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Continuous Improvement: How It Works and How to Master It

What is Continuous Improvement?

Let's define continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is a dedication to making small changes and improvements every day, with the expectation that those small improvements will add up to something significant.

The typical approach to self-improvement is to set a large goal, then try to take big leaps in order to accomplish the goal in as little time as possible. While this may sound good in theory, it often ends in burnout, frustration, and failure. Instead, we should focus on continuous improvement by slowly and slightly adjusting our normal everyday habits and behaviors.

It is so easy to dismiss the value of making slightly better decisions on a daily basis. Sticking with the fundamentals (<https://jamesclear.com/repetitions>) is not impressive. Falling in love with boredom (<https://jamesclear.com/stay-focused>) is

not sexy. Getting one percent better (<https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains>) isn't going to make headlines.

There is one thing about it though: it works.

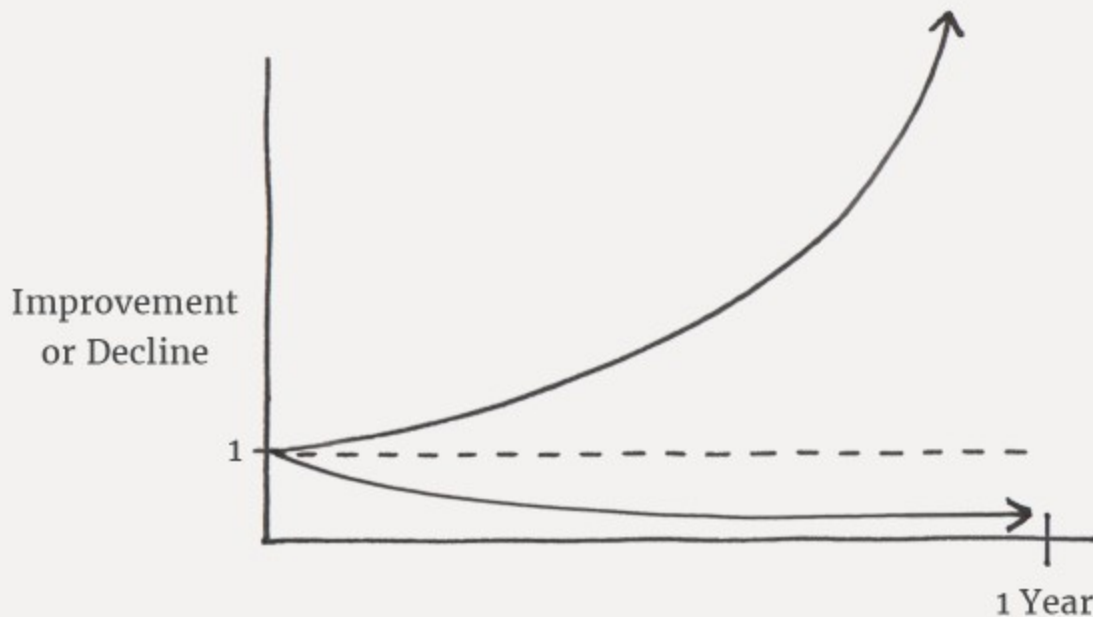
How Does Continuous Improvement Work?

So often we convince ourselves that change is only meaningful if there is some large, visible outcome associated with it. Whether it is losing weight, building a business, traveling the world or any other goal, we often put pressure on ourselves to make some earth-shattering improvement that everyone will talk about.

Meanwhile, improving by just 1 percent isn't notable (and sometimes it isn't even *noticeable*). But it can be just as meaningful, especially in the long run.

The Power of Tiny Gains

1% better every day $1.01^{365} = 37.78$
1% worse every day $0.99^{365} = 0.03$



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In the beginning, there is basically no difference between making a choice that is 1 percent better or 1 percent worse. (In other words, it won't impact you very much today.) But as time goes on, these small improvements or declines compound and you suddenly find a very big gap between people who make slightly better decisions on a daily basis and those who don't.

Here's the punchline:

If you get one percent better each day for one year, you'll end up thirty-seven times better by the time you're done.

This is why small choices don't make much of a difference at the time, but add up over the long-term.

For much more on this concept (and an example of a coach who used it achieve huge Olympic success), read this: [This Coach Improved Every Tiny Thing by 1 Percent and Here's What Happened \(https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains\)](https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains).

Continuous Improvement Tools

Now, let's talk about a few quick steps you can take right now to start focusing on continuous improvement.

Step 1: Do more of what already works

We often waste the resources and ideas at our fingertips because they don't seem new and exciting.

There are many examples of behaviors, big and small, that have the opportunity to drive progress in our lives if we just did them with more consistency. Flossing every day. Never missing workouts. Performing fundamental business tasks each

day, not just when you have time. Apologizing more often. Writing Thank You notes each week (<https://jamesclear.com/say-thank-you>).

Progress often hides behind boring solutions and underused insights. You don't need more information. You don't need a better strategy. You just need to do more of what already works.

Read more: Do More of What Already Works (<https://jamesclear.com/checklist-solutions>)

Step 2: Avoid tiny losses

In many cases, improvement is not about doing more things right, but about doing fewer things wrong.

This is a concept called improvement by subtraction, which is focused on doing less of what doesn't work: eliminating mistakes, reducing complexity, and stripping away the inessential.

Here are some examples:

- **Education:** Avoid stupid mistakes, make fewer mental errors.
- **Investing:** Never lose money, limit your risk.
- **Web Design:** Remove the on-page elements that distract visitors.
- **Exercise:** Miss fewer workouts.
- **Nutrition:** Eat fewer unhealthy foods.

