Kaizen: Small steps to lasting change

## By Dr. Roger Landry, MD, MPH

## *An excerpt from live, long Die Short: A Guide to Authentice Health and Successful aging by Roger landry, MD, MPH*

"Change, Dr. Maurer tells us, especially the big bites of change we all characteristically take on, triggers [an] instinctual fear… It is fear that causes us to fail, not succeed. Fear that grabs us precisely when we need a clear mind to develop a plan to change, when we need a reason to change, and when we need higher purpose to suppress our more basic instincts. This fear makes us fearful idiots precisely when we need all of our higher faculties to chart a course of constructive change.

Dr. Maurer is a clinical psychologist, and his answer to this dilemma is to change how we approach change, taking on smaller bites instead of our usual big bites. He advocates *kaizen*, the Japanese technique for making change…Kaizen is about small changes, easily achievable goals that are so small they do not trigger the amygdala to go into alert mode…

Kaizen is about small steps. It’s about asking ourselves the small questions: ‘What is the simplest things I can do to begin moving?’ ‘What can I do in five minutes each day to become more positive?’ Small questions allow us to begin thinking about a plan for change without triggering the amygdala and setting up roadblocks to success…

We’re talking *ridiculously* small steps by current standards. Like learning one word of a new language a day, or walking ten more steps each day, or thinking one nice thing about someone. These small steps will not trigger the brain’s survival/fear/change response. The amygdala will remain quiet. We will feel positive about what we’ve done, but more importantly, about our ability to change. And we’ll be on our way toward whatever we want to accomplish.”1

Kaizen, Step by Step

* Identify specifically why you want to change.
* Then zero in on what you want to change.
* Ask yourself, “What’s the smallest thing I can do to begin this change?”
* Make that small thing, NOT the ultimate change, your goal.
* Imagine yourself doing that thing.
* When you achieve the small goal, add the next smallest thing you can do.
* If you fail to achieve a goal, just step back to the last achieved goal and add a smaller, more achievable goal to that.
* Keep adding very small increments to your progress.  It doesn’t matter how long it takes.  You are changing and moving toward your ultimate goal.