

INTRO TO ETHICS

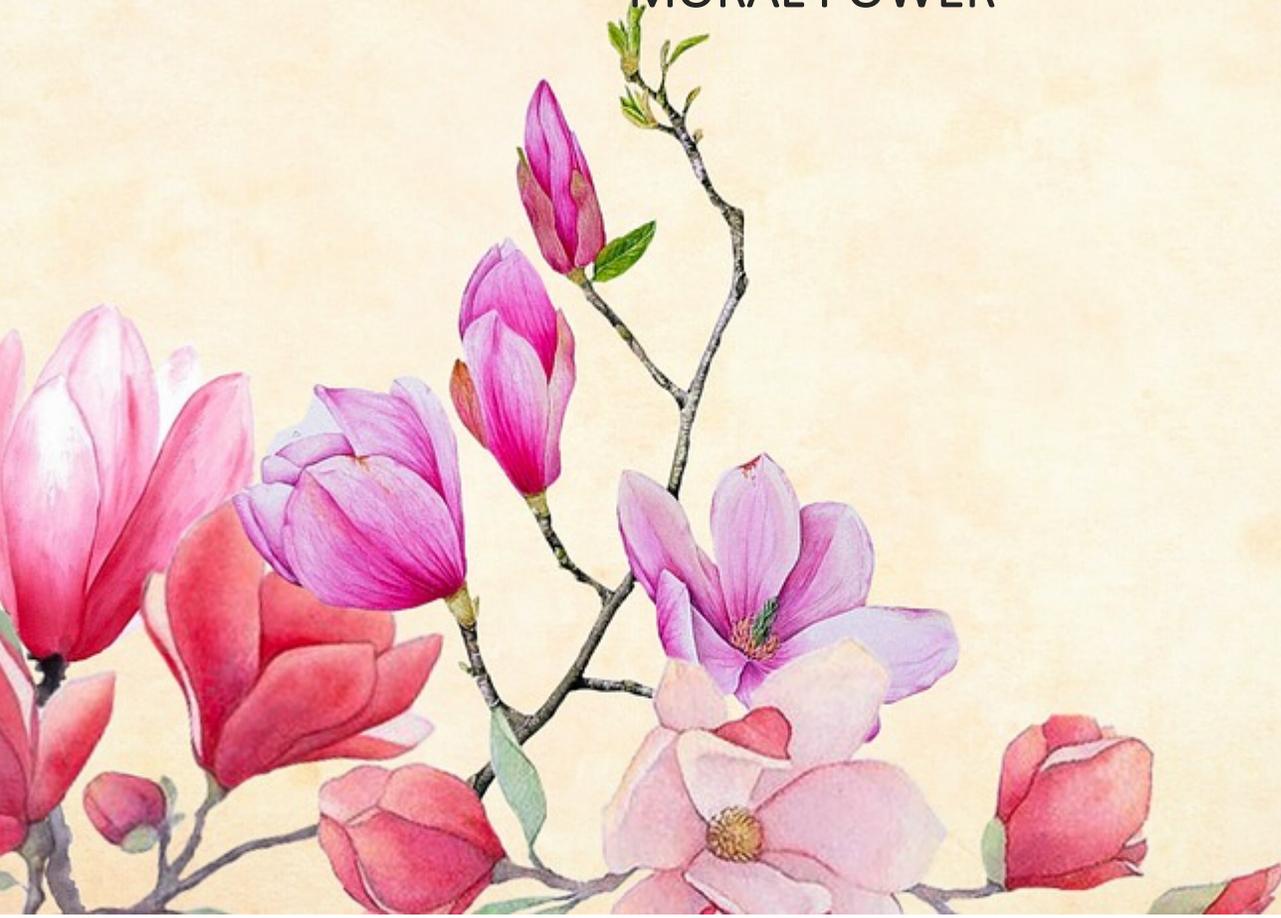
R. D. Walsh, Ph.D.

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CHAPTER 6

STOICISM AND PERSONAL MORAL POWER



Introduction

In the previous chapter we considered two moral theories—Duty Ethics and Utilitarianism. These moral theories have generated rational moral principles which can be used to make particular moral judgments. Like what kind of particular moral judgments? Like these: whether it is okay to pilfer supplies from work; whether advertising junk food to kids is wrong; whether you should change your major, have a second desert, or uproot your family by accepting a promotion that requires moving to a foreign country. Duty ethics and Utilitarianism (or just ‘Utility’) can help you to make such moral judgments effectively. You use these theories every day whether you know it or not.

The moral principles generated by Utility theory and Duty ethics are common ways of evaluating and making decisions about various types of moral issues. You might do this intuitively and emotionally in a pre-reflective manner, or you might use these theories reflectively, consciously working coming to a decision about something. Remember what we learned from the Runaway Trolley thought experiment in the last chapter. Non-rational, situational factors like

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emotion or the difference between pushing a lever and pushing a person, continually influence our rational moral decision-making. This leads to an important moral question:

How much of your everyday life is under your control or within your power to potentially control, and how much of what you experience in your life is not within your power to control?

Some things you can control, and some things you can't. Do you always know where the line is between these two dimensions of your life? What happens if you are mistaken about where that line falls? You are morally responsible for actions that are under your control and within your power. Why? Because you could have done otherwise. But you are less responsible for actions that are not under your control. It isn't your fault that it is raining on your golf day or that the train is late. Knowing what is under your control and what isn't will make a big difference to your living the best possible life.

So, it will be worthwhile to spend a little time considering the extent of your personal moral power—how you can cultivate it, how you can give it away, and how you can take it back. We must look more closely at what is under your control and within your personal moral power and what isn't.

This chapter addresses the question of how our moral power and/or lack of power weaves its way through our everyday lives by focusing on the ancient moral philosophy called **Stoicism** and its contemporary connection to **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**. Practices and ideas derived from these two perspectives can be very beneficial to your cultivation and development of personal moral power and achievement of success in life. That is the message I want to highlight right off about Stoicism: *there is a practical benefit to the practice of Stoicism*. And there is plenty of concrete evidence to support that message.



Jonathan Newhouse, CEO

In a recent interview with philosopher Jules Evans (we will hear more from Jules later), Jonathan Newhouse, CEO of the giant Condé Nast publishing empire in Europe, said he accidentally stumbled upon Stoicism and it immediately caught his attention. When he realized just how beneficial it could be, he said he “read just about everything” he could about it. “I incorporated it into my thinking, and it’s shaped the way I think and interact with the world in a very positive way.”

