

TWO ANCIENT TECHNIQUES TO DECREASE YOUR STRESS IN 2021

Unless you have had your head under a rock for the past few years, you've heard about mindfulness and the benefits that it can lead to in your personal and professional life. It offers everything from better sleep, decreased stress, and improved attention, and it will even increase the grey matter in your brain (i.e. the parts of your brain that help with memory, learning, emotion regulation, and more).

Clearly, mindfulness is something that has dramatic health and mental benefits, and there is no better time than right now to take advantage of some of these mindfulness benefits. Let's be honest. 2020 was an incredibly stressful year for everyone. The fear of Covid, kids having to be homeschooled, a presidential election, were just a few of the major sources of stress in 2020. Unfortunately, 2021 does not seem to be getting any better, and that is why I am personally trying to be more mindful in my daily life.

Mindfulness + Stoicism = Less Stress

While mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist meditation, being more mindful does not require you to put on robes and sit quietly for hours at a time. Much of it is about slowing down, being present, and reflecting upon yourself. It's about being aware of your physical body and the thoughts racing through your head, and being able to use this awareness to calm yourself down. I personally use mindfulness exercises and mindsets quite a bit when I am feeling stressed at home or on a tight deadline at work.

But as I practiced mindfulness exercises, I realized that I was leveraging another core set of beliefs to help reduce the stress. While some people leverage beliefs from the Bible or other religions, I realized I was pulling from the philosophy Stoicism. That realization made me go back to my library and reread, *The Art of Living*, by Epictetus and *Meditations*, by Marcus Aurelius.

Every five years or so, I reread these books and try to apply their lessons to my life. When I reread them this year, I thought a lot about how the Stoic philosophy supports being mindful, and that is why I wrote this article. I hope you get some value from it, and maybe some of you will even buy these Stoic texts.

A Quick History of Stoicism

I'm sure that when you think about Stoicism or being stoic, you might think about having a stiff upper lip, not reacting or showing emotion, or just being indifferent. While there are some connections with today's modern-day definition of stoicism, the philosophy of Stoicism is much more complex than just not showing emotions. This school of philosophy was started in 301 BC in Athens, Greece, by a merchant named Zeno, and it was seen as a philosophy of the people, not just the aristocrats.

Over the following 500 years, Stoicism became one of the largest and most highly regarded schools of philosophy, and even though it was a philosophy of the common man, Roman leaders began to follow its core tenants. For example, Marcus Aurelius was the Roman Emperor from 161 to 180 AD, and every night he would write in a journal about his effort to lead a stoic life. His journal was eventually published (the previously mentioned *Meditations*), and it is seen as one of the great overviews on how to be a Stoic.

But while Marcus Aurelius is the most well-known Stoic, my favorite Stoic is his teacher, Epictetus. Epictetus was born a slave, but from those impossible origins, he went on to become one of Rome's greatest philosophers. His handbook on the "Art of Living" was something that soldiers carried into battle and leaders had on their shelves.

At the core of Epictetus' and Marcus' writings were some core Stoic beliefs, and these beliefs are just as powerful today as they were 2,000 years ago.

Destressing Principle #1: Focus On What You Can Control, Not What You Can't

"If you are pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that disturbs you, but your own judgment about it. And it is in your power to wipe out this judgment now." - Marcus Aurelius

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There are many things in your life that you obviously cannot control, such as the weather, but Stoicism is about recognizing that most aspects of life are things that we cannot control. Epictetus and Marcus say the only things we truly control are our will, our perspectives of events with which we are involved, and how we act. Everything else is outside of our control. We fool ourselves into believing we can control how other people view us, our success and our failures. But if we are truly being honest with ourselves, we would recognize we control none of these things.

So how do you apply this principle in your daily life? Well, the first thing to realize is that events in your life do not make you happy, sad, mad, or whatever. The events happen, and the only thing you can control is your reaction to them. When your colleague does something to annoy you, it is not their actions that cause you to be annoyed, but it is your mindset that causes you to be annoyed.

In this way, mindfulness and stoicism are interlinked and help each other. Mindfulness is about being present in the moment and realizing you are feeling an emotion. If we aren't mindful of our emotions, then it will be impossible for us to choose and change our behavior like a Stoic. At the same time, stoic mindsets and thoughts cause us to reflect on our internal motivations and beliefs, thereby improving our mindfulness.

