

BLOG

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reversing adversity



MARGINAL GAINS



by Carolyn Spring

If I said I could help you improve your life by 1% you might not be very interested. Especially if your life is filled with pain, suffering, dysfunction and struggle, you might think, 'A 1% difference isn't going to do any good! I need a 100% difference!'

That's how I thought for a long time. I was presented with a lot of little things that might - *might* - make a little difference. But I dismissed them. I was looking for a big thing - The One Big Thing - that would make all the difference.

As a result I wasted a lot of time.

I was like a builder looking at a pile of bricks, timbers, roofing tiles, cement, insulation and plasterboard, and saying, 'No, no, I ordered a *house*.'

As anyone who's ever been on a DIY site will know, you can't order a house as one item - just add it to your basket, click 'next day delivery' and bingo you have a home.

It has to be built one brick, one screw, one beam at a time.

The same is true for our recovery from trauma, or indeed from physical ill health or any other kind of adversity.

'Marginal gains' is a concept that I came across a few years and it has been instrumental in the progress I've seen in my life. I first heard of it in relation to Dave Brailsford, the famed coach who turned British cycling into a medal-winning machine. It was a breathtaking transformation. Bradley Wiggins, Mark

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Cavendish, Jason and Laura Kenny, Chris Froome – they’ve all become household names largely because of Dave Brailsford (although I’m sure their sweat and dedication might also have contributed to it.)

Dave Brailsford is not a wizard with magical powers. When asked what his secret sauce was, time and again he would say, ‘Marginal gains.’

Before I was struck down with CFS/ME at the age of 15, I was very active in sport – I represented the school and county at a number of disciplines including hockey, netball, tennis, swimming and athletics. I later played football at University level and was about to trial for England when a back injury forced an end to my sporting ambitions. But sport has always been a huge part of my life and I’ve always been fascinated by what makes an elite sportsman or woman. Is it innate ability (Usain Bolt surely has a few advantageous genes), is it lots of hard work, is it ‘luck’?

The same kinds of questions apply to recovery from trauma. Do we recover because we’re just inherently, naturally blessed – because we’re ‘special’ in some way? Is it hard work? Is it a series of fortunate events (such as finding the ‘right’ therapist?)

There’s probably an element of all of these factors, but in reading about Dave Brailsford and his theory of ‘marginal gains’, it leapt out at me as being of great potential benefit in my own recovery from trauma and ill health.

‘Marginal gains’ is basically all about minor tweaks. It’s not about looking for The One Big Solution, or the one thing that will suddenly make someone a gold winner. It’s about tweaking everything by 1%, even less than 1%. One of my favourite examples is that Brailsford was meticulous in the preparation of his cyclists for competition. They took their own pillows to where they were staying, to try to ensure a good night’s sleep. At later events, they even carted in their own mattresses. They learned how to wash their hands properly, to reduce the risk of infections. They were super-nerds when it came to performance hacking.

It would be a bit OTT for me to take my own mattress to a Premier Inn the night before a training day, but it still piqued my interest. It basically got me thinking about all the



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little things, contributing 1% or less, that could make a difference. A tiny difference. But a difference nonetheless. And how, if I implemented lots of those tiny differences and I did it for long enough, it could add up to a big difference.

For a long time I'd been looking for The Big Breakthrough in my therapy. I was looking for The One Memory, or The One Insight, or The One Moment of Empathic Attunement to move me forwards. I left every single therapy session feeling slightly frustrated that The Big Thing hadn't happened. To be sure, it was elusive. But I felt that it must be just around the corner. Surely. So with enough therapy sessions, I would eventually stumble upon it: law of averages.

Every break in therapy was therefore difficult to handle, not just because I missed the affect-regulating benefit of mentalising in the presence of a significant attachment figure, but because it was a missed opportunity to stumble upon The Big Breakthrough.

When you're always looking for something that you can't find, it can lead to a lot of frustration. And with a history of trauma and a perfectionistic mindset, it can quickly lead to a downward spiral of hopelessness, despair and self-loathing. 'Marginal gains' changed my mindset completely.

What if, instead of looking for The Big Thing – the ready-made house delivered next day by Amazon, a kind of lottery-winning miracle – I focused on all the small, tiny, almost inconsequential things that might make a small, itty-bitty, almost inconsequential difference?

I couldn't force myself to have a Big Breakthrough. But I could encourage myself to go to bed in reasonable time each night. I could encourage myself to spend 5 or 10 minutes a day journaling. I could remind myself to take time out three or four times a day to do some deep breathing. I could get into bed every night and vocalise three things that I was grateful for.

And that's what I started to do. Immediately, there was kickback.

