarly, cultural norms and expectations program what is acceptable based on lifestyle and tradition (Heine, 2015). An individual's values as an adult differ from their group's attitudes and behavior patterns, which creates stress and anxiety (Tsai et al., 2016).

The survey data revealed that the participants have endured trauma, peer pressure, discrimination, and loss/grief. These experiences all derive from Social, cultural, and generational norms. The influence these norms have on one's mindset causes cognitive dissonance and uncertainty (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). An adult must practice self-awareness to determine if they are being true to the word of God and themselves. The pressures from worldly influences cause us to overlook how we contribute to our stress and anxiety. Doing so does not come with ease. It requires continuous effort and steadfast faith.

### ***Personal Development***

Personal development skills are essential to positive thinking and goal achievement (Whitehall et al., 2018). Personal development and awareness consist of activities that heighten emotional awareness (Aubrey, 2016). Personal development cannot be mastered over a specific period; it is a continuous occurrence throughout a person's life (APA, 2018). There are four core steps to self-development: Figuring out the personal desire, making the desire a clear goal, staying motivated, and increasing emotional intelligence (Nyatyowa, 2017). The participants in this study revealed they all set goals and use self-help tools to stay motivated.

### ***Self-help Techniques***

Self-help techniques require consistency and dedication (Sieber et al., 2019). The tools provide the opportunity to practice positive thinking and self-improvement. (Sieber et al., 2019). We learned in chapter 2 that personal development promotes the resilience required to accomplish your goals (Sieber et al., 2019). Researchers conclude that learning and practicing self-help techniques enhances an individual's willpower and desire to achieve (Sieber et al., 2019). The results from the concluded the same. The group of high academic achievers all report utilizing self-help techniques to motivate themselves during trying times.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

If I could do this study again and expand the research, I would inquire about happiness. We really need to know if high achievement equals happiness. Since the sample was gender and race-specific, future research should explore the transferability to men and different cultures. Because my scope was limited to a specific topic, future research should build upon these findings. But for the purpose of this study, the methods selected, and the population really were the best way to get at the research question.



## **Implications of Practice**

One of the significant outcomes of this study was the AGGVA framework. The AGGVA model is a set of five self-help tools that sufferers of stress and anxiety can adopt to implement and maintain a growth mindset. In times of scarcity and uncertainty, stress and anxiety are heightened due to cultural, social, generational expectations. High achievers have counteracted the onslaught by utilizing the same practices as the students that participated in the growth mindset studies. To offset the onslaught of negativity, sufferers must augment their current mindset with new techniques and processes to arm them with strength and resilience. This study's findings have filled a gap in research and contributed to designing a comprehensive framework that can support sufferers in a disruptive environment.

Each of the five AGGVA steps alleviates stagnation caused by stress and anxiety. The five steps outline the personal development aspects of a person's emotional and spiritual awareness and intelligence that must be addressed before navigating a change in circumstances. AGGVA moves the focus from hopelessness and defeat to belief, faith, and action. It requires a person to change the channel by adopting a new perspective and worldview by embedding new mindsets and acquiring new skills. The individual that wants to experience effective change must engage in both emotional and spiritual growth.

The AGGVA is an acronym representing the growth mindset practices found in the literature reviewed and survey results utilized by high achieving adults. AGGVA stands for Attitude, Gratitude, Goal setting, Vision, and Affirm. AGGVA represents all demographics' opportunity to identify perceptions to discard and discover new ways to integrate proven tools that are elevated if aligned with spirituality.

While there are many self-help techniques, practices, and theories in the world today, it isn't easy to decipher which ones to use and when. People know of these tools, yet there seems to be uncertainty on which ones to use, how long one should practice, and what they will get out of them. This study informs the practice of professionals in the fields of mental health, psychology, and business. In each of the areas, people are their greatest product. The goal of each profession is to inspire elevation and positive self-satisfaction.

This study informs the practice of professionals in the fields of mental health, psychology, and business. In each of the areas, people are their greatest product. The goal of each profession is to inspire elevation and positive self-satisfaction.

Psychologists will also benefit from this research. Those researching the efficacy of self-help tools and methods that clients can use on their own between sessions will find this study useful. If organized in a cohesive and simplified manner, these techniques will help psychologists that service clients virtually.

