

# The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient (2019)

## Introduction

“Tranquility is worth pursuing as it is a psychological state in which we experience few negative emotions, such as anxiety, grief, and fear, but an abundance of positive emotions, especially joy”

- We can transform what for many people would simply be an unfortunate setback into a kind of mind game
  - Doing this lets us respond to setbacks without becoming frustrated, angry, or despondent
- Goal: think of all setbacks as part of a challenge laid out by the “Stoic gods”
- Aside: What a bunch of spoiled brats we twenty-first-century humans are
- The Stoic Test strategy: when faced with a setback, we should treat it as a test of our resilience and resourcefulness, devised and administered by “Stoic gods”
  - The Stoic test strategy is based on the framing effect – how we mentally characterize a situation has a profound impact on how we respond to it emotionally
- The goal of Stoics is not to banish emotion but to minimize the number of negative emotions (feelings of frustration, anger, grief, and envy)
  - Their goal is not to remain calm while suffering a setback but rather to experience a setback without thereby suffering

## Setbacks

- One sign of maturity is a realization of the extent to which you either intentionally or unintentionally make life difficult for those around you
- Setbacks and desires are interconnected: whether something counts as a setback depends on what a person wants, and how significant the setback depends on how much he wants it
- The biggest cost by far is the emotional distress a setback trigger
- Our usual reactions result in us becoming first frustrated and then angry, which substantially increases the harm done to us by the setback

## Anger Issues

- Frustration often begets anger



- Consequently, getting frustrated in response to a setback only makes things worse
- When we become angry, we have two options: we can either express our anger or suppress it
  - If suppressed, our anger might take root in us and enter a kind of dormant state, only to spring back to life at an inopportune moment
    - A year after experiencing a setback that angered us, our anger might flare into our consciousness again
- The Stoic philosopher Seneca understood how much harm we do by allowing ourselves to get angry
  - In his essay "On Anger" he asserts "No plague has cost the human race more."
- In getting angry, we are only hurting ourselves
- In particular, if we could learn how not to get angry about the setbacks we experience in everyday life, there wouldn't be much anger left to deal with

## Resilience

- We cannot always control what happens in our life, but we can always control what we do with what happens
- It is so very easy for us to take our abilities for granted
  - We need to realize that more generally, for everything we do, there will be a last time we do it
- "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are."
- When the number of options available is limited, it is foolish to fuss and fret
  - We should instead simply choose the best of them and get on with life
  - To behave otherwise is to waste precious time and energy

## Can We Become More Resilient?

- Resilience continuum shows that the great-grandchildren of today are in many cases substantially less resilient than their ancestors were
- We have a lot of people walking around with a victim mentality
  - Being a victim, after all, relieves you of responsibility for many of the aspects of your life that have gone wrong
- A resilient person will refuse to play the role of a victim
- Resilient people regard the failures they experience as stepping stones on the road to eventual success rather than traumatic events
- **Resilience is not an innate trait. It is an acquired ability!**

## The Psychology of Setbacks

- Whereas your conscious mind is conspicuously rational, your subconscious mind operates in a semi-rational manner

