

# The Slow Change Method

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When I was younger, I was trying all sorts of self-improvement methods. This typically involved reading a book that suggested a change in behavior. I would try out the new method and things would improve for a couple of weeks and then return to normal. I decided that these self-improvement methods were flawed and that I could create a better method for creating changes in behavior.

I decided to create the "Quick Change Method." I figured that if I could develop a method to change behavior that was fast and effective, I could write a book and get rich quick. My future days could be lived in ease and comfort.

I am sad to report that I failed miserably. After 10 years of consistent effort, I could not produce a method for quick change. Nothing I tried was more effective than the methods in the books I had read.

As I lamented my failure, I realized that the attempts to create the quick change method were not completely wasted. I had actually changed a lot over the preceding 10 years. I was doing much better than I had been doing at the beginning.

I realized that I had developed the "Slow Change Method." Or, perhaps I should call this the zig-zag method. I found that the process of changing had been one of ups and downs. Over time, the ups were higher and the downs were lower. After 10 years, there was substantial progress.

From a book publishing prospective, this seemed to be a complete failure. Who would pay good money for a book that recommended hard work and persistent effort over many years? I could not imagine that this would be a best seller. Oh well. File this away under lessons learned.

A while later, I got interested in studying changes in criminal offender risk scores. After studying these for a while, I noticed that the same zig-zag pattern was emerging in the risk scores. Risk scores were not static, they were dynamic.

This seemed to resonate with my experience. I tried to find some way to analyze this data and got interested in something called "Individual Growth Curve Modeling" after reading a book by Singer and Willett called "Applied Longitudinal Data Analysis." Their

first attempt at the analysis of time series was to create an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression plot through the time series.

I used the OLS method on the offender risk score data and placed several of the plots together on one page. As I observed them, I noticed that a peculiar pattern emerged. Offenders with small changes in risk score had a trend toward decreasing risk (good thing) while offenders with large changes in risk had a trend toward increasing risk (bad thing). The correlation was small  $r = -.04$ , but so was my sample ( $n=12$ ).

Two samples of the risk plots are shown below. Offender 1 had a large decrease in risk on the second assessment, which seemed to result in lower risk scores for a while, but then relapsed and was worse off at the end. Offender 2 had much smaller reductions in risk, but they persisted over time and the net result was a reduction in risk.

### Risk Trends



As I thought about this, I reflected back to my experience with the discovery of the "Slow Change Method." Could my experience be universal? Is all change a zig-zag process? Moreover, is slow change better than quick change?

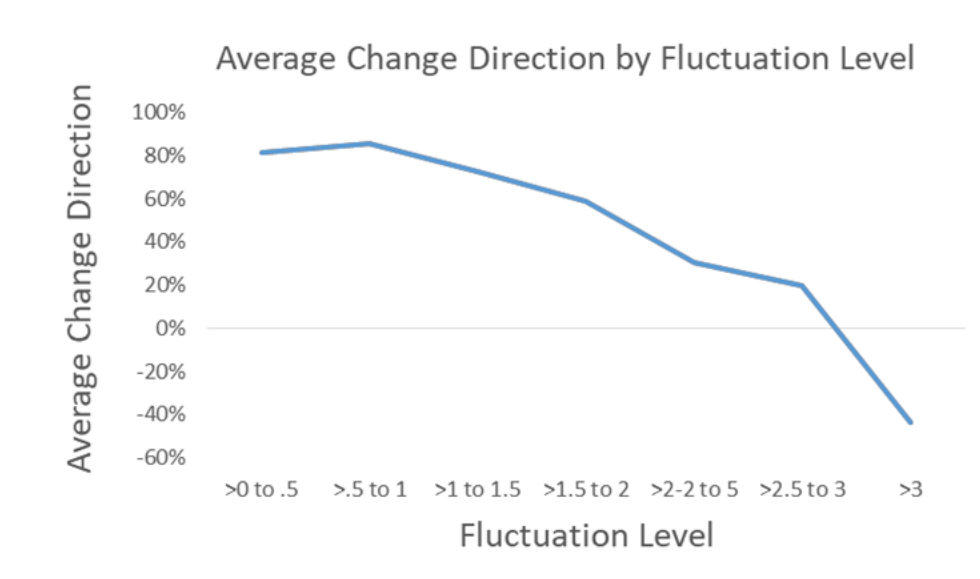
I decided to get more risk data, and collected longitudinal risk data from 50,000 offenders. I assessed the fluctuation levels by using the standard errors on the OLS trajectories of longitudinal risk plots. This removed any bias due to the overall change

in values. I broke the fluctuation levels into categories ranging from low to high, and then assessed the percent with improvement or decline.

I found that quick change is generally associated with risk getting worse rather than improving. The plot of my results is shown below. It shows that 80% of offenders with small changes in risk are getting better, while 40% of offenders with large fluctuations in risk levels are getting worse.

Was the moral about the tortoise and the hare correct? Does "slow and steady" win the race in behavior change? This seemed to be the case.

### Average Change Direction by Fluctuation Level



I realize that this is only one study and that there might be alternative explanations. However, there don't seem to be a lot of studies that explore this question. Which is better? Quick change or slow change?