Customer and employee satisfaction are critical to a business reaching its goals; thus, this research will also benefit them. Customers give rave reviews and referrals when they have a pleasant experience with a company. Businesses should invest in their employee's personal development and growth mindsets to achieve this.

### **Future Research**

There are three recommendations for future research. The first recommendation is to explore and rate happiness among high achievers with growth mindsets. Does happiness parallel goal achievement? Researchers should use this study as a foundation to continue formulating self-help tools and systems people can use to conquer negativity. One way to do this is to further explore if achievement decreases stress and anxiety while increasing

happiness. A larger sample size would increase insight. The demographic in this study were eager to participate and share with others. It is also recommended to utilize snowball sampling as a recruitment method.

Upon completing the survey, a participant reached out to learn more about the research. After dialogic engagement with the participant, I noted her inquiries as a recommendation for future research. Thus, the second suggestion for future research is to explore if high achievers are single or married and if they have children or not.

The final recommendation would be to conduct the same study with male high achievers. A comparison of mindsets and motivational practices is worthy of research. Do men overcome obstacles that may cause fixed mindsets the same as women? Do men use the same or similar self-help techniques as women to accomplish their goals? Answers to these questions will contribute to research by determining if the suggested AGGVA framework can be practiced effectively across all demographics.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the AGGVA is an acronym representing the growth mindset practices found in the literature reviewed and survey results. AGGVA stands for Attitude, Gratitude, Goal setting, Vision, and Affirm. It is a systematic way of utilizing the self-help techniques used by the sample of adult high achievers. AGGVA represents an opportunity for people to identify and change negative perceptions. Which then gives them the growth mindset to accomplish their goals and dreams.

While there are many self-help techniques, practices, and theories in the world today, it isn't easy to decipher which ones to use and when. People have heard of these terms and techniques but don't have a systematic way to practice them in their times of need. The AGGVA framework is also a vital tool for helping professionals in mental health and

psychology. It will also boost morale in business settings. In each discipline, the goal is to inspire elevation and positive self-satisfaction.

Using the YANA Life Improvement app based on the AGGVA framework with clients, mental health helping professionals will have clients utilize the app between sessions and share journal entries during sessions. The tool is also beneficial to businesses. While customer and employee satisfaction are critical to a company reaching its goals, employing a system for the team to implement and maintain a growth mindset will increase productivity. Customers give rave reviews and referrals when they have a pleasant experience with a company. Thus, businesses should invest in their employee's personal development and growth mindsets.

## **Conclusions**

In the literature review, we also learned that prolonged stress and anxiety lead to fixed mindsets (Bergland, 2017). Stress-related disorders are the most common and pervasive mental health disorders in the United States (NIMH, 2017). Americans are suffering from stress and anxiety more than anywhere else in the world (NIMH, 2017). In addition, we learned that anxiety is an extended reaction to stress (Bergland, 2017), which evokes emotional feelings of doubt, fear, and worry (APA, 2018).

Americans are bombarded with negative energy daily. Whether it is the media or family and friends stricken with Covid-19, the visibly increasing homelessness and job/food insecurities lead to fixed mindsets caused by stress and anxiety. Medical and frontline workers suffer from extreme fatigue, senior citizens are experiencing isolation, and students across the country are also deprived of necessary social interactions with teachers and peers. Adverse environments, perceptions, and early programming were found as significant contributors to stress and anxiety in multiple studies (Boaler, 2013; Bergland, 2017; Pedersen, 2018).

Researchers contend that if stress and anxiety are not dealt with, they will lead to extensive physical and mental ailments (APA, 2018).

So, the research on stress and anxiety suggests that a person's mindset plays a prominent role in stress relief and achievement. While Dweck's research on developing a growth mindset is oriented toward students, there is also a body of literature that illustrates how the same growth mindset components are applied to adult audiences with success. This research successfully combined those components, adding gratitude as a component of the system. Gratitude was added after discovering from the sample that religion/spirituality/prayer has a significant impact on their success despite challenges.

This study's primary contribution to psychology, mental wellness, and self-help is the development of the AGGVA framework to help people contend with life's disruptions. By drawing on academic high achievers' insights regarding mindset, strategies, and practices; the five actionable strategies were formed into a methodology that will change people's perceptions from negative to positive:

1. Monitor your attitude/mood.
2. Adopt an attitude of gratitude.
3. Turn dreams into written goals.
4. Envision positive results.
5. Affirm who you are and your purpose.