In the real world, it is often easier to improve your performance by cutting the downside rather than capturing the upside. Subtraction is more practical than

downside rather than capturing the upside. Subtraction is more practical than addition.

One of the best ways to make big gains is to avoid tiny losses.

Read more: To Make Big Gains, Avoid Tiny Losses
(<https://jamesclear.com/subtraction>)

Step 3: Measure backward

We often measure our progress by looking forward. We set goals. We plan milestones for our progress. Basically, we try to predict the future to some degree.

There is an opposite and, I think, more useful approach: measure backward, not forward.

Measuring backward means you make decisions based on what has already happened, not on what you want to happen.

Here are a few examples:

- **Weight Loss:** Measure your calorie intake. Did you eat 3,500 calories per day last week? Focus on averaging 3,400 per day this week.
- **Strength Training:** Oh, you squatted 250 pounds for 5 sets of 5 reps last week? Give 255 pounds a try this week.
- **Relationships:** How many new people did you meet last week? Zero? Focus on introducing yourself to one new person this week.
- **Entrepreneurship:** You only landed two clients last week while your

average is five? It sounds like you should be focused on making more sales calls this week.

Measure backward and then get a little bit better. What did you do last week? How can you improve by just a little bit this week?

Read more: Measure Backward, Not Forward

(<https://jamesclear.com/measure-backward>)

Essential Reading on Continuous Improvement

- Process Improvement: This Coach Improved Every Tiny Thing by 1 Percent and Here's What Happened (<https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains>)
- Forget About Setting Goals. Focus on This Instead. (<https://jamesclear.com/goals-systems>)
- The Proven, Reasonable and Totally Unsexy Secret to Success (<https://jamesclear.com/habit-creep>)

Best Continuous Improvement Books

- The Goal (<https://jamesclear.com/book/the-goal>) by Eliyahu Goldratt
- Running Lean (<https://jamesclear.com/book/running-lean>) by Ash Maurya

Want more great continuous improvement books? Browse my full list of the best self-help books (<https://jamesclear.com/best-books/self-help>).

All Continuous Improvement Articles

This is a complete list of articles I have written on continuous improvement.
Enjoy!

- The 1 Percent Rule: Why a Few People Get Most of the Rewards
(<https://jamesclear.com/the-1-percent-rule>)
- The Beginner's Guide to Deliberate Practice
(<https://jamesclear.com/beginners-guide-deliberate-practice>)
- How to Master the Invisible Hand That Shapes Our Lives
(<https://jamesclear.com/feedback-loops>)
- The Proven, Reasonable and Totally Unsexy Secret to Success
(<https://jamesclear.com/habit-creep>)
- Pat Riley on the Remarkable Power of Getting 1% Better
(<https://jamesclear.com/career-best-effort>)
- Do More of What Already Works (<https://jamesclear.com/checklist-solutions>)
- To Make Big Gains, Avoid Tiny Losses (<https://jamesclear.com/subtraction>)
- Measure Backward, Not Forward (<https://jamesclear.com/measure-backward>)
- How to Solve Big Problems (<https://jamesclear.com/narrow-focus>)
- This Coach Improved Every Tiny Thing by 1 Percent and Here's What Happened (<https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains>)
- Forget About Setting Goals. Focus on This Instead.
(<https://jamesclear.com/goals-systems>)



Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

Whenever you buy one of [my books \(https://jamesclear.com/books\)](https://jamesclear.com/books), join the [Habits Academy \(https://habitsacademy.com\)](https://habitsacademy.com), or otherwise contribute to my work, 5 percent of the profits are donated to the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF).

With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

17077

MALARIA NETS DISTRIBUTED

30739

PEOPLE PROTECTED

317

YEARS OF ADDITIONAL LIFE

9

LIVES SAVED

BETTER HABITS

[Behavioral Psychology](https://jamesclear.com/behavioral-psychology) (<https://jamesclear.com/behavioral-psychology>).

[Habits](https://jamesclear.com/habits) (<https://jamesclear.com/habits>).

[Motivation](https://jamesclear.com/motivation) (<https://jamesclear.com/motivation>).

[Procrastination](https://jamesclear.com/procrastination) (<https://jamesclear.com/procrastination>).

BETTER PERFORMANCE

[Constant Improvement](https://jamesclear.com/continuous-improvement) (<https://jamesclear.com/continuous-improvement>).

[Deliberate Practice](https://jamesclear.com/deliberate-practice-theory) (<https://jamesclear.com/deliberate-practice-theory>).

[Goal Setting](https://jamesclear.com/goal-setting) (<https://jamesclear.com/goal-setting>).

[Productivity](https://jamesclear.com/productivity) (<https://jamesclear.com/productivity>).

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(<https://www.linkedin.com/company/jamesclear/>)

BETTER THINKING

[Creativity \(https://jamesclear.com/creativity\)](https://jamesclear.com/creativity).

[Decision Making \(https://jamesclear.com/decision-making\)](https://jamesclear.com/decision-making).

[Focus \(https://jamesclear.com/focus\)](https://jamesclear.com/focus).

[Mental Toughness \(https://jamesclear.com/grit\)](https://jamesclear.com/grit).

OPTIMAL HEALTH

[Better Sleep \(https://jamesclear.com/sleep\)](https://jamesclear.com/sleep).

[Eating Healthy \(https://jamesclear.com/eat-healthy\)](https://jamesclear.com/eat-healthy).

[Strength Training \(https://jamesclear.com/strength-training\)](https://jamesclear.com/strength-training).

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