Stoic philosophy, Newhouse continued,

...helps me manage myself and my own feelings. There's not very much that disturbs my equanimity. I can have a detachment and calmness in doing what I do. I don't get offended if someone I do business with lets me down, I just recognize this is the way some people behave. It reminds me of a quote from Marcus Aurelius I was looking at this morning:

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“Whenever you are offended at someone’s lack of shame, you should immediately ask yourself, ‘is it possible for there to be no shameless people in the world?’ It’s not possible – do not ask for the impossible. This person is just one of the shameless inevitably existing in this world.”

Sounds pretty straightforward but people get hung up on how other people act all the time, so the stoic skill of reframing situations positively can be beneficial across the board. Think about road rage. The Stoics would say that if someone is behaving in a rude way, stay cool, step back and say ‘OK that’s their problem. What’s my responsibility? Mine is to follow the precepts of truth, justice, courage and self-control’. Nothing can prevent you from doing that.

Your attitude is entirely up to you and within your potential control. If you ask most people, do you think you can achieve your goal, people would say, maybe I will, maybe not. If your goal is to live according to reason and virtue, then that is always achievable. I’d never thought of that before running into Stoicism. Now it guides my life.¹

Keep in mind that this personal perspective on the philosophy of Stoicism is coming from an extremely successful entrepreneur in the international publishing field. Stoic philosophy works.

Stoicism fits in with the theories we have investigated in previous chapters that focus on how morality operates in the actual *practice* of living the good life back in Chapter 4. Aristotle was influenced by Stoic ideas and that influence is reflected in his arguments about virtue and happiness, so some Stoic ideas have already been introduced in this text. This is in keeping with the fact that Stoicism was a widespread system of ideas and practices in the ancient world and continues to have a lively influence today in western culture. A life philosophy with that kind of staying power is worth taking a closer look at.

Within the context of focusing on how we should go about living the best possible life, I would like to zero in on the fundamental Stoic question of just how much of your life is under your control and how much isn’t, since it will be shown that the clear determination of this will supposedly make a huge and decisive difference to your achievement of success in your personal and professional life. I have found this to be true in my own experience.

Because of its importance, we will continue to investigate the extent of your personal moral power in the following chapter regarding the question of character, situation, and the influence of company culture on your morality. And the topic will come up again after that because of the central place the idea has across the whole field of ethics. But, first, let’s turn our attention to the philosophy of Stoicism and see how this connects with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to create a general moral approach to life that can really work for you.

¹ Evans, Jules. “Jonathan Newhouse, Stoic CEO of Condé Nast’s international empire.” Philosophy for Life.org, October 16, 2013. Retrieved September 2015.

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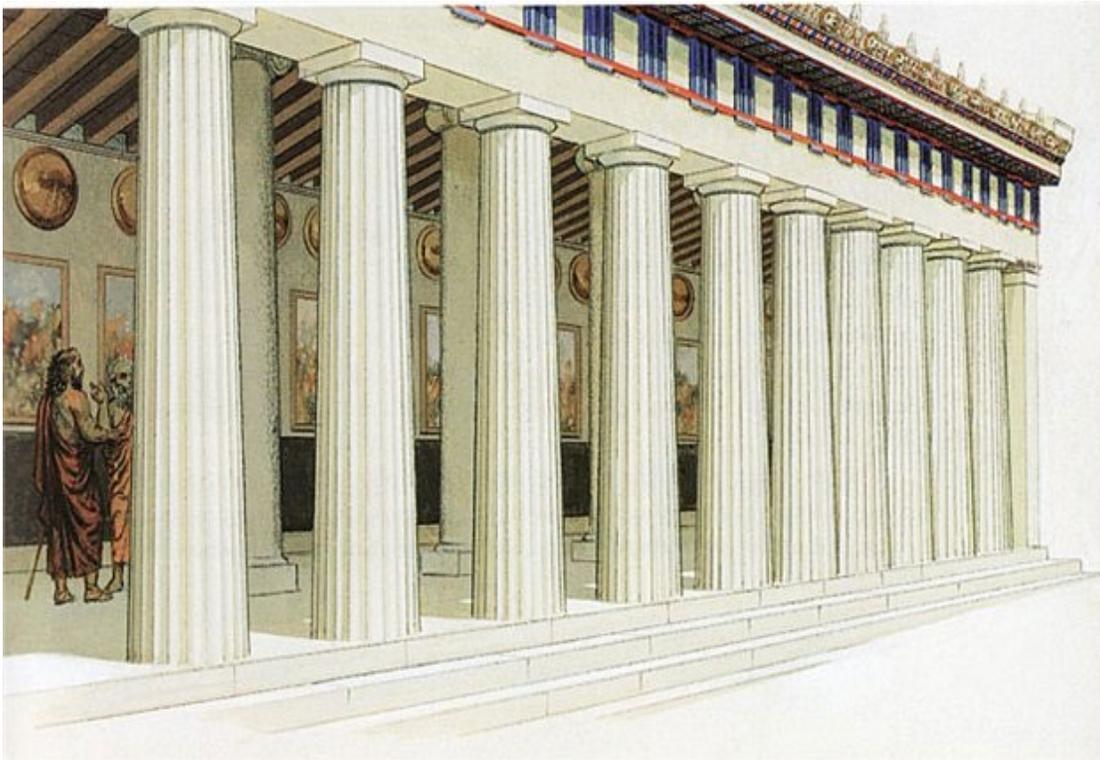
Stoicism

Stoicism focuses on how to achieve the best possible life through the development of certain moral value perspectives and the practice of basic Stoic principles, namely: being guided in your life decisions primarily by reason; moderating your desires by the pursuit and practice of virtue; living in harmony with the natural order; embracing what is under your control and letting go of what is not; and maintaining equanimity in both victory and defeat.

It was not only the contemplation and discussion of these ideas and principles that was important to Stoicism. Study and discussion and discourse are necessary, but the self-actualizing exercise of these virtuous qualities and characteristics in the existential, everyday life of the practitioner is the primary goal of Stoic practice.

STOIC LIFE PRINCIPLES - Epictetus

- Practice the virtues until they are habits
- Live in accord with reason and Nature
- Moderate your desires and passions
- Get ethical and philosophical training for life
- Practice *very* honest self-assessment
- Make careful life judgments
- Develop inner calm. How?
 - Focus on what is under your control



The origin of the Stoic way of life dates back to the teaching of **Zeno of Citium** in the 3rd century BC who taught in Athens. And, probably, Stoic ideals have roots further back into antiquity. Other notable “early” Stoic thinkers followed Zeno. Where did Stoicism get its name? The Greek term “Stoa” refers to the porch or colonnade where the Stoic students and teachers regularly gathered for instruction in downtown Athens.

