ROLE OF SET IN THINKING

A mentalset is a tendency to only see solutions that have worked in the past. This type of fixed thinking can make it difficult to come up with solutions and can impede the problem-solving process.

For example, imagine that you are trying to solve a math problem in your algebra class. The problem seems similar to ones you have worked on previously, so you approach solving it in the same way. Because of your mental set, you are unable to see a simpler solution that might be possible

When we are solving problems, we often tend to fall back on solutions that have worked in the past. In many cases, this is a useful approach that allows us to quickly come up with answers. In some instances, however, this strategy can make it difficult to think of new ways of [solving problems](https://www.verywellmind.com/problem-solving-2795008).

These mental sets can sometimes lead to rigid thinking and can create difficulties in the [problem-solving process](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-problem-solving-2795485). While in many cases we can use our past experiences to help solve the issues we face, it can make it difficult to see novel or creative ways of fixing current problems.

For example, let's imagine that your vacuum cleaner has stopped working. When it has stopped working in the past, a broken belt was the culprit. Since past experience has taught you that the belt is a common issue, you replace the belt again, but this time the vacuum continues to malfunction. You ask a friend to come to take a look at the vacuum, and he discovers that one of the hose attachments was not connected, causing the vacuum to lose suction. Because of your mental set, you failed to notice a fairly obvious solution to the problem.

[Functional fixedness](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-functional-fixedness-2795484) is a specific type of mental set that involves only being able to see solutions that involve using objects in their normal or expected manner.

Mental sets can be useful at times. By using strategies that have worked before, we are often able to quickly come up with solutions. This can save time and, in many cases, this approach does yield a correct solution.

As you might imagine, however, mental sets can also create problems both large and small.

In daily life, a mental set might prevent you from solving a relatively minor problem (like figuring out what is wrong with your vacuum cleaner). On a larger scale, mental sets might prevent scientists from discovering answers to real-world problems or make it difficult for a doctor to determine the cause of an illness.

For example, a physician might see a new patient with symptoms similar to certain cases she has seen in the past, so she might diagnose this new patient with the same illness. Because of this mental set, the doctor might overlook symptoms that would actually point to a different illness altogether. Such mental sets can obviously have a dramatic impact on the health of the patient and possible outcomes.