

The problem with pity

“So instead of giving in to pity, let’s train ourselves to truly help others by showing rational love and Stoic goodwill.”



BRITTANY POLAT



Brittany Polat, author of *Tranquility Parenting: A Guide to Staying Calm, Mindful, and Engaged*, holds a Ph.D. in applied linguistics but currently researches and writes about Stoic psychology and philosophy. Brittany's latest project is *Living in Agreement*, where she applies her lifelong interest in human nature to the discourse and practice of inner excellence.

What’s the Problem with Pity?

Who wishes, then, to fall into error? - “No one does.”... And who wants to live in sorrow and fear, and feel envy and pity, desiring things without being able to attain them, and wanting to avoid things and yet falling into them? - “No one at all.” - Epictetus, Discourses, 4.1, 1,4

Most of us tend to think of pity – which Merriam Webster defines as a “sympathetic sorrow” – as a noble emotion. We often see it as something that inspires us to do good deeds and empathize with others. But the ancient Stoics took a different view, classifying pity as one of the bad emotions. And when we stop to think about it, we can see why. The clue is in the definition: sorrow. Even though pity might sometimes inspire us to help people, it is still a type of sorrow, based on incorrect judgments about the world. It does more harm than good.

Is not feeling pity hard-hearted?

You might think, “But someone who doesn’t feel pity would be hard-hearted and selfish, wouldn’t they?” No – not if they’re a Stoic! Stoics are not motivated to act by negative emotions like guilt and pity. Instead, we are motivated to help others by clearly understanding our close connection to them. As Seneca says,

Nature brought us to birth as kin, since it generated us all from the same materials and for the same purposes, endowing us with affection for one another and making us companionable. Nature established fairness and justice. According to nature's dispensation, it is worse to harm than to be harmed. On the basis of nature's command, let our hands be available to help whenever necessary. Let this verse be in your heart and in your mouth:

I am a human being, I regard nothing human as foreign to me. – Seneca, Moral Letters 95, 52-53

We don’t need to experience pity in order to help others. We help others because we are members of the same family. Caring for them is what we’re meant to do.

Sometimes pity can make things worse!

In fact, sometimes pity can make things worse. Here’s an example. Molly sees photos of refugee children in the news, and she is so sorrowful that she spends a whole afternoon crying. She feels depressed just thinking about the suffering children, and eventually she stops reading the news because she can't bear it. Alice, on the other hand, sees the same photos, but she doesn’t react with debilitating negative emotions. Instead, she shows rational compassion and action. She researches the most effective way to help the refugee children and supports the organizations that can assist them. Which one of these women did the most good?

Responding appropriately

Clearly, Alice helped the most, even though she did not feel pity for the children. She responded appropriately to the situation, but she did not feel a negative emotion. In contrast, Molly wasn’t able to do much good. Her thoughts ceased to center around the refugees and instead centered on her own feelings. According to Matthieu Ricard, who is a translator for the Dalai Lama and also an expert on compassion and altruistic love:

When we are mainly concerned with ourselves, we become vulnerable to everything that can affect us. Trapped in this state of mind, egocentric contemplation of the suffering of others undermines our courage; it is felt as a burden that only increases our distress. - Matthieu Ricard, Altruism, p. 49

Let’s offer help, not pity

So instead of giving in to pity, let’s train ourselves to truly help others by showing rational love and Stoic goodwill. As Marcus Aurelius reminds us,

A human being finds delight in doing what is proper to a human being; and what is proper to him is to show goodwill to his own kind. - Marcus Aurelius Meditations, 8.26)