We must remember our trials are our testimony. Difficulties strengthen us. The test we encounter eliminates ego and provides the opportunity to grow, making many experts in the areas that challenge them the most. They also offer the opportunity to share with and teach others how we grew through those experiences.

How we perceive our difficulties often determines whether we get out of or stay stuck in those situations. When overwhelmed with challenges, it's easy to think things are never going to work out. Turbulent circumstances can cause one to give in and live with it (fixed mindset) instead of defeating it (growth mindset). A fixed mindset attracts fear, worry, and doubt. To live in victory, you must change your perspective. You alone must decide challenges are not going to keep you from your destiny. With faith, the participants expressed retreating and turning to religion, spirituality, and/or prayer. It was in those instances they were able to change the channel from hopelessness to tragic optimism. The process of turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment (Frankl, 2010).

## **Reflections**

Paramount years in American history have collectively affected its citizen's wellbeing. My grandmother talked about the Great Depression in 1929. My dad talks about 1968, the year both Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy were assassinated. Like every other American, I will not forget the global pandemic, a tumultuous election year, and the extreme civil and racial unrest in 2020.

Ironically, while I write this final chapter and develop a framework to alleviate stress and anxiety, I am sequestered in my one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles County, referred to as the country's epicenter for the disease, reporting the most Covid cases and deaths in America. I have not physically seen a family member or friend in over a year. I have lost family and friends to Covid-19 and had to grieve alone.

This, of course, has caused me to experience elevated grief, stress, and anxiety. To overcome these extreme circumstances, I push forth, practicing the AGGVA framework daily.

Without a doubt, this model has enabled me to achieve my goals despite my challenges. Just as Dweck has found in her research, the process of developing a growth mindset requires consistent practice and effort.

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study addresses one of the most critical topics in mental health today, anxiety and stress. This research aimed to disrupt the cycle of negative energy that leads to social ills by developing a structured method to practice positive thinking and goal achievement. By gaining a better understanding of the sample's lived experiences, the AGGVA model was created. A theoretical framework that increases hope, positive expectations, and productivity.

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## APPENDIX A

## Human Subjects Training Certificate

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|   |  | Completion Date 04-Apr-2018<br>Expiration Date 03-Apr-2021<br>Record ID 26662531  |
| This is to certify that:   |  |   |
| <b>JULIE SUMNER</b>  |  |   |
| Has completed the following CITI Program course:   |  | Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.   |
| <b>Graduate &amp; Professional Schools HSR</b><br>(Curriculum Group)   |  |   |
| <b>Graduate &amp; Professional Schools - Psychology Division Human Subjects Training</b><br>(Course Learner Group)   |  |   |
| <b>1 - Basic Course</b><br>(Stage)   |  |   |
| Under requirements set by:   |  | <br>Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative |
| <b>Pepperdine University</b>   |  |   |
| Verify at <a href="http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w172cd7f4-c29a-4ddf-888b-150f0ee92aba-26662531">www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w172cd7f4-c29a-4ddf-888b-150f0ee92aba-26662531</a> |  |   |



## APPENDIX B

### Recruitment Script

#### **THE SCIENCE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ACADEMIC HIGH ACHIEVERS**

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Julie Sumner, a doctoral candidate at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology. I am conducting a survey to examine the mindset and motivational habits of African American females with doctorates. If you identify as an African American female and have earned a doctorate degree from an accredited school, I invite you to participate. By volunteering to take the survey, you will significantly contribute to research in mental wellness. Should we agree you are the right fit for the survey:

- I will email you a consent form that must be signed and returned to me.
- Once I have received the consent form, I will email you a link to anonymously take the survey.
- No personal identifiers will be reported.
- The emails and consent forms will only be seen by me, who will keep all correspondence on a computer file that only I can access.
- All correspondence will be deleted upon completion of the study.
- You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
- The survey is anticipated to take 15 minutes.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact me at [julie.sumner@pepperdine.edu](mailto:julie.sumner@pepperdine.edu). I also ask that you kindly pass this on to other women that fit the criterion.

