



# Think like a Stoic, change your brain

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## Turning ourselves into better humans

The study of how to turn ourselves into better humans sometimes suffers from a lack of “hard evidence.” I am a science writer, and I always look for quantitative as well as qualitative data when evaluating any practice or behavior. So for years I’ve been interested in finding evidence about how Stoicism can change our brains, and how people who pursue a Stoic life philosophy may respond differently to brain stimuli from other people.

Brain responses are measured by today’s scientists using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) or PET (positron emission tomography). I have yet to read any neuroimaging studies of “brains on Stoicism,” but I’ve come across a few relevant research papers that could shed some light.

Our brains are very, very complicated. So there’s no easy way to define the effect of Stoic thinking on a person’s brain (not to mention that each person has a different genetic profile, may have changes in brain anatomy, and has varying life experiences). But let’s look at a few possible clues.

## Name and tame our emotions

First, to explore the usefulness of Stoic approaches to negative emotions, we can turn to UCLA study called “Putting Feelings Into Words,” from 2007. This research demonstrated that

verbally labeling emotions could help people cope with negative experiences. Neuroimaging showed a cognitive pathway for how this may work, supporting the idea that putting emotions into words actually diminishes the reaction of the amygdala to negativity.

My takeaway: If we can recognize our emotions, our “impressions” in the Stoic sense, we have a chance to “name and tame” them (to use a common phrase from modern therapy). We may even be able to completely reframe their meaning. That’s what the Stoic approach means when it asks us to examine our impressions before judging or acting.

## Cultivate the ability to choose

Second, another study could shed light on the Stoic emphasis on pursuing the good life by seeking to grow in our ability to choose, find self-acceptance, and live with purpose—*eudaimonia*. A 2014 UK neuroscience study, “Neural Correlates of the ‘Good Life,’” demonstrated that 70 adults who showed *eudaimonic* well-being in a 42-item measurement (signs of pursuing the “good life”) had larger regional gray matter volumes in their right insular cortexes. They literally grew their brains. (The study used MRI scans.)

## Be content with what you have

What else could help us cultivate a more positive outlook, especially as we

live through a long-lasting pandemic? A 2016 study of brain images, “The Neural Correlates of Happiness,” explored something that can activate happiness in the brain: positive autobiographical memories. Interestingly, these kinds of memories touch the portions of the brain believed to be affiliated both with *eudaimonic* happiness and *hedonic* happiness—the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, the goal of Epicureans.

The Stoic practices of being content with what we have, and what we have had, could sync with this study: even if we’ve suffered losses in the present, we still retain the memory of the good people and things we’ve experienced in the “banquet” (Epictetus’ word) of our lives. Memory could help us keep perspective on this bigger picture.

## A case for Stoic thinking

Although there remains debate among scientists (and everyone else!) on the nature and inner workings of happiness in the brain, we can see that evidence is building for the kinds of practices Stoicism advocates. All the more reason to build Stoic thinking into our everyday lives.



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