

Get 1% Better Every Day: The Kaizen Way to Self-Improvement

Brett and Kate McKay

It's happened to all of us. You have a "come to Jesus" moment and decide you need to make changes in your life. Maybe you need to drop a few pounds (or more), want to pay off some debt, or desperately long to quit wasting time on the internet.

So, you start planning and scheming. You take to your journal and write out a bold strategy on how you're going to tackle your quest for self-improvement. You set big, hairy SMART goals with firm deadlines. You download the apps and buy the gear that will help you reach your objectives.

You feel that telltale rush that comes with believing you're turning over a new leaf, and indeed, the first few days go great. "This time," you tell yourself, "this time is different."

But then...You had a long day at work, you just can't make it to the gym, and by golly, eating an entire pizza would really make you feel better. Or an unexpected expense comes up, and your bank account dips back into the red. Or you decide you've been doing really well with being focused, so what's a few minutes of aimless web surfing going to do?

Within a matter of days, your fiery ambition to change yourself is extinguished. That audacious, airtight plan in your journal? You don't even look at it again because along with your goal to lose weight, your daily journaling goal has also met an untimely demise.

And so, you're back to where you started, only even worse off than before. Because now you're not just an overweight, in debt, and easily distracted man, you're an overweight, in debt, and easily distracted man who has failed at *not* being overweight, in debt, or easily distracted. The sting of failure can feel like an existential gut punch.

But time heals all wounds. Nature has — for better and worse — blessed us with terrible memories, so we forget how crappy we felt when we failed in our last attempt to radically improve ourselves.

Thus, six months later that itch to change yourself returns, and the whole scenario plays itself out again, like some Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich*-infused version of *Groundhog Day*.

Getting Off the Roller Coaster of Personal Development

Our quest to become better often feels like a roller coaster ride with its proverbial ups and downs. By the time you're headed down Self-Improvement Mountain for the twentieth time, you're vomiting out the side of your cart in self-disgust, cursing yourself that you once again bought a ticket to ride.

Why are our attempts to better ourselves usually so uneven, and why do they so frequently end in failure? There are a few reasons:

Focusing on the big goal overwhelms us into inaction. It's an article of faith in the world of personal development that you have to make big, Empire State goals. You don't just want to dominate in your own life — you want to dominate *the world*.

And so you draw up plans for leaving behind the 99% of schmooze out there, and becoming part of the extraordinary 1% — not necessarily as measured in pure wealth, but in passion, fitness, financial independence, and number of Machu Picchu pics in your Instagram feed.

But the enormity of your goals ends up overwhelming you into inaction. What we moderns call “stress” would be better termed “fear”; the physiological reaction is the same in both emotions. A big, audacious goal looks to the brain just like a saber-toothed tiger stalking us in the woods, and the idea of paying off \$100K in student loan debt seems so impossible that it's actually scary. And when our brain encounters scary, the old amygdala kicks into fight-flight-freeze mode, and you assume the position of deer-stuck-in-headlights.

Big, giant goals can be awe-inspiring. But like many awe-inspiring things — a lion, a black hole, the Grand Canyon — they can also swallow you whole.

We think a magic bullet will save us. Let's say that we're able to overcome the torpor-inducing effects of aiming for radical personal change, and we start taking action towards achieving our goals. As humans are wont to do, instead of just getting right to work doing the boring, mundane, time-tested things that will bring success, we typically start looking for “hacks” that will get us the results we want as fast as possible and with as little work as possible. We want that magic bullet that will allow us to hit our target right in the bullseye with just one shot.

The danger of looking for a magic bullet is that you end up spending all your time searching for it instead of actually doing the work that needs to be done. You scroll through countless blog articles on productivity, in hopes of discovering that one tip that will make you superhumanly efficient. You listen to podcast after podcast from people who earn their living telling people how to make money online, hoping one day you'll hear an insight that will unlock your businesses' potential, so you too can make your living online, telling other people how to make a living online. You research and find the perfect gratitude journal so you can be more Zen.

The insidious thing about searching for magic bullets is that you feel like you're doing something to reach your goals when in fact you're doing *nothing*. Magic bullet hunting is masturbatory self-improvement. All the pleasure, without the production of metaphorical progeny.