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Stoicism was a commonly known and influential cultural practice in its day. Christianity, from the very beginning, was highly influenced by Stoic philosophy to describe its newly developing belief system. Thus, Christianity has perpetuated Stoic ideas through the centuries down to our own day where they continue to be an integral aspect of Western culture, as can be seen in the movie “The Gladiator,” for example, and in Tom Wolfe’s best-selling novel *A Man in Full*, and even in the “Serenity Prayer” used by Alcoholics Anonymous: **“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”** That prayer gets right to three of the most important principles of Stoic philosophy.

Because the repetitive practice of Stoic ideas and virtues leads to the ability to be calm and rational in the midst of a crisis when everyone else is overwhelmed by the situation, these practices are particularly helpful in business and management, leadership roles, military life, raising children and athletic competition, as you will see in more detail below.

Stoicism was widely practiced for centuries in Greece and then in Rome, where some of the most notable “later” Stoic thinkers emerged, including **Seneca**; the Roman emperor **Marcus Aurelius**; and, my favorite, **Epictetus**, the renown Stoic teacher. Stoic values informed Greek and Roman culture for centuries and influenced the way people lived their lives every day.

According to Stoic philosophy, we should live a life that is guided by reason in harmony with the natural order and our own human nature. We should not allow ourselves to be swamped by our emotions, passions, or desires since that might derail us on the path to success by causing confusion about what is under my control or within my power. That can lead to bad judgments. Of course, it is important to note that this attitude of restraint doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t have emotions, passions, and desires at all. They are fine, even necessary, as long as they are not in charge of guiding our decisions like tyrants. Problem is, for most of us, it will take some practice to get there. Emotion, as we saw in the last chapter, can be a powerful force impacting moral decision making. Patience is a virtue; but so is assertiveness.



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The dimension of Stoicism that I want to bring into relief in this chapter operates exactly where the rational and the non-rational aspects of moral decision-making come into play. And this is also the focus of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. So, here is another place where you can see the ‘therapeutic’ dimension of philosophy and psychology operating in tandem to help you achieve the best possible life.

Stoicism and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy



Jules Evans talks about Stoicism and CBT (15:31)

In his book *Philosophy For Life*, philosopher Jules Evans talks about how Stoicism and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helped him to overcome a social anxiety disorder, panic attacks and drug abuse that were ruining his life when he was in college.² His TED talk in the video above details his experience. Evans said he accomplished overcoming these disabilities using a type of therapy pioneered by psychologist Albert Ellis called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Ellis claimed that he learned the essence of his therapeutic strategy from the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus. Here is what Ellis learned.

The very first principle that is referenced in *The Handbook* or *Enchiridion* of **Epictetus** (an “enchiridion” was a brief student notebook of the basic practical principles of Stoicism) focuses on the seemingly obvious distinction that some things are under our control while other things are not under our control. If you get this distinction wrong in some life situation, *The Handbook* states, it could ruin your entire life and derail you from achieving the best possible life. Here is how Epictetus puts it:

² Evans, Jules. *Philosophy For Life and Other Dangerous Situations*. New World Library: Novato, CA, 2012.

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Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in a word, whatever are not our own actions.

The things in our control are by nature free, unrestrained, unhindered; but those not in our control are weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others.

Remember, then, that if you suppose that things which are slavish by nature are also free, and that what belongs to others is your own, then you will be hindered. You will lament, you will be disturbed, and you will find fault both with gods and men.

But if you suppose that only to be your own which is your own, and what belongs to others such as it really is, then no one will ever compel you or restrain you. Further, you will find fault with no one or accuse no one. You will do nothing against your will. No one will hurt you, you will have no enemies, and you will not be harmed.³

Stoicism teaches that we should be indifferent to things that are not under our control and focus our attention on the things that are under our control, like our beliefs, attitudes, emotions and desires. Getting this distinction wrong by thinking that something that is not under your control is under your control—like believing that you can control the way others judge you or feel about you, your reputation—will lead to conflict and problems.



Student Handbook

³ Epictetus. *The Handbook*. <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0557.tlg002.perseus-eng2:1>

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Conversely, believing that something that is under your control is not under your control, like believing that your friend can *make* you angry when, in actuality, that is not in your friend's power, will also result in existential life problems and the failure to achieve your goals. Determining where the line is between 'what is under your control' and 'what is not under your control' at any given point in your life, then, is crucial to achieving the best possible life. Let's try to see how this is the case in more detail.

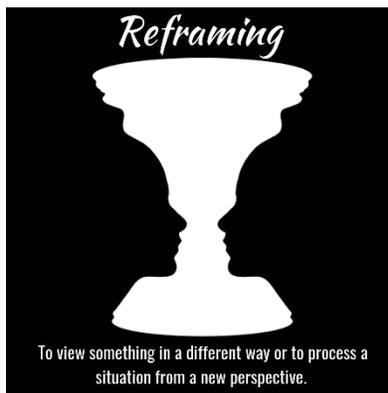
Video (8:28) **STOICISM AND THE ART OF NOT CARING**

Ctrl/click to play the video

One consequence of this Stoic principle, as it plays out in actual practice, is that, whereas you cannot control things that happen to you, you can control your reaction, response and attitude about those things. Epictetus argues that

"... it isn't the things that happen to you in themselves that cause you to be upset or cause you problems, it is your interpretations and judgments about those things...."

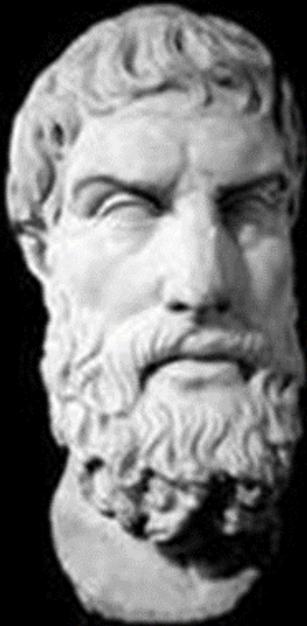
This is especially true when those interpretations are based on irrational and self-defeating beliefs, biases, prejudices, attitudes, and ideas that we all hold to varying degrees without realizing their destructive power. Check out Ellis' list of 12 self-deceptive lies we tell ourselves below. We don't realize we are telling ourselves such lies, of course. We fool ourselves. These are 12 ways of giving away your personal moral power without realizing you are doing so.



