

Bypassing the Stress Reaction

by Wayne Topping, PhD, LMP



Abstract

Many of us claim we want to integrate positive changes into our lives, yet most of us struggle in this area. We shall examine some outstanding research concerning troubled marriages that identifies a major

problem that prevents such changes from taking hold. Then we'll consider solutions that arise from taking a kaizen approach to life.

Introduction

How would you feel if a former classmate at a twenty-fifth class reunion said to you, "Wow! You haven't changed a bit." Now, if it is in regard to personal appearance – trim waistline, full head of hair, unwrinkled face – you would probably be delighted. However, what about if the comments related to your character and behavior? That wouldn't be so cool! Because, the reality is -- as much as we would like to make certain improvements -- it is actually quite difficult for the average person to change.

Let's look at some marriage research that shows why it is difficult to institute self-improvement. Then we'll look at a concept that should make it easier for a person to change.

Why Marriages Deteriorate

For years I had wondered why marriages often deteriorated into the nagging wife-withdrawn husband scenario. I had observed it empirically but had no way to rationally explain it. Once I was introduced to the research of clinical psychologists John and Julie Gottman my questions were answered. For more than 23 years, the Gottmans and colleagues have been

studying marriage to answer questions such as:

- Why do some relationships click, while others just tick away like a time bomb?
- How can you prevent a marriage from going bad – or rescue one that already has?

After extensively examining over 3000 relationships in the "love lab" at the University of Washington in Seattle, they have some answers. Their knowledge of what causes marriages to succeed or fail is now so precise that Dr. Gottman can observe and listen to a couple interacting for an hour and predict with 95 percent accuracy whether that couple will still be together in 15 years' time, fifteen minutes and his success rate is around 90 percent (Gladwell, 2005). How is that possible?

In the "love lab," while a couple discusses any issue from their marriage, their responses are measured in a number of ways; they are video-taped on camera from various angles, they are observed through a one-way mirror system, electrodes on their chests measure their heart-rates, devices taped to their fingers monitor their pulse and how they sweat in response to stress, sensors clipped to their ears record how fast blood flows from their hearts to their extremities, and a shifting platform beneath their chairs measures how much each partner wiggles during the session. After recording the physiological responses to stress, the researchers have reached a number of conclusions. I'll share two here that answer the question I posed above and will provide a segue into the second part of my talk.

In simplified terms, in an emergency situation the brain and body are wired up to react in a number of predictable ways that have been characterized as the "fight or flight" response.

We fight off the aggressor or we run out of harm's way. In a troubled relationship, the flight response will appear as withdrawal or stonewalling. The Gottmans found that in 85% of marriages the stonewaller is the husband. Why? This is primarily because the male cardiovascular system is more reactive than the female cardiovascular system and slower to recover from stress. For example, if a man and a woman hear a very loud, brief sound like a tire blowout, most likely his heart will beat faster than hers and stay elevated for a longer period of time. His blood pressure will also become more elevated and stay higher longer. Since marital confrontation that activates vigilance takes a greater physical toll on the male, it is no surprise that men are far more likely than women to resort to avoidance strategies.

The Gottmans have discovered that more than 80% of the time it is the wife, who is constitutionally better able to handle stress, that brings up sensitive issues. The husband, who is less able to cope with it, will attempt to avoid such subjects. He may become defensive and stonewall. Or he may even become belligerent or contemptuous in an attempt to silence her. Typically a wife may say, "We need to go for some marriage counseling." The husband's response is likely to be, "You can go. You're the one that's messed up. I don't need any help." Truth is, he's more afraid of it. If the couple don't get help, the husband will often distance himself from his spouse. That can lead to divorce, or a dead marriage, in which they maintain separate, parallel lives in the same home. They no longer feel connected to each other and have given up on the relationship.

These couples desperately need help. However, this research illustrates that it is difficult to bring about change when you are in survival mode. What can be done? Kaizen to the rescue!

The Development of an Idea

In 1940 France fell to Nazi Germany. America's allies needed shipments of military equipment desperately. Moreover, it was becoming increasingly more obvious that America would eventually enter the war. American manufacturers would need to step up quality and quantity of their armament

production. Accordingly, the United States government created management courses called Training Within Industries (TWI) to meet this need. Instead of encouraging radical, more innovative change, one of these TWI courses exhorted managers to implement what it called "continuous improvement" – i.e., to look for hundreds of small things you can improve. Rather than being a totally inadequate response, this concept of continuous improvement resulted in a profound acceleration of America's manufacturing capacity. One of the most vocal advocates of this approach was a statistician called Dr. W. Edwards Deming.