'What's the point of this?!' sneered an inner critical voice. 'This isn't going to solve anything! It's pathetic!' The voice was snarling, bitter, hoarsely despising. 'You have DID! You don't recover from DID by going to bed early. You don't get over complex trauma by doing some deep breathing. This is ridiculous!'

My shoulders would slump in despair. The voice was right. This was pathetic. *I* was pathetic. Was this really the best I could do? It was a massive four-storey house I was trying to build, and what difference



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did I really think I could make by just laying one brick a day?

And then I would sit down in despair for several days more, feeling defeated, feeling lost, feeling helpless and powerless and that there was nothing at all I could do to make things better. Life was so unfair.

When we look at the finished article – a new-build house, a gold-winning athlete – it's easy to focus on the final product, not the process that led up to it.

I've been watching new houses being built around me where I live. It is a wonder to behold: a square of mud has trenches dug, foundations laid. The brickwork starts. Every day I watched the brickies at work. It frustrated me sometimes to see how long it took them to collect their bricks, stack them ready, get their mortar, measure out their lines. I'd look up after a couple of hours of my own work and think, 'For

goodness' sake, you've not done anything! You've just moved bricks from one place to another!' Other times, I might be out for a day or two and come home to find that a wall had suddenly shot up.

When the house was finished, I had a clear picture in my mind of how it had been built. Literally, one brick at a time.

When we look at someone who has made significant progress in their recovery from trauma, we can think, 'Oh, I could never be like that.' We can think, 'What good is it for me to just lay one brick at a time? I'm not making any progress.' We can ridicule our lack of progress when all we're doing is creating stacks of bricks ready to lay.

But there is only one way that a house is built – one brick at a time. Each day, there are marginal gains. It doesn't shoot up overnight. It is slow, steady work.

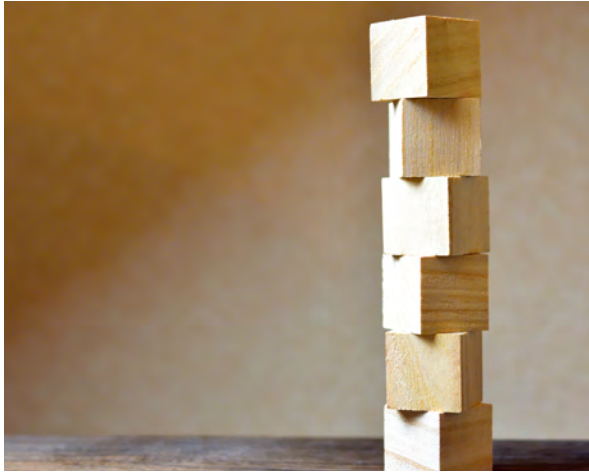
The hardest part was shaking off my despondence. It was a lack of impatience, really – I wanted to be better, and I wanted to be better now. It takes faith and perseverance to keep going, every day, without seeing any results. It takes a lot of hard work. It takes a certain conviction that the little things will add up to the big things.



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In recovery from trauma, we're trying to shift the default operating focus of our minds from the back brain to the front brain. The back brains operate when we're in danger. The front brains operate when we're safe, doing daily life. Trauma keeps us stuck in the back brain mode of danger. Recovery from trauma involves getting our front brains back online, and our bodies feeling safe.

And that process doesn't happen with next day delivery. It happens one brick at a time. Breathing, deeply. Meditating. Journalling. Occasionally a window will go in – an insight in therapy, the resolution of a particularly tricky traumatic memory. On one particular day the roof will go on and we'll think, 'Wow! I'm really making progress now!' But then it will slow again as the guttering is fixed, the air vents inserted.

Progress isn't linear. But our effort can be. 'Marginal gains' is about identifying all the

little things that will help a little bit, and then doing them consistently. It's laying every brick at a time, tightening every bolt, sealing every gap.

What marginal gains can you make in your life? For me, as I said, they were things like breathing, journalling and sleep. Diet was huge. Reducing the toxic load of unhealthy relationships – reducing the burden of drama. Managing money carefully so as not to be stressed about debt. Leaving enough time to allow for accidents and roadworks so that I didn't arrive at therapy or other appointments stressed. Having daily routines and disciplines to stay on top of household chores, rather than living in a mood-sapping cesspit. Limiting alcohol. Stretching. Getting daylight and exercise.

'Marginal gains' isn't so much about what you do. It's more a change of orientation and expectation. It's about looking at what you can fix and change and do, rather than feeling constantly defeated by what you can't. It leads to a series of small wins, and it builds your confidence. Perhaps most importantly, it's an antidote to helplessness.

A 1% improvement doesn't sound like a big deal. But add up enough 1% changes, over enough time, and suddenly life can be very different.

What marginal gains can you implement in your life today? ■