- Your conscious mind appears to be perfectly willing to play the role of lackey to your subconscious mind at times ([System 1 vs. System 2](#)).
- Your subconscious mind tends to treat life's setbacks as undeserved tribulations
- Dealing with your emotions and your subconscious mind, is a lifelong challenge since unlike any children you might have, your emotions and subconscious mind are never going to grow up
- Your subconscious mind is where your muse if you have one, resides
- Your subconscious mind is quite willing to engage in lateral thinking and to explore unlikely connections between ideas, something that your sober and methodical conscious mind is reluctant to do
- Negative visualization is one of the most remarkable psychological instruments in the Stoic toolkit
  - You should periodically have flickering thoughts about how your life and circumstances could be worse
  - Remember... the Stoic gods will show you how your life can in fact be worse through setbacks
- Whereas the use of anchoring can help us better appreciate our lives, the use of framing can prevent setbacks from disrupting our tranquility
  - What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things
- The Stoics knew that while our subconscious mind is inclined to frame events in ways that trigger negative emotions, we can substantially undermine that tendency by consciously reframing events
- We use framing to avoid experiencing negative emotions in the aftermath of a setback
- A Stoic's primary goal in life is to attain and then maintain tranquility – to avoid, that is, experiencing negative emotions while continuing to enjoy positive emotions
- When people judge others, we do so in accordance with our own values, not in accordance with the values of the people they are judging
- If you can bring yourself to laugh at the things that make most people cry, you have a powerful weapon to use against life's adversities
- People normally think of setbacks as annoying events, or even worse, as undeserved tribulations, and as a result, respond by getting frustrated or angry

## Taking Stoic Tests

- Preventing ourselves from experiencing negative emotions in the aftermath of that setback is the whole ball game
- Usually, the harm done to us by our emotions – if we allow them to be triggered – is the biggest cost associated with a setback
- Preventing emotions from arising is the focus not concealing the emotions
- Anger is a double-edged sword: besides motivating us, it can exhaust us, so that we run out of energy before winning our battle



Combined Raw Notes: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy (2008) and The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient (2019) by William B. Irvine

- We live in a world in which change when it comes, is likely to be incremental
- Anger is incompatible with Joy
- We are much more resilient than modern-day psychologist would have us believe, and therefore much less in need of grief counseling than many people recommend today
  - Most people, left to themselves, will rebound from an interpersonal loss, and grief counseling can make things worse by inadvertently undermining their resilience
- The Stoics, therefore, recommend that we periodically make a point of reminding ourselves just how wonderful it is that the people we love are currently part of our life
  - Something could have happened that deprived us of their company, but it didn't... Aren't we lucky?
- We should be practicing mortality meditations to fully appreciate the existence of those we love while they are still alive
- To the extent possible we should also simply accept that death is a part of our life and we will need to get on with life
- Put a setback in one psychological frame, and we will find it upsetting; put it in another, and we may discover, much to our amazement, that we enjoy dealing with that setback
- Our subconscious tends to favor the blame frame: it assumes that you have been wronged
- We humans, in other words, are hybrid creatures, part god and part animal.
  - Our conscious mind, with its reasoning ability, is our godly component;
  - Our subconscious mind and emotions together form our animal component
- Excellence withers without an adversary
- The Stoic gods, possess a mischievous sense of humor

## The Five-Second Rule

- Our first priority should be to prevent ourselves from being flooded by negative emotions
- If we are set back, we have five seconds to declare the event to be a Stoic test
- Our brain, then might be described as a computer with lots of processing power but an archaic operating system

## Living A Stoic Life

- We can go out of our way to do things that we find physically or mentally exhausting
- It is our homework to be rejected over and over and over and over, and then come back and report on it
- The goal of life should be to live a tranquil life, one in which we experience as few negative emotions and as much delight as possible
- It is possible to achieve worldly success while practicing Stoicism
- We need to have the ability to try something, fail, learn, and try again
- How we frame a setback has a very real impact on our chances of successfully overcoming it
- You only need to be clever and patient and persistent to overcome life's challenges



- You should also keep in mind that there is something much, much worse than failing to do something difficult, and that is not even attempting to do it because you feared failure
- For an event to count as a setback, it must not only come as a surprise to us but must, from our point of view, count as a change for the worse
- Our life experience determines the size and shape of our comfort zone
  - In particular, if we make a point of exposing ourselves to things that make us either physically or emotionally uncomfortable, we can train ourselves to be comfortable with them and thereby expand our comfort zone
- Our comfort zone has two dimensions, one physical and the other emotional, and our goal is toughness training should be to expand both of them
- To become emotionally tougher, you need to tackle your fears – you need, in other words, to deal with what we might think of as your scared self
- Familiarity breeds comfort: do something scary often enough, and it only ceases to be scary, it becomes automatic
- The body will get used to the new eating regimen so that even though you eat less food, you experience less hunger than you did before
  - It might dawn on you that what you previously thought of as hunger wasn't biological hunger at all
  - It was instead a psychological mélange of boredom and discontent
- Stoics engage in toughness training so they can have a better life
- Experiencing too much comfort will reduce your capacity for experiencing pleasure

