When it's windy some people build windscreens.

Others build
windmills.

Stuck-thinking

**When we are confronted with a problem –
whatever that problem may be, a rebellious
child, a rainy vacation, a malfunctioning body
part - our first reaction is 'yes-but'. We want to
get rid of it.**

A yes-but reaction is logical and understandable,
nobody welcomes a problem. But the effect of a
yes-but reaction can be disappointing and in most
cases the situation goes from bad to worse. When
we resist a problem it tends to turn into a disaster,
what the Germans call a 'Verschlimbesserung'.

However as neither the English nor the Dutch
language provides a word which adequately
expresses this idea, we made one up, 'vastdenken'
or 'stuck-thinking'.

Stuck-thinking examples come in all shapes and
sizes. Social geographers know it as the waterbed
effect. For example when you improve living
conditions in a certain neighbourhood without
improving the adjacent areas, the problems will
probably shift to those surrounding areas, rather

like what happens when you push down on a waterbed. People who diet know it as the yo-yo effect, economists as the downward spiral and biologists know it as the pork cycle.

To keep things closer to home, you can forbid a child to smoke, but doing so can effectively make smoking more attractive to the child. Your solution has become part of the problem.

All these phenomena can be compared to getting your car stuck in the mud. You try to drive it out, but the more you spin the wheels, the deeper down your car sinks.

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Strike

A concert master was going through a series of difficult negotiations when he was confronted by union representatives who threatened to initiate a week-long strike, even though the orchestra was preparing for a very important concert which was scheduled for two days' time. The conflict was deadlocked until the concert master made them a paradoxical offer…

Compensating feedback

Stuck-thinking is a simple concept in theory – turning a problem into a disaster – but in practice it can be difficult to recognize a stuck-thinking pattern, let alone break out of it. This has to do with what system theorists call 'compensating feedback'. It's like making a dent in a plastic bottle. For a moment something has changed, but soon enough the bottle will plop back into its original form.

We like to combat problems with direct and effective measures. If your child lacks confidence you believe you must speak to him encouragingly but unfortunately it's not that simple. Reality takes over and as we've already seen, a non-smoking rule just makes smoking more interesting, while nothing is more demoralising than parents giving 'motivational' monologues. Who, other than a loser, needs a motivational speech?

The difficulty lies in the fact that compensating feedback is almost always invisible as it happens
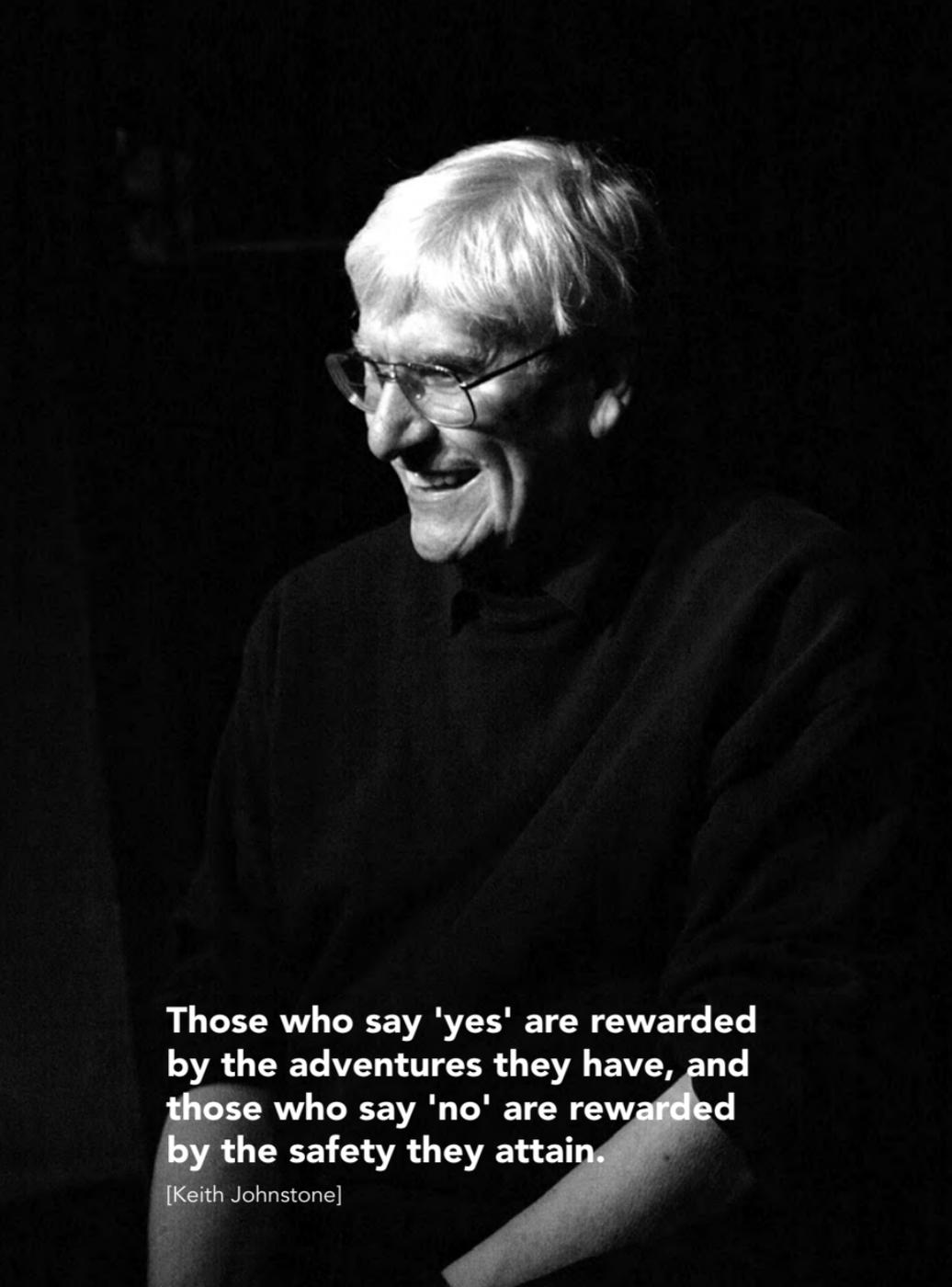
Those who say 'yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say 'no' are rewarded by the safety they attain.

[Keith Johnstone]

At his wedding, a man was made a gift of a hideous painting by his mother-in-law. 'It will look lovely above the sofa', the mother-in-law said. Whereupon the son-in-law replied, 'In that case we'll have to move the sofa to the attic'.

outside our field of vision. Take for example a centre for difficult youths, where a particular group was causing lots of problems. The supervisors reacted by enacting harsher punishments which only resulted in the problematic group became even more troublesome. Then one of the supervisors started looking more closely at the situation and discovered that the youths considered the punishments to be badges of honour. Who dared to break the most rules? Who went furthest in challenging authority? In practice, the punishments were regarded as a reward, so the supervisors made the radical decision to stop punishing altogether. Within no time the bothersome behaviour had disappeared.

No matter how difficult it can be to recognize stuck-thinking, one thing is clear - more of the same will not work. Getting even angrier with your child, becoming stricter and stricter with your employees, trying harder and harder to lose weight, are all stuck-thinking patterns. As Einstein said, 'Insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different outcome.'

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