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The psychological practice of *reframing* can be helpful here, as Jonathan Newhouse pointed out above. Instead of getting angry when your friend doesn't show up at the agreed-on time and condemning your friend for his or her thoughtlessness, you can bring before your mind all the possible things that might have happened to prevent your friend from showing up that were out of his or her control. Take advantage of the opportunity to practice perspective-taking or reframing.

Going back to Jules Evans' social phobias.... **By reframing his interpretation of people's actions in a way that was more consistent with and limited to what he actually perceived or what was happening rather than being informed by his own lack of self-confidence, he was able to defuse the debilitating threat of social situations and move toward success.** In short order, after putting the wisdom of Stoic philosophy into practice, the panic attacks in social situations stopped. Evans argues that there is much we can learn from ancient Greek philosophy that is practically applicable to our life today. Epictetus would agree with that. Epictetus would have been a good CBT therapist.⁴ In the next section of our textbook we will look at how Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) incorporated a key idea from the Stoic principles taught by Epictetus.



Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle. Some things are within your control. And some things are not.

--Epictetus

⁴ Check out Evans' TED talk detailing his experience with Stoicism and CBT at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuwYvFINGns>

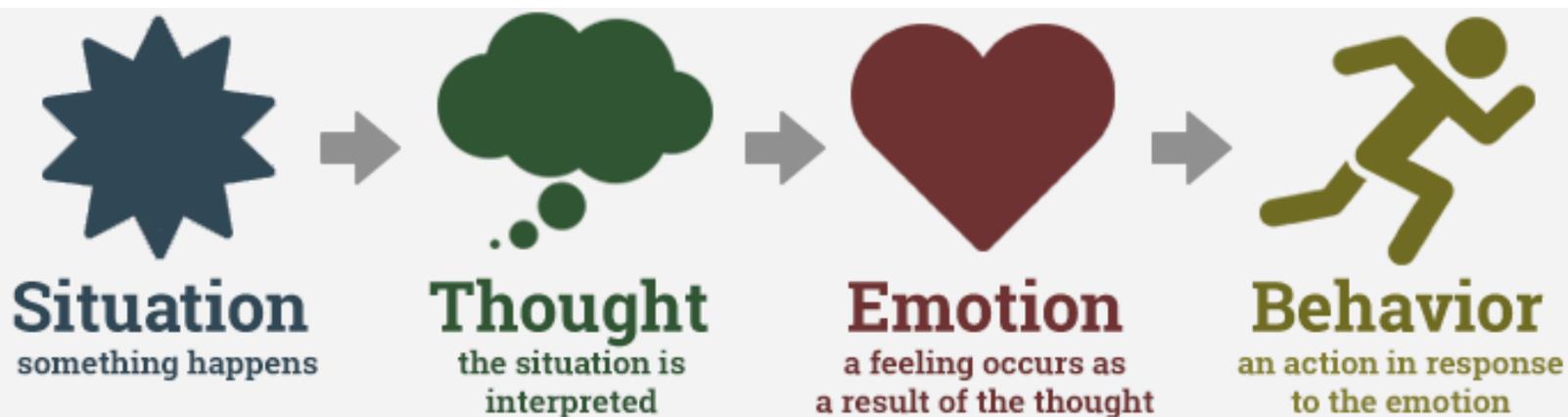
How Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) works

A fundamental premise of CBT—borrowed from Stoicism—is that humans do not get emotionally disturbed by unfortunate circumstances. **We get disturbed by how we judge and construct our views of these circumstances through our language, evaluative beliefs, meanings, moral value orientation and philosophies about the world, ourselves and others.** In CBT, similarly to what students learned from Epictetus, clients are taught to apply this premise in life situations by learning the **A-B-C model** of psychological disturbance and change.

The A-B-C model states that it is not simply an **(A) activating event**, that causes disturbed and dysfunctional emotional and behavioral **consequences (C)** like social anxiety, panic attacks, eating disorders, etc., but also and primarily what people irrationally **believe (B)** about the activating event (A) and how they interpret its meaning. Now, the adverse activating event (A) can be an external situation, a thought, a feeling or a kind of internal event, a memory or thought, for example. It can refer to an event in the past, present or future.

Our irrational beliefs (B) that are most important in the A-B-C model are explicit and implicit moral philosophical meanings, biases and assumptions about events, personal desires, and preferences. Our beliefs that are most significant are highly evaluative and consist of interrelated and integrated cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects and dimensions.

According to CBT, if your evaluative belief (B) about the activating event (A) is rigid, absolutistic, fictional and dysfunctional, the emotional and behavioral consequences (C) are likely to be self-defeating and destructive. This is definitely not on the path toward living the best possible life. Alternatively, if your belief is positive, flexible and constructive, the emotional and behavioral consequence is likely to be self-helping and constructive. Lesson to be learned: work at developing positive, flexible, self-affirming and constructive beliefs.



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CBT claims that people consciously and unconsciously construct emotional difficulties such as self-blame, self-pity, anger, hurt, guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, and behaviors like procrastination, compulsiveness, avoidance, addiction and withdrawal by means of their irrational and self-defeating thinking, emoting and behaving. Stoicism and CBT can help to defeat these self-defeating beliefs and behavior patterns.



12 Lies We Tell Ourselves

By A. Ellis

1. I must have the love and approval of others. I must avoid disapproval at all costs.
2. I must be perfect, a success in all that I do. I must not make any mistakes.
3. People must always do the right thing. When they do not, they must be punished.
4. Things must be the way that I want them to be – otherwise life will be intolerable.
5. My happiness/(unhappiness) is caused by external events. I have no control over my happiness/(unhappiness).
6. I must worry about things that might be dangerous, unpleasant or frightening otherwise they might happen.
7. I will be happier if I can avoid life's difficulties, unpleasantness or responsibilities.
8. I am weak and need to depend on those who are stronger than I am.
9. Events in the past have strongly influenced me – and they must continue to do so.
10. I must be upset when others have problems. I must become sad when others are unhappy.
11. I should not have to feel discomfort or pain. I must avoid them at all costs.
12. There is one right and perfect solution to any problem (usually mine). It is a tragedy when it is not found.

