

Saying Less for Increased Resiliency

“Be silent for the most part, or, if you speak, say only what is necessary and in a few words. Talk, but rarely, if occasion calls you, but do not talk of ordinary things – of gladiators or horse races or athletes or of meats or drinks – these are topics that arise everywhere – but above all do not talk about men in blame or compliment or comparison. If you can, turn the conversation of your company by your talk to some fitting subject; but if you should chance to be isolated among strangers, be silent.”

-Epictetus

In modern terms, Epictetus is saying that you should say less, avoid gossip or being a basic person who talks about basic things. No matter what you do, don't talk about other people. If you can't avoid that, say nothing at all. Why is shutting your big yap an ancient philosophical basic? Because one of the primary goals of Stoicism is to help you live a good life that is free of regrets and consequences. The vast majority of the hurt feelings and regrets in life come from the stuff that people say; very few long term regrets come from choosing not to speak.

This is something that I've worked on quite a bit since starting my practice of Stoic philosophy. I do my best to follow Epictetus' advice, but it's an ongoing challenge especially when you consider the importance of communication in modern life. Leading people all day, solving problems, working with others, and teaching all require me to communicate almost constantly, so I aim to be what you might call a “social-Stoic”.

Since not talking isn't really an option for me, I take that obstacle and turn it into an advantage. I have to be extra careful about what I'm saying and the kinds of conversations I allow myself to take part in. I look for ways to communicate well, without talking so much. I can talk, but I have to be disciplined about it. I've started looking for opportunities to not speak when possible and listen instead. Over the last few years, I've learned that I get more out of conversations and am much more capable of handling those tough conversations when I'm not trying to talk but instead trying to hear others. I've learned that “less is more” when giving opinions. I don't have to chime in on every little thing. Even if and when someone asked for an opinion on something it is ok to say “I'm undecided” or “I'm still thinking about it.” Saying less, is a practice, a discipline, and something I'm very much still working on mastering, but it has a lot of benefits. Most of those benefits come in the form of mistakes that I don't make, harm I don't do, and consequences that I don't have to face.

Increased Resiliency Benefits

“Don’t be overheard complaining, not even to yourself.”

- Marcus Aurelius

We often don’t realize it, but so much of day to day communication is whining, griping, complaining, and venting. If you want to feel significantly better by the end of next week, you can do this one thing between now and then. If it’s not positive, don’t say it. If it is negative, just leave it unsaid. If it doesn’t contribute to solving a problem or boosting someone, chop it and leave it on the editing room floor. Challenge yourself to follow Marcus Aurelius’ advice for one week. Here is the cool thing: by complaining less, by griping less, by saying fewer negative things, you will feel better, be happier, and have fewer regrets. It really isn't complicated, the less you say, the less it's possible for you to regret saying those things.

This “adds up” to being more resilient for a simple reason. Saying less, complaining less, exposing your mind to less negative influences, and having less regrets all add up to you having less to be resilient to. It decreased the mental baggage. You are carrying less mental weight so that you have fuel in the tank for when you need to dig deep and overcome hard times and difficult situations. It makes your mindset more positive, and with that you are more capable of dealing with the negatives.

“I begin to speak only when I'm certain what I'll say isn't better left unsaid.”

- Cato

When you make the connection between regrets consequences, feeling unhappy or down, and what you say both to yourself and to others, you learn that saying less is a powerful tool that gives you strength, happiness and mental toughness.

Amor Fati

- Sgt. Steve