

Small Steps, Big Change

A practical coaching guide to making meaningful change manageable - one realistic step, one repeatable choice and one piece of progress at a time.

Big change rarely begins with a big leap

When something matters to us, it is easy to create a plan that assumes we will have maximum motivation, energy and focus every day. Then ordinary life happens. We become tired, busy, overwhelmed or discouraged, and the plan starts to feel like evidence that we have failed.

Small-step change takes a different approach. Instead of asking, 'How can I transform everything?', ask, 'What is the smallest action that genuinely moves me in the direction I want to go?' Small does not mean meaningless. A step that can be repeated often has more power than an ambitious action that cannot be sustained.

Why small steps work

- **They reduce overwhelm:** the brain has a clearer starting point.
- **They create evidence:** completing something builds proof that movement is possible.
- **They allow learning:** you can adjust the plan before investing too much energy.
- **They support consistency:** a manageable action is easier to repeat on ordinary days.
- **They protect capacity:** progress does not have to require burnout.

Start with direction, not perfection

Choose an area that matters: wellbeing, relationships, work, confidence, sleep, movement, boundaries, organisation or recovery. Then identify the direction you want to move in. A direction is broader than a rigid target. 'I want to look after my energy better' can produce many useful small steps.

Carl Rogers and change

Person-centred thinking reminds us that sustainable growth is supported by acceptance rather than relentless self-rejection. You can want something to change without treating your present self as unacceptable.

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." - Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person (1961).

Make the step smaller than your resistance

If 'exercise three times a week' feels impossible, the first step might be putting your shoes by the door, walking for five minutes or doing seated movement. If 'sort my finances' feels overwhelming, the step might be opening one letter. If 'improve my mental health' is too broad, the step might be booking one appointment.

Turn Intention Into Repeatable Action

The SMALL framework

- **Specific:** What exactly will I do?
- **Manageable:** Can I do it at my normal capacity, not only on a good day?
- **Attached:** Can I link it to something that already happens?
- **Low-friction:** What can I prepare or remove to make starting easier?
- **Learn:** What did the attempt teach me?

Motivation is helpful, but design matters more

Motivation naturally changes. Build the environment so the desired action requires less effort: place medication where you will safely see it, prepare clothing, keep a water bottle accessible, use calendar prompts, create templates, automate routine tasks or ask another person to body double.

Neurodivergence and small-step change

ADHD can make initiation, working memory, time awareness and consistency difficult. Autistic people may find transitions, uncertainty or sudden routine changes costly. A plan can be important and still fail if it relies on executive functions that are already overloaded.

Neurodivergent-friendly approaches

- Make the starting cue visible and concrete.
- Use body doubling or accountability when it genuinely helps.
- Reduce the number of decisions needed to begin.
- Create a 'minimum version' for low-capacity days.
- Keep routines predictable but allow recovery after disruption.
- Use visual progress rather than relying on memory.
- Treat sensory barriers as real barriers that can be adjusted.

The minimum version

Every important habit can have a smaller version. Reading might become one page. Tidying might become one surface. Walking might become two minutes. Journaling might become one sentence. The minimum version keeps the pathway open when capacity is low.

Avoid the all-or-nothing reset

Missing one day does not require a Monday, a new month or a completely new plan. Resume at the next reasonable opportunity. The ability to restart is part of consistency.

When a step keeps failing

- Is it actually small enough?
- Is the cue clear?
- Does it happen at a realistic time?
- Is there a sensory, emotional or practical barrier?
- Does the action still matter to me?
- Am I trying to solve a support need with willpower?
- Would another person, adjustment or professional input help?

Celebrate information as well as success

An attempt that shows you the plan is too difficult is still useful. Change becomes more sustainable when you treat setbacks as data rather than verdicts.

Your Small Steps Toolkit

From big goal to next step

QUESTION	YOUR NOTES
What matters to me?	_____
What direction do I want to move?	_____
What is one small action?	_____
How can I make it easier?	_____
What is my minimum version?	_____
What support might I need?	_____

The 1% experiment

Choose one area and ask what approximately 1% better could look like today. The number is not literal; it is permission to choose an improvement small enough to be realistic.

Examples

- One glass of water rather than redesigning your whole diet.
- Five minutes outside rather than a demanding exercise plan.
- One boundary sentence rather than resolving the whole relationship.
- One email rather than clearing the entire inbox.
- One paragraph rather than completing the whole application.
- One support request rather than continuing to cope alone.

Seven-day small-step challenge

- **Day 1:** choose one meaningful direction.
- **Day 2:** make the next action smaller.
- **Day 3:** remove one point of friction.
- **Day 4:** use the minimum version.
- **Day 5:** ask for one piece of support.
- **Day 6:** restart something without criticising yourself.
- **Day 7:** review what was genuinely sustainable.

Progress tracker

- **My step:** _____
- **What helped me start:** _____
- **What got in the way:** _____
- **What I learned:** _____
- **My next small step:** _____

When the goal needs more than coaching

Some difficulties require medical, psychological, financial, safeguarding, addiction, employment or other specialist support. Breaking a problem into steps can help you access that support, but it should not replace it. The smallest useful step may be making the appointment or telling somebody what is happening.

Urgent support

If you are in immediate danger, experiencing a medical or mental-health emergency, or unable to keep yourself safe, seek urgent help. In the UK, call 999 or attend A&E; in an emergency; NHS 111 and local urgent mental-health services can help direct you.

A Message From Maggie, Books & Resources

A message from Maggie

We can put enormous pressure on ourselves to change everything at once. We decide that tomorrow we will be more organised, healthier, calmer, better with boundaries and completely on top of life. Then when we cannot maintain that enormous plan, we think the problem is us.

I would rather you choose one step you can actually live with. Something small enough that it still has a chance on a difficult day. Then notice what happens. Adjust it. Repeat it. Let progress build instead of demanding transformation overnight.

Small steps are not a lesser form of progress. They are often how confidence, trust in ourselves and sustainable change are built.

And remember: sometimes your next step is not doing more. It may be resting, saying no, asking for an adjustment or letting somebody help you.

Recommended reading

James Clear - *Atomic Habits*. Practical ideas about making habits visible, easy and repeatable.

B. J. Fogg - *Tiny Habits*. A behaviour-change approach built around making actions very small and workable.

Carl R. Rogers - *On Becoming a Person*. Person-centred foundations of acceptance, authenticity and growth.

Russ Harris - *The Happiness Trap*. ACT-informed strategies for moving towards what matters even when difficult thoughts and feelings are present.

Further resources & references

Support may include a coach, GP, qualified counsellor or psychotherapist, neurodivergent-affirming professional, occupational health, workplace adjustments or specialist services depending on the goal and circumstances.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On Becoming a Person*. • Fogg, B. J. (2020). *Tiny Habits*. • Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic Habits*. • Harris, R. (2019). *The Happiness Trap*, 2nd ed. Behaviour-change strategies should be adapted to individual capacity and clinical needs.

Important: This resource provides coaching reflection and psychoeducation. It does not replace individual medical, psychological or emergency care.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Maggie's Coaching