



Wellbeing Insights

Can a step in the right direction be too small?

I would like to come straight out and answer this question with 'No'.

However, this is probably now too short a blog, and there are several things I would like to share about the topic of seeking and making change in one's life.

For many, if not most of us, change is scary. Our brains are programmed to resist change. Whenever our brain detects a new challenge or opportunity or desire, it triggers within us some degree of fear. Our amygdala, which is located in our mid-brain and just in front of our hippocampus, is responsible for controlling our flight-or-fight response and it would far prefer us to stick to our usual, safe routines.

When people want to change, they often go about it through attempting a drastic process of change – something we could refer to as radical change. There is nothing wrong per se with 'radical change'. When it works, this approach can produce amazing results and each of us will have experienced occasions of such positive change and growth. However, you may have noticed the 'when it works' phrase, which suggests that this approach can backfire.

The problem with radical change is that despite often meeting with early short-term success, we can so easily fall back to old ways, old habits, once our initial burst of motivation and enthusiasm fades away. I imagine I am not alone in striving for change by setting ambitious goals and making drastic changes to my routines, only to find I am back where I started several months or weeks down the track.

Often, people don't realise that there is another way to change, a way that is so gentle that you hardly even notice the change!

Welcome to an approach to change known as 'Kaizen'. Kaizen is a Japanese term that comes from two Japanese words: 'kai' meaning 'change' and 'zen' meaning 'good'. So therefore, it literally means 'good change', but it has also become synonymous with the concept of continuous growth and improvement.

The Kaizen approach to change is about taking small, safe steps to accomplish large goals and this process can regularly result in significant, lasting change. The well-known phrase, attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, sums up beautifully the Kaizen approach. "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Kaizen allows us to meet life's constant demands for change by seeking out continual, but always small, improvement. Kaizen strategies can include: asking yourself small questions; thinking small



thoughts; taking small actions; solving small problems; bestowing small rewards and recognising small moments. Dr. Robert Maurer, author of *One Small Step can Change your life – The Kaizen Way*, devotes a chapter to each of these key Kaizen strategies.

Let's say you wanted to make the change of drinking more water. This is a goal I have frequently set for myself, and I nobly set my target of drinking 3 litres of water per day, and generally achieve this target for about 3-5 days until ... I suddenly don't reach my target. Whether it was a particularly busy day, whether a small emergency presented itself, or whether I was just waning in motivation, suddenly I have 'fallen off the horse', my streak has ended, and I find myself drifting back to my previous poor hydration habits.

The Kaizen approach to change is that as you are endeavouring to form new habits you set yourself such a small step that is achievable no matter how bad a day you had, no matter how low your motivation. Such a small step could be to drink an extra mouthful of water after brushing your teeth. You could also ask yourself a small question such as 'What is one way I can remind myself to drink more water?' Hopefully you can see how this gentle approach to change can be helpful. As you meet with success with your first small step, a few gulps of water after brushing your teeth, it will almost be impossible for your brain not to want to think of the next small step! Whilst it might be several months away, enjoy going slowly and safely; you have a real chance of reaching your goal and sustaining your change.

Given all changes, even positive ones, are scary – sometimes our attempts to change through large radical steps can fail due to our heightened sense of fear. I wonder if you may benefit from taking the gentler Kaizen way of approaching change.

While the steps may be small, what you are reaching for is not! But, for now, all you need to do is take one small step!