Kaizen

Fast-forward a few years. Now it is after the war and General Douglas MacArthur and his forces are occupying Japan. MacArthur is concerned about an invasion from North Korea and sees that it is in America's best interests to have a stronger Japan. Achieving a thriving Japanese economy would require improved worker efficiency and raised business standards. Ironically, at a time when America no longer sees a need for "continuous improvement" the United States government TWI specialists go to Japan to introduce such concepts to the Japanese. They are very receptive. Dr. Deming is involved in their trainings and, behold, the Japanese economic miracle. In fact, the Japanese are so impressed by the idea of small, comfortable steps toward improvement that they coined the term kaizen to describe it. Interestingly, one of my friends who works for Boeing told me that he keeps hearing management talking about "kaizen this and kaizen that"! What was once an American idea has now come back into American industry.

How does it work? In Dr. Robert Maurer's book *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way*, the underlying physiological responses are summarized in this way:

Large goal → fear →
access to cortex restricted → failure

Small goal → fear bypassed →
cortex engaged → success

We, kinesiologists, understand the first line. Innovation, i.e. shocking and radical reform, is sufficiently stressful that the individual goes into the fight/flight response, the frontal lobes of the brain shut down and the person goes back to reacting out of the midbrain for survival. If change is the goal, we're doomed to failure. In kinesiology, our response has been to use techniques such as emotional stress release to restore brain function to the frontal cortex. While these approaches work, taking a kaizen approach in addition increases chances for a successful outcome, especially when we consider clients with posttraumatic stress disorder who have been severely traumatized and clients who are in a troubled relationship such as the marriages described earlier. With kaizen, the changes are deliberately made to be sufficiently small that they don't activate the vigilance response, which would put the individual into fight/flight. Because kaizen allows the control of the brain to remain in the frontal lobes, the person can entertain new options, new dendritic connections are being made and the person can head on towards success. This approach is consistent with what I have observed among peak performers. They advocate that people who are serious about being successful should do something small every day to advance them toward their goals. Every small step is a step forward. While each in itself is very small, if they accumulate enough of them they will achieve their goals.

Recognizing Kaizen in Action

The Kaizen approach can be recognized in other areas as well. For alcoholics to consider going the rest of their lives without drinking is inconceivable. It would create such stress that they would go back to drinking. However, if the goal becomes that of going for a single day without drinking, for many that is conceivable, yet if done continuously results in a life of sobriety. Einstein described the power of compound interest as the eighth wonder of the world. To illustrate, if a fifteen-year-old were to invest \$7 (U.S.) each month and compound it at 15% per year, by age 65 they would have more than \$1 million. At age 50, it would require an investment of \$1500 per month (Givens, 1991). The latter is such a large amount it is not conceivable for the vast

majority of people. The former is so plausible that all that prevents it is a lack of knowledge and the development of the habit of putting the investment aside regularly. However, as with kaizen, a small continuous effort results in profound results. An accountant friend of mine, Eric Bowen, was contemplating (and calculating) one day what the daily difference in effort and achievement was between Bill Gates (two years his junior) and himself. He came up with what he calls **The 0.1% Principle**:

“One-tenth of one percent improvement every day over the previous day will make a million-fold difference in one's lifetime achievement. One-tenth of one percent improvement every day makes the difference between a common person's achievements and those of the great leaders, the great inventors, the Nobel Prize winners, and the billionaires.”

I'm sure the Japanese would approve!

Dr John Gottman, in his books (1999, 1994), educates people as to the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” the factors that are most destructive to relationships. While dramatic changes in a relationship are probably doomed to failure, one of the major strategies advocated (Gottman and DeClaire, 2001) is that of bidding for connection, where a “bid” is the fundamental unit of emotional communication; this can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch -- any single expression that conveys the message, “I want to feel connected to you” -- would certainly fit into the kaizen model.

How Can We Apply Kaizen with Our Clients?

If the client's proposed change is considerable, there is increased chance for failure. Therefore, we can use the kaizen approach to greatly increase the likelihood of a successful outcome for the client in numerous ways, regardless of the goal.

- Have the client commit to doing something toward the goal every day, no matter how small.

- Spend two minutes each day imagining (sculpting) an ideal marriage.
- Spend five minutes a day decreasing credit card debt.
- Spend five minutes a day cleaning up excess paperwork.

Questions are a great way to engage the brain in a playful way, for example,

- How can I improve my communication with my spouse in some small way?
- What would an ideal marriage look like?

If it is difficult to generate answers to the questions listed above, Dr. Maurer advocates repeatedly asking the same question so that the hippocampus (the part of the brain that stores information) will have no choice but to eventually answer it.

Postscript

Apply the kaizen strategy to your own life and at some future class reunion, instead of a former classmate saying, "Wow, you haven't

changed a bit!" he or she will be saying, "Wow, you've changed! How did you do it?"

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