## Setups

- In a setup, they are extraordinarily nice to us, but only in order to set the stage for a subsequent setback
- The greatest danger comes from excessive good fortune: it stirs the brain, invites the mind to entertain idle fancies, and shrouds in thick fog the distinction between falsehood and truth

## Death

- Increase your chances of extracting every drop of delight that your life has to offer
- Acknowledge your mortality, though, and you will be acutely aware that every day you live represents a withdrawal from a life bank that has a finite number of days in it
- Believing in heaven not only takes the sting out of death but potentially makes death something too long for
- Since his primary goal in life is to attain and then maintain tranquility, a Stoic would spend the time that remained experiencing as few negative emotions as he can, with as little anxiety, fear, anger, and regret as possible even in death
- Is life ultimately about having the best death possible?

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- The prospect of death will, at last, make us fully aware of how beautiful, and wonderful our life is
- We are foolish to waste even a moment of our life being miserable when we have it in our power to experience the delight
- Dying then, is the easy part of your Stoic exit exam; the challenge is to retain your equanimity
- **We should, that is, do what we can to help those around us have a better life**

## The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy (2008)

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### Philosophy of life

- A grand goal in living is the first component of a philosophy of life
- Second component of a philosophy of life is a strategy for attaining your grand goal in living
- The default and dominant philosophy of life:
- “To spend one’s days seeking an interesting mix of affluence, social status, and pleasure”
- The downside of failing to develop an effective philosophy of life: You end up wasting the one life you have
- The best hope of gaining happiness is to live of self-discipline not self-indulgence.
- Two principal sources of human unhappiness: our insatiability and our tendency to worry about things beyond our control

### Goals and Practices of Stoicism

- The overall goal of Stoicism is the attainment of tranquility
- To banish negative emotions from one’s life
- We have to find a way to overcome our insatiability
  - People that obey their lust are like servants that obey their masters
  - People that are unable to control their desires will never be able to find contentment
  - This insatiability is why so many people are unhappy
- A virtuous man is one that lives in accordance with nature
- The pursuit of virtue results in a degree of tranquility
- Strive to avoid hedonic adaptation



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- Learn how to want the things we already have
- Contentment can be gained by changing our desires
- Primary function is to be rational
- Try to become indifferent to what others think about me

## Prime Example of Hedonic Adaptation

- We start out in a state of wedded bliss, but before long we find ourselves contemplating our spouse's flaws and, not long after that, fantasizing about starting a relationship with someone new
- We need to take steps to prevent ourselves from taking for granted the things we worked so hard to get (Hedonic Adaptation)
- As soon as we find ourselves living the life of our dreams, we start taking that life for granted
- Hedonic adaptation has the power to extinguish our enjoyment of the world

## Negative Visualization

- Negative visualization teaches us to embrace whatever life we happen to be living and to extract every bit we can from it
- It simultaneously teaches us to prepare ourselves for changes that will deprive us of the things that delight us
- Contemplating the impermanence of everything in the world will force us to recognize that every time we do something could be the last time, we do it
- By engaging in negative visualization, we can convince ourselves to be happy with what we already have and thereby counteract our tendency toward insatiability
- As we go about our day, we should periodically pause to reflect on the fact that we will not live forever and therefore that this day could be our last
- Instead of thinking about how our situation could be worse, we refuse to think about how it could be better
- In retrospective negative visualization, we imagine never having had something that we have lost