Warm Regards,  
Julie Sumner, MA (Psych)  
Doctoral Candidate  
School of Education and Psychology at  
Pepperdine University

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent

#### **PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY Graduate School of Education and Psychology**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH SURVEY**

**Principal Investigator:** Julie Sumner, MA (Psych)

**Research Supervisor:** Dr. Ebony Cain, Ph.D.

**Title of Project:** The Science of Personal Development: A Study of African American Female Academic High Achievers

**To participate in the study, one must identify as an African American female with a doctorate from an accredited school.**

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research study under the direction of Julie Sumner, MAP, and under the supervision of Dr. Ebony Cain, Ph.D.
2. The overall purpose of this research is to identify: The mindset and motivational tools used by the participants to structure a self-help system the millions of Americans suffering from stress and anxiety can use daily.
3. Participants agree to take an electronic survey that will take approximately 15 minutes.
4. Benefits of the study: Your volunteering to participate in this study will significantly contribute to research in the fields of mental wellness and self-help.
5. Possible risks: Risks are minimal. There is the possibility of boredom, distraction, or discomfort, answering the survey questions. Should this occur, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
6. As a participant, I understand the following:
  - I understand that my participation is voluntary.
  - I understand that I may refuse to participate.
  - I understand I can withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time.
  - I understand that the investigator will take all reasonable measures to protect my confidentiality in accordance with applicable state and federal laws.
  - I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries concerning the research herein described.
  - I understand that I may contact the Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Ebony Cain, Ph.D., at Ebony.cain@pepperdine.edu if I have other questions or concerns about this research.
  - I understand if I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I can contact the IRB chair Dr. Judy Ho, Ph.D., at Judy.ho@pepperdine.edu.
  - As a result of this consent, I agree to participate in the research described above.

## Appendix D

### Survey

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Hdc85uSgxxH\\_jGK3kYV7LkHLDL2CAZ\\_4lhekWp\\_o0TJA/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Hdc85uSgxxH_jGK3kYV7LkHLDL2CAZ_4lhekWp_o0TJA/edit?usp=sharing)

### **The Science of Personal Development Survey**

1. Have you ever experienced any of the following? (Please select all that apply)

- Trauma
- Grief/loss
- Peer pressure
- Discrimination
- None of the above

2. How do you define achievement?

3. How do you overcome stress and anxiety?

4. As a child, were you encouraged to embrace:

- challenges or what you do well?
- I was encouraged to embrace challenges.
- I was encouraged to embrace what I do well.
- I was encouraged to embrace both my challenges and what I do well.
- I did not receive encouragement as a child.

5. People only achieve success if they are born with intelligence, skill and talent.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. Talent, intelligence, and skill can be developed with effort and practice.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree

- Strongly disagree
7. How do you currently feel about challenges you have endured in the past?
- Extremely grateful
  - Grateful
  - Resentful
  - I do not think about previous challenges
8. When things seem difficult, you often:
- Embrace the challenge
  - Avoid the challenge
9. How do you motivate yourself when life and obstacles get in the way?
10. Do any of the methods below help you to overcome obstacles and achieve your goals?
- Mood monitoring
  - Goal Setting
  - Gratitude Journaling
  - Visualization
  - Read/recite positive affirmations
  - Prayer/Religion/Spirituality
  - None of the above
11. A positive attitude dictates positive results.
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
12. How often do you envision positive results/outcomes?
- Always
  - Usually
  - Sometimes
  - Rarely
  - Never
13. How often do you turn to religion/spirituality/prayer when faced with challenges?
- Always
  - Usually
  - Sometimes

- Rarely
- Never

14. How does gratitude influence your success?

- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount
- A little
- Not at all

15. What State do you live in?

## APPENDIX E

## IRB

IRB Protocol Anniversary notification for the Protocol - 20-05-1358.

Dissertation

eprotocol@pepperdine.edu

Nov 23, 2021, 6:00 AM

to Ebony.Cain, Julie.Sumner

Dear Dr. Julie Sumner,

Protocol Title: The Science of Personal Development: A Study of African American Female  
Academic High Achievers

Review Type: EXEMPT

Form Type: NEW

Panel Name: GPS IRB

Meeting Date: November 23, 2020

Approval Date: November 24, 2020

This is to notify that IRB retained your Exempt Study for completion of 1 Anniversary