We stop doing the things that helped us improve in the first place. Okay. So, let's say you don't let the bigness of your goal overwhelm you, and you're not a chump magic bullet hunter either.

You get to work. Slowly but surely you start seeing results. You lose five pounds. You whittle \$200 off your debt. You meditate for 20 minutes a day for a whole week. You're having success! But in our personal backslapping, we would do well to heed Napoleon's warning: "The greatest danger occurs at the moment of victory."

There's a tendency for folks to view self-improvement as a destination. They think that once you reach your goal, you're done. You can take it easy. So, when these folks start having some success and things start getting better in their lives, they stop doing the things that got them to that point. And so, they start backsliding.

I fell into this trap when I was first trying to get a handle on my depression. I'd take some proactive steps to leash my black dog — meditate, write in my journal, get outside, etc. As soon as I started to feel better, I'd think, "Hey! I beat it this time! I'm cured!" So, I let up. I stopped doing the things that helped me feel better in the first place. And of course, I went back to feeling terrible.

Self-improvement isn't a destination. You're never done. Even if you have some success, if you want to maintain it, you have to keep doing the things you were doing that got you that success in the first place.

The Kaizen Effect: Get 1% Better Each Day

- Little strokes fell great oaks. —Benjamin Franklin
- It's time to get off the self-improvement roller coaster.
- To do so, we're going to embrace the philosophy of small, continuous improvement.

It's called Kaizen. It sounds like a mystical Japanese philosophy passed down by wise, bearded sages who lived in secret caves.

The reality is that it was developed by Depression-era American business management theorists in order to build the arsenal of democracy that helped the U.S. win World War II. Instead of telling companies to make radical, drastic changes to their business infrastructure and processes, these management theorists exhorted them to make continuous improvements in small ways. A manual created by the U.S. government to help companies implement this business philosophy urged factory supervisors to "look for hundreds of small things you can improve. Don't try to plan a whole new department layout — or go after a big installation of new equipment. There isn't time for these major items. Look for improvements on existing jobs with your present equipment."

After America and its allies had defeated Japan and Germany with the weaponry produced by plants using the small, continuous improvement philosophy, America introduced the concept to Japanese factories to help revitalize their economy. The Japanese took to the idea

of small, continual improvement right away and gave it a name: *Kaizen* — Japanese for continuous improvement.

While Japanese companies embraced this American idea of small, continuous improvement, American companies, in an act of collective amnesia, forgot all about it. Instead, “radical innovation” became the watchword in American business. Using Kaizen, Japanese auto companies like Toyota slowly but surely began to outperform American automakers during the 1970s and 1980s. In response, American companies started asking Japanese companies to teach them about a business philosophy American companies had originally taught the Japanese. Go figure.

While Kaizen was originally developed to help businesses improve and thrive, it’s just as applicable to our personal lives, and it’s the antidote to perpetual, puke-inducing rides on the self-improvement roller coaster.

Instead of trying to make radical changes in a short amount of time, just make small improvements every day that will gradually lead to the change you want. Each day just focus on getting 1% better in whatever it is you’re trying to improve. That’s it. Just 1%.

It might not seem like much, but those 1% improvements start compounding on each other. In the beginning, your improvements will be so small as to seem practically nonexistent. But gradually and ever so slowly, you’ll start to notice the improvements in your life. It may take months or even years, but the improvements will come if you just focus on consistently upping your game by 1%.

You’ll eventually reach a certain point with your personal development in which a 1% increase in improvement is equal to the same amount of improvement you experienced in the first few days combined. That’s sort of hard to get your mind around, because math. But think about it: 1% of 1 is just .01; 1% of 100 is 1. You’re maybe at a 1 right now and will only be making tiny improvements for a while. But stick with it. You’ll eventually reach that 100 level (and beyond) where you’ll be improving by a factor of 1 *every day*.

That’s the power of the compounding effect.

When you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur. When you improve conditioning a little each day, eventually you have a big improvement in conditioning. Not tomorrow, not the next day, but eventually a big gain is made. Don’t look for the big, quick improvement. Seek the small improvement one day at a time. That’s the only way it happens — and when it happens, it lasts. —John Wooden

The Kaizen approach to self-improvement completely circumvents the unproductive ups and downs all too common to the quest. By breaking down big, overwhelming goals into super small, discrete pieces, Kaizen encourages action. The small successes you experience with your baby steps feed on each other and start building some momentum, which leads to taking bigger and bigger actions.