## Self-Control and Reason

- Willpower is like muscle power ...
- The more they exercise their muscles the stronger they get
- The more we exercise our will the stronger it gets
- By practicing Stoic self-denial techniques over a long period, Stoics can transform themselves into individuals remarkable for their courage and self-control
- Reason will never enlist the aid of reckless unbridled impulses over which it has no authority
- We should use our reasoning ability to overcome negative emotions

- We should use our reasoning abilities to master our desires, to the extent that it is possible to do so

## Desire, Pleasure, and Sex

- If we cannot resist pleasure we will end up playing the role of the slave
- Sex has the power to destroy
- Sexual intercourse has never done a man good and he is lucky it hasn't harmed him
- Intense pleasures when captured by us, become our captors, meaning that the more pleasures a man captures, the more masters will he have to serve
- Natural desires such as the desire for water when thirsty can be satisfied
- Unnatural desires cannot
- Sex is nothing more than "friction of the members and an ejaculatory discharge"
- We are therefore very foolish to place a high value on sexual relations and more foolish still to disrupt our life in order to experience such relations
- For each desire we fulfill in accordance with a hedonistic strategy, a new desire will pop into our head to take its place
- When you are contemplating whether or not to take advantage of opportunities for pleasure, engage in a sort of rational-reasoning analysis... Is it really worth it?

## Grief

- It is perfectly natural to experience grief (reflexive grief) but eventually the true Stoic will try to dispel whatever grief remains in him by trying to reason it out of existence
- Is this what the person who died would want me to do? Thus, the best way to honor thy memory is to leave off grieving and get on with life
- The goal of the Stoics is therefore is to minimize grief
- The primary grief-prevention strategy is to engage in negative visualization
- Although it might not be possible to eliminate grief from our life, it is possible to take steps to minimize the amount of grief we experience over the course of a lifetime
- Rather than mourning the end of a loved one's life, we should be thankful that they lived at all

## Control of Events

- My winning at tennis is therefore an example of something over which I have some control but not complete control
  - Instead of having winning a tennis match as my goal, make it my goal to prepare for the match as best you can and try your hardest in the match
  - When we spend time dealing with things over which we have some but not complete control, we should be careful to internalize our goals. My goal in playing tennis, for example, should be not to win the match but to play the best match possible





- There are things over which we have complete control and things over which we don't have complete control
- We have no control over the past nor do we have any control over the present (this very moment)
- We are wasting our time if we worry about past or present events
- When you only have slight control over an event, you will want to internalize your goals regarding the event
- We waste our time with and cause ourselves needless anxiety if we concern ourselves with things over which we have no control
- To curb our tendency to worry about things beyond our control, the Stoics advise us to perform a kind of triage with respect to the elements of our life and sort them into those we have no control over, those we have complete control over, and those we have some but not complete control over. Having done this, we should not bother about things over which we have no control. Instead, we should spend some of our time dealing with things over which we have complete control, such as our goals and values, and spend most of our time dealing with things over which we have some but not complete control. If we do this, we will avoid experiencing much needless anxiety.

## Anger

- Anger is brief insanity
- If we find ourselves to be overly sensitive, we will be quick to anger
- To avoid becoming we should also keep in mind that the things that anger us generally don't do us any real harm... They are instead mere annoyances
- Thus, when we feel ourselves getting angry about something, we should pause to consider its cosmic insignificance
- One of the worst things we can do when other people annoy us is get angry
- The problem with anger is it feels good to vent it and feels bad to suppress it
- But by venting anger, I accomplish nothing other than to disturb my own tranquility

## Reactions to Insults

- Pause when you are insulted and consider whether what the insulter said is true
- If there is truth to the comment then there is little reason to be upset
- Stop and consider the source of the insult
- We would really be foolish to allow the insults of childish adults upset us and mess up our tranquility
- As a result, we ourselves are the source of any sting that accompanies the insult
- Instead of reacting to an insult we should calmly and quietly bear what has happened