

Do not despise the day of small things. Zechariah 4:10

By the time this article reaches you, you have had time to make your New Year's resolutions, break them, and either become discouraged and given up, or are redoubling your efforts. Several problems occur with resolutions. We usually frame them in all-or-nothing terms: I will exercise daily; I will clear all the clutter out of my room; I will stop arguing about inconsequential things. When we are unable to make the sustained effort required to change our behavior, we become discouraged and give up, often telling ourselves that we have failed and are unable to change.

What if we could change the way we try to change? *Kaizen* is an approach to change that invites us to make small steps for continuous improvement. In his book *One Small Step Can Change Your Life*, clinical psychologist Robert Maurer traces the concept from its origins in American industries as they became more efficient to supply the Allies in World War II. The approach was then implemented in post-war industrial Japan, where the name *kaizen* originated. As a mental health professional, Maurer applies similar principles to help clients make a series of small, successful changes in problematic behaviors, rather than attempting to make major changes in a short period of time.

Asking small questions and taking small actions allow us to bypass the part of the brain, called the amygdala, which controls the fight-or-flight response. The amygdala registers any new experience or unfamiliar behavior pattern as potentially dangerous. Making a dramatic change in behavior often triggers a fear response that shuts down the cortex, the thinking part of the brain, and mobilizes resistance. *Kaizen* involves taking small actions that guarantee success, even if the step seems ridiculous. Achieving the small goal creates a sense of accomplishment and confidence that motivates one to continue.

Strategies to Overcome Fear

Maurer's first strategy for disarming the fear response is asking small questions to dispel fear and inspire creativity. For a client who wants to increase her physical fitness, the first step might be to ask, "What can I do for one minute a day to increase my physical activity?" Marching in place in front of the TV for one minute each evening might be the first step toward becoming more active. When the first step results in success, the person is more likely to take the next step. Those daunted by career decisions, might ask others "What is one thing that you enjoy about your job?" The responses they receive can help them identify positive factors to look for in a new job situation. An individual who wants to eat more healthfully might initially leave one bite of food on his plate.

This change is so subtle so it does not mobilize the amygdala's defenses. Little by little the brain gets the message that eating less causes no negative effects, and so portions can gradually be decreased without prompting a backlash.

Another strategy is thinking small thoughts to develop new skills and habits. Research has shown that practicing a task mentally, using all one's senses, activates the same brain activity as actually doing the task. Maurer has a client use *mind sculpture* in which he imagines himself using a new behavior or skill successfully, including how his body is moving, how he feels, what he smells, hears and touches. This technique, used by professional athletes to perfect their performances, can be applied to a variety of tasks, from asking for what one needs to feeling more confident making small talk at a party.

Create a Weekly Goal

In the Talitha-Life Program for Women Religious at Saint Luke Institute, weekly Goal Setting and Goal Review groups focus on making gradual small changes in behavior. Each woman sets a weekly goal related to the problem issues she is addressing. The goal is behavioral, specific, measurable and achievable within the time period. For example, a woman with low self-esteem might have as a long-term treatment goal to learn to appreciate her gifts and strengths. In her first week, she identifies three things that she likes about herself and writes each one on an index card. She places a different card on her mirror each day where she can read it when she wakes up and before she goes to sleep. In the next week, she asks three other women to name one thing they enjoy about her, and she reviews these daily. Another week she writes in her journal one thing that she does each day that illustrates these positive qualities. Soon she has a written record to counteract her negative thoughts about herself.

On Friday, when the women review their goals, they assess not only whether they completed their goals, but also what they learned in the process. If an individual has not completed her goal, she asks herself what obstacles she encountered and what additional resources she might need to be successful. Sometimes she realizes that she was reluctant to ask for help or that her expectations were too high. This experience gives the women valuable information about ways they sabotage themselves. Group members affirm each other for their progress or make suggestions about overcoming obstacles or reshaping the goal. This process strengthens the women's sense of their own ability to make significant life changes—and reminds them to do it one small step at a time.

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