What’s more, one of the underlying assumptions of Kaizen is that there is no magic bullet that will suddenly make things better. Change comes through small, continuous

improvement. Instead of wasting your time searching for the “one thing” that will change everything, Kaizen calmly directs your attention to the task at hand and offers this needed reminder: “You already know what you need to do. Get to work and find small ways to improve along the way.”

Finally, Kaizen isn't a “one and done” approach to life. It's a process of continual improvement. You'll never “arrive” with Kaizen, so the temptation to rest on your laurels once you've seen a bit of improvement is reduced. The Kaizen mindset reminds you that all improvements must be maintained if you wish to secure your gains. As Rory Vaden says: “Success isn't owned, it's rented. And the rent is due every day.”

How to Implement Kaizen in Your Life

Ask yourself this question every single day: What is one small thing I can start doing that would improve my life?

Then, start small. Like really small:

- Want to start the exercise habit? Just do a single push-up as soon as you roll out of bed in the morning. The next morning, add another. And so, on and so forth. In two months, you'll be doing 60 push-ups in the morning. In a year's time, you'll be giving Charles Bronson a run for his money.
- Want to establish a morning and evening routine? Start with the evening and concentrate on the 10 minutes right before you go to bed. Plan what you'll do during those 10 minutes — it can be as simple as brushing your teeth for 2 minutes, flossing for 1, and reading for 7 — and make it a habit. Every day add 5 more intentional minutes until your whole evening becomes a satisfying routine. Then work on the morning.
- Want to start journaling? Instead of making it a goal to write a page each day, just start off with writing for a minute. That's it. You might only get a sentence or two down, but that's okay. The next day, add a minute. In a month, you'll be writing in your journal for 30 minutes if that's something you want to do.
- Want to start reading your scriptures more? Start with one, single verse. Add another verse each day, until you're reading a chapter a day.
- Want to start meditating? Begin with a minute of breathing exercises. That's it.
- Want to lose weight? Cut out one sugary drink a day. Or cut your usual afternoon snack in half.

You get the idea. Think of the smallest step you can take that would move you incrementally towards your goal. Then try to make it even smaller.

When tackling big goals, it's usually advised to only work on one goal at a time, but with the Kaizen approach, working on several things at once is entirely doable.

Try to do just 1% better than the day before. Start small and make your increases gradual. Avoid the temptation to get impatient and start rushing forward and taking bigger leaps. Take it slow, steady, and consistent.

Simply try to do a little bit better than you did the day before.

Yes, the improvements will be gradual. Some days you may not even notice your improvement and it will be tempting to abandon ship and try something else. But with Kaizen, Father Time is your ally. You've got to play the long game with your self-improvement — you have to develop what wrestling legend Dan Gable calls the “Patience of Change.”

As my buddy Mark Rippetoe would say, “Just do the program!”

Once you've reached your goal, start a maintenance plan, and keep it up for the rest of your life. Lost enough weight? Keep up the manageable diet/exercise plan you're on, indefinitely. Reached the point where you're reading 30 minutes a day? Keep it up, and enjoy watching a library of read-books accumulate year after year.

Self-improvement isn't a destination. It's a process. It's like shaving; even though you did it this morning, you're still going to have to wake up and do it again tomorrow. The process never ends.

Give up on the idea that you'll someday “arrive.” You'll never arrive. Instead of focusing on the results of your effort to improve yourself, focus on the process. Joy in the journey, and all that jazz.

And remember this: If you want to maintain the improvement you've made, you have to keep doing the things that brought you that success in the first place. Don't let your early success lull you into a false security and allow yourself to slack off.

What About Setbacks?

Of course, you'll encounter setbacks. Some days you may get worse by 1%. That's okay. It's just 1% worse. Forget about yesterday and concentrate on today. Get back into the saddle and start doing 1% better again.

- Change is possible.
- You can get better.
- It just takes time and patience.
- With small strokes, you shall surely fell great oaks.