Psychotherapist Albert Ellis thought that your beliefs about yourself, like the 12 false beliefs listed above, can be stifling. Humans have achieved the questionable distinction of being able to fool themselves. Unfortunately, false ideas mistakenly thought to be true will compromise your personal moral power and block your path to the best possible life. Stoicism and CBT can help overcome such obstacles to personal and professional success.

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CBT, similar to Stoicism, is an educational process in which the therapist teaches the client, using specific exercises and directives, how to identify irrational and self-defeating beliefs and philosophies that are rigid, extreme, unrealistic, illogical and absolutist, and then to forcefully and actively question and dispute them and replace them with more rational and self-helping ones. By using different cognitive, emotive and behavioral methods and activities, the client, together with help from the therapist and in regular homework practice exercises, can gain a more rational, self-helping and constructive way of thinking, emoting and behaving.

One of the main objectives of CBT is to show you that whenever unpleasant and unfortunate activating events happen in your life, you definitely have a choice from within your personal moral value orientation to interpret and respond to those events in a way that will condition your experience of those events. This practice is the source of your personal moral power. Thus, Epictetus, like a good CBT therapist, thought that you should take up an attitude of indifference to things that are not under your control and focus all your practical energy on developing and managing what is under your control. That is the Stoic path to success.

Why Stoicism is good for today

1. Stoicism was built for hard times

Stoicism was born in a world falling apart. Invented in Athens just a few decades after Alexander the Great's conquests and premature death upended the Greek world. Stoicism took off because it offered security and peace in a time of warfare and crisis. The Stoic creed didn't promise material security or a reward of peace in the afterlife; but it did promise an unshakable happiness in this life available to you right now.

Stoicism tells us that no happiness can be secure if it's rooted in changeable, destructible things. Our bank accounts can grow or shrink, our careers can prosper or falter, even our loved ones can be taken from us. There is only one place the world can't touch: our inner selves, our personal moral choice at every moment to be brave, to be reasonable, to be good, whatever we want.



The world might take everything from you; Stoicism tells us that nevertheless you have a fortress on the inside where you can stand firm. Epictetus, who was born a slave and crippled at a

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young age, wrote: “Where is the good? In the will.... If anyone is unhappy, let him remember that he is unhappy by reason of himself alone.” That gets right to the heart of the matter, doesn’t it?

While it’s natural to cry out when in pain, the Stoic makes the effort to remain peacefully indifferent to everything that happens on the outside of his or her sphere of control, to stay equally happy in times of triumph and disaster, success and failure; in fact, to make a success *of* failure. It’s a demanding way of life, but the reward it offers is freedom from enslavement to your passions and freedom from enslavement to the emotions that so often try to control us, when we should be in control of them. A real Stoic isn’t unfeeling. But he or she does have a mastery of emotions, like the skills produced by Emotional Intelligence training, because Stoicism recognizes that fear or greed or grief only enter our minds and our bodies when we willingly let them be there. It is up to you.

A teaching like that seems designed for a world on edge, whether it’s the chaotic world of ancient Greece and Rome, or a complex, modern, technologically-driven financial/political world like our own that always seems to be on the verge of a new national or world crisis or stunning tech breakthrough. But then, Epictetus would say that, as long as you make the basic mistake of gearing your happiness to perishable things, your world is always going to be on edge and under threat.



2. Stoicism is made for globalization

The world that gave birth to Stoicism was a parochial, often xenophobic place: people held fast to age-old divisions of nationality, religion, and status. If openly embracing those divisions sounds familiar to us, we have Stoicism to thank for it. It was perhaps the first Western philosophy to preach universal solidarity. Epictetus, influenced by the **Cosmopolitanism** of his day, said that each of us is a citizen of our own land, but “also a member of the great city of gods and men.” The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, perhaps history’s best-known Stoic, reminded himself daily in his reflective meditations to love the whole world as much as he loved his native city.

If the key to happiness is really in your own will and your personal moral power, then even the biggest social divides start to look trivial. The Roman Stoic Seneca lived in a society built on slavery, but he also urged his fellow Romans to “remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies.”

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This embrace of Cosmopolitanism (a word invented by Stoics, which literally means citizen of the world, and which we will investigate in a future chapter) made Stoicism the ideal philosophy for the Roman Empire because this society brought an unprecedented range of races and religions into contact. Stoicism made sense for a globalized world--and it still does today.

3. If you're Christian, you're already part-Stoic

Stoicism and Christianity Are They Compatible?

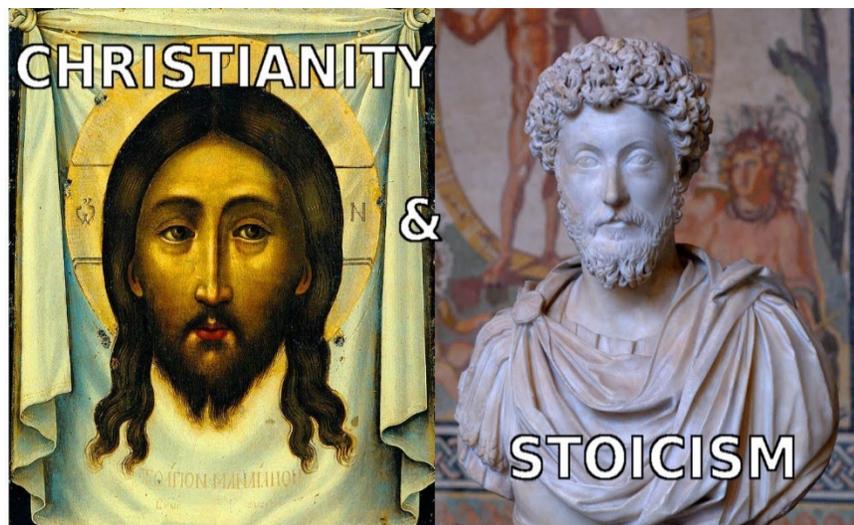


I mentioned this above but let me elaborate. Imagine a religion that stressed human solidarity under a benevolent creator God; a religion that told us to moderate and master our basic urges rather than being enslaved by them; that nevertheless insisted that all humans, because we're human, are bound to fail at this

mission; and that spent a lot of time talking about "conscience" and the multiple aspects, or "persons," of a unitary God energy. All of that might sound somewhat familiar to you if you grew up in Western culture. But the philosophy that invented all of those ideas was not Christianity; it was Stoicism.

