



EVERYONE'S A STOIC

A quick search of the term *Stoicism* on Amazon reveals that hundreds of books on the topic have been published in the past 3 months alone. The internet is teeming with podcasts, courses, and blogs about how this ancient Greek philosophy and its principles, including focusing on what you can control, not getting carried away by emotions, and living in the here and now, can improve your life.

Sports coaches endeavor to make their athletes resilient. In his autobiography *Drive*, 2010 Olympic 1,500-meter speed skating champion Mark Tuitert from the Netherlands wrote about how the age-old ideas of Stoicism help him cope with the pressure of being a top athlete and how anyone can develop a stoic mindset with just a few practical lessons. The list of famous people who swear by the ancient Greek philosophy is long and varied. It includes actor-turned-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger, US football star Tom Brady, author of the Harry Potter book series J.K. Rowling, and Twitter founder Jack Dorsey.

Lifestyle coaches teach courses on how adopting Stoicism can improve inner balance. In psychotherapy, Stoicism has seeped into techniques to help people with depression and anxiety disorders. There now seems to be something for everyone in Stoicism, including *The Stoic Salesperson* for sales professionals and *Stoicism for Entrepreneurs* for business professionals. There are books of stoic tips for conquering creative blocks and burnout, improving time management, being a better friend, and more.

What makes a philosophy that is more than 2,000 years old so popular today? First and foremost is an increase in the popularity of philosophy in general and in people searching for meaning beyond their traditional religious institutions. I also think the appeal of Stoicism amid society's reinvigorated appetite for philosophy has much to do with its practical nature. Stoicism comprises timeless principles everyone can recognize or relate to. It seems as if the works of Marcus Aurelius or Seneca, two prominent Roman proponents of Stoicism, could have been written yesterday. Most people can get something out of this school of philosophy right away.

If your Twitter feed typically stresses you out, you'll probably find something useful in the principles of Stoicism. The following are seven exercises you can do to practice Stoicism.¹

► **No. 1: Dichotomy of control.** Make a list of things on your mind and organize them into two columns, one for things that you have control over and one for those you don't. Tell yourself that you won't waste time on the things you have no control over. For example, no matter how hard you try, you can't make someone like you. Do this exercise daily or during difficult times.

► **No. 2: Keep a diary.** Do this not as an anecdotal account of your day but as a systematic philosophical practice. What have you experienced, and what have you learned from it?

► **No. 3: Visualize the bad.** The *premeditatio malorum*, or the premeditation of the evils and troubles that may lie ahead, is an essential practice in Stoicism. By systematically imagining terrible things, you can arm yourself against setbacks. For example, Seneca practiced the different ways a planned trip could go wrong: a storm, a sick captain, or invasion by pirates.

► **No. 4: The obstacle is the way.** Aim to turn challenges into opportunities. If someone doesn't want to cooperate, see that as an opportunity to exercise patience. There is no good or bad, only perception.

► **No. 5: Put things in perspective.** Imagine the billions of people on the planet—all the armies, births, and deaths. Doing this makes you realize how puny you are. Luxury and power become subordinate and your daily worries banal. At the same time, the exercise helps you recognize how you are connected to the world at large.

► **No. 6: *Memento mori*.** This translates to: "Remember that you [have to] die." Reflect on your mortality and the shortness of human existence as a way to make you humble, not to instill fear. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote, "You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think."²

► **No. 7: Practice adversity.** Comfort is the worst form of slavery because it makes us fearful of losing things. To avoid becoming dependent on comfort, do little things on occasion that take you away from it. For example, fast for a few days or take a cold shower to avoid becoming dependent on the comforts of life.

Stoicism has proven helpful for teaching people to deal with adversity and trauma in psychotherapy. Cherry-picking the catchphrases of Stoicism, however, hazards reducing it to watery mindfulness or an excuse to acquiesce in the social order to avoid difficult situations and feelings or to erase empathy. I encourage everyone to explore the concepts of Stoicism further. ■

1. Holiday R. *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living*. Portfolio; 2016.

2. Aurelius M. *Meditations*. Penguin Classics; 2006.

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