Destressing Principle #2: Happiness Can Only Be Found From Within

Building off the idea that emotions come from our beliefs and not from external things, Stoics believe that happiness can only come from within ourselves. Too often we get fooled into believing that happiness comes from things. We believe that a new job, a new toy, making more money, winning an award, becoming famous, or countless other things will make us happy. But whatever happiness we get from those things is fleeting, and then we are wanting the next job, toy, etc.

To a Stoic, happiness can be found by living and practicing four virtues:

- **Wisdom or Prudence:** Includes excellent deliberation, good judgment, perspective, good sense.
- **Justice or Fairness:** Includes good-heartedness, benevolence, public service, fair dealing.
- **Courage or Fortitude:** Includes bravery, perseverance, authenticity (honesty), confidence.
- **Self-Discipline or Temperance:** Includes orderliness, self-control, forgiveness, humility.

The key thing to realize is that all of these virtues are internal. Acting with good judgment, having courage, or being fair in your interactions are all behavioral choices that you can make. No one can give you self-discipline, but at the same time, no one can take away your self-discipline. It is something you control, which means that you have control over your own happiness.

In order to actively build a happy life, Stoics use a tool that is also a core tool of mindfulness; daily reflections. At the end of your day, ask yourself three questions: "What good did I do today?"; "What could I do better?"; and "How can I be the best version of myself tomorrow?" You can keep a journal like Marcus Aurelius, or just reflect on the answers in your head. By just spending 5 minutes a day, you will constantly be refocusing yourself away from external concerns and towards internal happiness.

Destressing Principle #3: Premeditation

"I may wish to be free from torture, but if the time comes for me to endure it, I'll wish to bear it courageously with bravery and honor. Wouldn't I prefer not to fall into war? But if war does befall me, I'll wish to carry nobly the wounds, starvation, and other necessities of war. Neither am I so crazy as to desire illness, but if I must suffer illness, I'll wish to do nothing rash or dishonorable. The point is not to wish for these adversities, but for the virtue that makes adversities bearable."- Seneca (another famous Stoic philosopher).

Mindfulness is all about accepting our thoughts and feelings in the moment, and most people achieve that through some sort of regular meditation. Stoicism works to accept things not just in the moment, but also in the future, and they do that by meditating about the worst-case scenarios.

While it might sound horrible to sit and meditate about misfortunes and hardships that you might face in the future, Stoics think of it more like a vaccine. By meditating about the worst-case scenarios, you

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inoculate yourself from surprise if that worst case actually occurs. Stoics aim to be present in the moment, and to calmly and patiently make decisions.

So, the next time you are thinking about a project at work or a big decision, ask yourself the following questions: “What could go wrong?” “If X happens, what would I do?” “By responding to X, what will that lead to?” From there, continue to dig and dig, until you have fully visualized the possible negative situations, and reflect on what you will do if you face that situation.

This doesn’t mean that you should actively hope the worst case happens. It just means that we should recognize that worst-case scenarios are possible. No one’s life is perfect. Bad things will happen to us. The goal of Stoicism and mindfulness is to accept this fact, and not blindly rage in anger or withdraw into sadness. Only then can we do what Seneca recommends, use our virtues to handle the adversity we face.

Stoics Are Not Unfeeling Robots

People often misconstrue what being stoic is all about. They think Stoics have no emotion, and this couldn’t be further from the truth. Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and all other Stoics would be the first to admit that they feel the same emotions that all of us feel. The only difference is that they do not let emotions in their decision-making process. They focus on the calm steadiness of reason. In many ways they were practicing mindfulness before mindfulness even became a thing.

As frequent readers of this Human Capital article series know, I am constantly writing about how our emotions, illogical thoughts, and other cognitive biases overwhelm our decision-making process. I wish I believed humans were rational creatures, but countless researchers have shown the majority of our decisions are biased one way or another. I think that is why Stoicism and mindfulness resonate so much with me.

By being present, calm, and reflective, we can attempt to pull ourselves out of the chaos of our situations. We can acknowledge and accept our thoughts and feelings, but ultimately, we can reason and rationality to decide how we will act. This is the power of Stoicism when combined with mindfulness, and that is how I plan on decreasing my stress levels in 2021.

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