It makes sense that Christianity is a deeply Stoic religion. Stoic philosophy dominated Roman culture for centuries—and Christianity went mainstream in that same culture. What's more, many of the leaders of the early Christian church, especially among the Greeks, were naturally oriented to the philosophy of Stoicism prior to hearing the Christian message. Christianity inevitably borrowed much of its religious conceptual thought and terminology from Stoicism, because thinking about religion in the early 1st millennium meant thinking pretty much like a Stoic.

As Christianity continued to grow, church leaders who wanted to emphasize the uniqueness of their faith began to downplay this Stoic connection. But Stoicism is still there at the foundation of the Christian religion in some of its most basic explanatory terms, ideas, and concepts.



4. Stoicism is the unofficial philosophy of the military

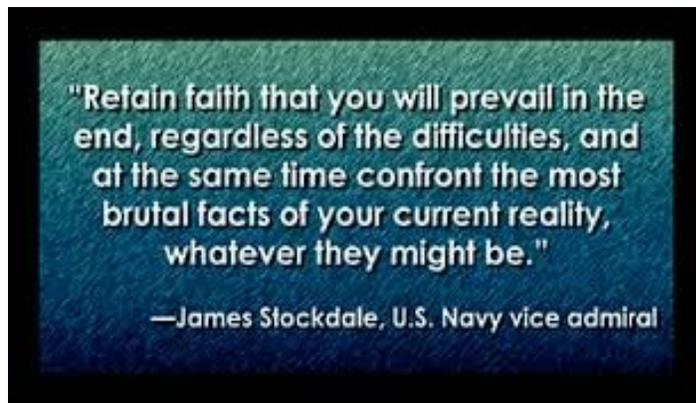
In 1965, James Stockdale's A-4E Skyhawk was shot down over Vietnam. He later remembered the moment like this: "After ejection I had about thirty seconds to make my last statement in freedom before I landed...And so help me, I whispered to myself: 'Five years down there, at least. I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus'." ⁵



James Stockdale

"So what Epictetus was telling his students was that there can be no such thing as being the "victim" of another. You can only be a "victim" of yourself. It's all in how you discipline your mind."

— James B. Stockdale, [Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior](#)



Stockdale spent more than seven years in a Vietnamese prison, and he wrote that Stoicism saved his life. Stockdale had spent years reflecting on Stoic thought before deploying, and he drew on those teachings to endure his captivity. These words from Epictetus kept coming back to him: "Do you not know that life is a soldier's service? ... If you neglect your responsibilities when some severe order is laid upon you, do you not understand to what a pitiful state you bring the army?" While some of his fellow POWs tormented themselves with false

hopes of an early release, Stockdale's Stoic practice helped him confront the grim reality of his situation, without giving in to despair and depression.

Stockdale is not alone as a military person who drew strength from Stoicism. In her book *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind*, Nancy Sherman, who taught Philosophy at the U. S. Naval Academy and visited the University of Montana recently, argued that Stoicism is a driving force behind the military mindset--especially in its emphasis on endurance, self-control, and inner strength. As Sherman writes, whenever her philosophy class at Annapolis turned to the Stoic thinkers, "many officers and students alike felt they had come home." ⁶



⁵ Stockdale, James. *A Vietnam Experience*. Hoover Institute Press: Stanford, CA, 1984.

⁶ Sherman, Nancy. *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind*. Oxford: New York, 2005.

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Speaking of officers and students, someone who has thought long and hard about Stockdale's experience is ex-Navy SEAL, Eric Greitens. Ideas from ancient philosophy and from Stoicism, are an integral aspect of his approach to living the best possible life presented in a book directed primarily at returning veterans. Entitled *Resilience: Hard-won wisdom for living a better life*, it is an exceptional book that would be enlightening for anyone. I found it to be very illuminating. The book is framed as a series of letters written to another ex-Navy Seal and combat buddy named Walker who is struggling to adapt to life after active duty service in Iraq.

I enthusiastically recommend *Resilience* to you, whether you are military or not. Here is a brief excerpt from Greitens' thought-provoking book:

"So now, step back with me for a minute as I try to explain what we're doing here together.

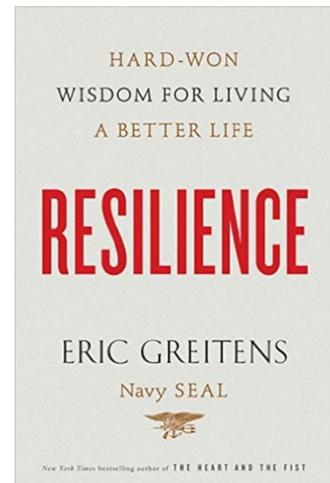
These letters, the back-and-forth, the discussions, this is philosophy.

Today we think of philosophy as something that happens in a classroom and nowhere else. We think of philosophy as a discipline of sitting and thinking, reading and arguing. But there was a time when philosophy was more than just talk.

During the Golden Age of Greece, philosophers were less interested in sitting and thinking. They were more interested in thinking and living. As a practical matter, the Greeks usually did not "read" philosophy in the way that you are reading this letter—silently and to yourself. Reading philosophy meant reading aloud to others; practicing philosophy meant living in a community.

The emphasis was not on the words alone, but on the effect of the words. Did a philosopher help people to examine their lives? Did that examination lead to happiness, to flourishing, to meaning? If it did, it worked. If it didn't, then it didn't matter how clever the words were.

Of the ancients who practiced this kind of life, one of my favorites is Epictetus, who started life as a slave and ended it as the wisest philosopher of his day. Here's what he told his students about what they were trying to do together: "A carpenter does not come up to you and say, 'Listen to me discourse about the art of carpentry,' but he makes a contract for a house and builds it ... Do the same thing yourself. Eat like a man, drink like a man ... get married, have children, take part in civic life, learn how to put up with insults, and tolerate other people."



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The test of a philosophy is simple: does it lead people to live better lives? If not, the philosophy fails. If so, it succeeds....

The question is, are you aware of the philosophy you have—the assumptions, beliefs, and ideas that drive your actions? Are you aware of the way those assumptions, beliefs, and ideas add up to shape your life? Can they stand exposure to the light of day?

...If we limit our understanding of resilience to this idea of bouncing back, we miss much of what hardship, pain, and suffering offer us. We also misunderstand our basic human capacity to change and improve....

What happens to us becomes part of us. Resilient people do not bounce back from hard experiences; they find healthy ways to integrate them into their lives”⁷

5. Stoicism is a philosophy for leadership



Stoicism teaches us that, before we try to control events, we must learn to control ourselves. Our attempts to exert influence on the world are subject to chance, disappointment, and failure—but control of the self in a Stoic manner is the only kind of approach to life events that can succeed 100% of the time. From emperor Marcus Aurelius on, leaders have found that a Stoic attitude earns them respect in the face of failure, and guards against arrogance in the face of success.

Of course, Stoicism doesn't *guarantee* that you will become rich and famous. It can be a long way between making bright ideas into realities in the world. The Stoics taught that we fail far more often than we succeed, that to be human is to be fearful, selfish, and angry far more often than we'd like. But they also taught a realistic way to work toward overcoming the negative and irascible energies that hold us back and by which we undermine ourselves. They gave us a realistic, meaningful, practical, down-to-earth program for achieving the best possible life. It all turns on this principle: **effective leaders must first learn how to lead themselves effectively.**

Try incorporating Stoic ideas into your everyday life. The more you practice Stoic qualities in good times, the more likely that you will find them readily available when they're most needed

⁷ Greitens, Eric. *Resilience: Hard-won wisdom for living a better life*. Mariner: Boston, 2016, pp.24-31.

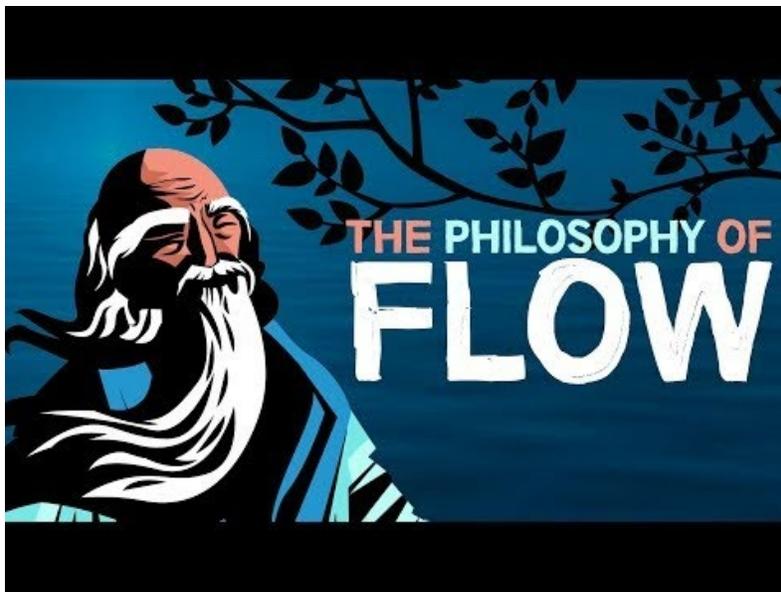
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in emergency situations that arise, often without warning, in your personal or professional life. As my dad liked to say, “A word to the wise is sufficient.”

6. Stoicism and personal moral power

One final thought. I like to make a connection between Stoicism and *personal moral power* which we talked about earlier. I think of personal moral power as your ability to know what you want and to get what you want, get what you believe will lead to genuine and sustained happiness and flourishing in your life. But sometimes we get our priorities wrong and make less than profitable judgments.

For example, consider the outcome from missing the mark about what is under your control and what isn't, discussed above. When people think that something that really is under their control is not under their control, or when they mistakenly think that something that is not under their control is under their control, they lose some of their personal power. Because of that, they will be hindered or unable to get what they want to some degree and perhaps miss living the best possible life here and now by that much.



This short video compares the Taoist idea of *wu wei* (doing by not doing) with what the Stoics mean by living in harmony with Nature. This is called Flow.

When you get the distinction about what is under your control wrong in any situation in your life, you will be inevitably giving away some of your personal moral power. Not good. You can almost always tell those folks who have gotten that distinction wrong in some area of their lives and given away their personal moral power because they inevitably *blame* others for their own self-caused misfortune and fail to see the part that they, themselves, play. This is a bias blind spot that can have severely negative outcomes.

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For example, a person who thinks other people can cause her to get angry, and says things like “My daughter made me so angry today!” mistakenly thinks that something which is under her control is not under her control, and thus she has ‘given away’ some of her personal power to her daughter, who now has the ‘power’ to make her mom get angry. The unwitting daughter now has personal moral power over mom and can ‘push her mom’s moral buttons’ and ‘make’ her mom get angry and

thus derail her on her path to success—a dangerous and vulnerable position to be in, as you can see. Of course, the daughter only has this power over mom because mom gave it to her by wrongly believing that her daughter actually has the power to make her angry (a lie she tells herself, and believes), thereby not having to take responsibility for her anger herself, as her own problem. Mom, however, could take back her personal moral power by ‘owning’ her anger as her own production, thus seeing that it is under her control. Now she has the power to do something about it.

The same thing is true regarding exam grades, to take another example. An exam grade does not have the power to make you feel good or bad, even though it may seem as if it does. I have taken plenty of exams. If you let go of that idea about the power exams have over you, if you take that power back, then an exam, whatever the grade may be, is simply a source of information that you can use as you wish to make the most effective future judgments on your path to living the best possible life. That way, you win regardless of whatever grade you get. If you reframe your exam situation according to Stoic principles, you will *always* benefit from taking exams no matter what grade you get. This puts the power of exams back in your hands, where it belongs. Of course, you must also be willing to ruthlessly question your motives, beliefs, true values and justifications in order to eliminate bias and see what is happening clearly. This is easier said than done.

When you get it right about what is within your power and what is not within your power—taking charge of the one and letting go of the other, as Epictetus teaches—your own personal power will be at its maximum level and you will be in the most likely position to succeed, to get what you want, and to live the best possible life.



A Few Final Reflections on Chapter 6

Here are some of the things I like about Stoicism:

1. It is a practical, usable and results-driven life philosophy. Because of the focus on self-mastery, Stoic ideas are perfect for entrepreneurial types who are willing to set goals and work hard in order to achieve their dreams and lead the way for others. Actualizing your potential for success is what Stoicism is all about.
2. Like most Greek philosophy, Stoicism involves a focus on Virtue Ethics, i.e., the pursuit of excellence through self-actualization that is accomplished by practicing the virtues. It is also compatible with the existential phenomenological orientation and is well-suited for dealing with existential obstacles to success such as life crises, phobias, bias, procrastination, anxiety, depression, fear of assertiveness, fear of success, etc. This is why Stoicism influenced Cognitive Behavioral Therapy practice.
3. Stoicism is aligned with the personal growth and development approach to ethics which I think is more important for Business students to engage than the cognitive/theoretical approach that leaves out so much about real, practical life and real, flesh and blood people immersed in everyday activities. Because of its focus on personal growth and development, Stoicism is a great guide for those who are willing and able to muster the hard work of self-development that will set them apart from the herd.
4. Stoicism utilizes a practice-oriented, exercise approach focused on active engagement. This involves reflecting on your experience, beliefs, values and ideas through directed exercises that aim at effective changes in your moral value orientation and hence your way of acting and responding in the world, like the exercise of not saying that people make you angry (since they can't), or the exercise of trying to resolve difficult moral dilemmas like Jim's hiring conflict, or working to gain control of your inner states like anger, boredom and other emotions, passions, moods, etc. in order to generate positive, productive energy.
5. The two main Stoic principles presented in this chapter have always seemed particularly meaningful to me in my life. I have passed them along to you in this chapter for your edification. The **first principle** has to do with the practice of determining and then letting go of what is not within my power to control (like the

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weather and other people's judgments) and focusing *all* of my effort on what is within my power to control (like my emotions and passions and networking). This is a lifelong practice of development. The **second principle** is the idea that it is not what happens to me that upsets or disturbs me but my interpretation and judgment of what happens. These two principles can be applied beneficially throughout your personal and professional life. How you fare in terms of these two principles will make all the difference between success and missing the mark in life, love, and work.

6. Jules Evans in the TED video very effectively pulls together the connection between ancient Stoic philosophy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy through a phenomenological reflection on his own life experiences. CBT, as Evans explains, makes it clear just how powerful for life development and overcoming obstacles to success are the principles and practices of Stoicism. Don't miss the video.

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PRACTICE

Further reading:

[Donald Robertson – How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, 2019](#) An excellent book by a well-known psychotherapist. Check out the short video (9:29)



TERMS TO KNOW

- Stoicism
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Epictetus
- Marcus Aurelius
- Seneca
- Personal power
- Personal moral power
- Reframing
- A-B-C model

TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. What are the basic developmental practices of Stoicism?
2. Why was Jonathan Newhouse, CEO of Conde Nast, attracted to Stoic ideas?
3. How would you describe Stoicism to an intelligent friend?
4. How were the values of Stoicism preserved through the centuries down to our present day?
5. Where did Stoicism get its name?
6. Describe the reasons why Stoicism is a good, practical moral value orientation for helping you navigate the moral challenges that arise in today's business world?
7. How is Stoic philosophy reflected in Eric Greitens' ideas about "resilience"?
8. How is CBT grounded in Stoic philosophy?
9. Does being a stoic mean that you shouldn't have any emotions, passions, or desires? Explain.

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REFLECTION EXERCISE

Someone who embodies Stoic ideals



Seneca

“Choose someone whose way of life as well as words, and whose very face as mirroring the character that lies behind it, have won your approval. Be always pointing him out to yourself either as your guardian or as your model. This is a need, in my view, for someone as a standard against which our characters can measure themselves. Without a ruler to do it against you won’t make the crooked straight.” — Seneca, Letters From a Stoic

As the above quote from Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher, suggests, the Stoics, like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy therapists, encouraged practitioners to use thought exercises to train themselves to not be swamped by an emotion. It might be a simple technique like imagining that a driver who cuts you off is rushing home to a terrible emergency instead of just being mean and aggressive. This is an exercise a Stoic teacher might recommend in order to check your road rage.

Here is another typical Stoic exercise for your reflective pleasure.

In 300 words or less, describe someone you know or know about who best embodies the Stoic ideals that we investigated in this section of the course, like virtuousness in everyday living, rational decision-making, insightfulness, leadership especially in emergencies, problem solving, success in life and not just material success, happy in good times and bad, able to find the positive aspect of negative situations, and so forth ... aspects about that person that you admire.

It is best if this is somebody who embodies Stoic ideals is someone you know personally (you don’t need to reveal their identity), but it could also be a public figure or someone you know about and admire.

SCENARIO EXERCISE

Amazing Run or Avalanche?

Ultimate Ski Expeditions, Inc. provides just what the name implies: an opportunity for top-notch skiers to have the run of their lives. The company takes groups by helicopter to peaks of virgin snow and treacherous terrain. The small company has been tenuously established for two seasons when Mike joins as a field guide; Mike's primary job is to ensure the safety of the skiers.



Mike likes his boss, Charlie Masterson, but often feels sorry for him. As owner of the company and its official manager, Charlie has too much riding on each expedition. Insurance costs for such an operation are exorbitant, and since

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each participant has to pay thousands of dollars, it is always difficult to book a party fully and cover all expenses.

One February morning, after a spell of bad weather and a consequent lack of expeditions, Mike is slated to accompany a group down Proud Peak, an hour away by helicopter. This morning's trip means everything to Charlie and Ultimate Ski Expeditions. There is every indication that a successful trip will keep the company afloat, but any mishaps could mean the end of the business Charlie has worked so hard to create.

The sky that morning is a clear, bright blue. There is little wind; conditions are perfectly safe to board the helicopter and land at the top of the mountain. Mike awakens with an uneasy feeling about the outing, however, that he cannot shake off.

Although Mike is trained in every aspect of skiing and feels confident about his ability to manage any challenge, there are some factors out of anyone's control. Part of Mike's job is to check conditions and decide whether or not it is safe to ski a slope. In his backpack, Mike carries gear used to test the snowpack and determine if avalanche conditions prevail. Proud Peak has accumulated many inches of snow in recent blizzards, and no one has been near the ski slope recently.

As the helicopter approaches the mountain, Charlie waxes poetic about the experience each skier is about to undergo. The plan is for the skiers and Mike to disembark by towrope and ski the mountain, while Charlie and the pilot monitor the activity from aloft.

The eight skiers are let down at the top of the mountain. Mike removes his testing gear and sets to work. After considering his data for a moment, Mike repeats the operation. In the helicopter above, Charlie sits watching, his walkie-talkie held at the ready. Mike looks at his second batch of results. They indicate skiing the slope is a gamble. The conditions are right on the edge of "avalanche." With luck, the group can ski safely. Mike knows plenty of skiers have skied through similar conditions with no harm at all. But if the snow shifts and begins to slide, Mike also knows there is a chance no one will get off the mountain alive.

As if from far away, Charlie's voice reaches Mike over the walkie-talkie. His tone is forced and bright.

"So, Mike! It looks like a perfect day for a perfect run! Let's hear the go-ahead and get these people on their way!"

Should Mike give the go-ahead, or play it safe?