

Use Stoicism as an antidote

“A Stoic framework helps stiffen the backbone a bit, keeping me upright in the face of challenges.”



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Questions people ask

When I share with people outside the Stoic community that I use Stoic philosophy as a guide, I usually hear a couple of specific questions. Aside from “What’s Stoicism?” the most common question is prefaced by furrowed eyebrows, followed by, “Isn’t that all about having no emotions?”

That’s easy: No. For me, Stoicism does not imply emptying oneself of all feelings, but rather using our judgment to guide our responses to the emotions we naturally experience in life. It’s like cognitive-behavioral therapy: You question your responses to your reactions, seek out the sources of your thoughts and emotions, and check whether you really want to “assent” to them. Do you want to let knee-jerk reactions guide your every decision? Or do you want to take back the driver’s seat, and shape your thoughts and actions according to your ethical principles?

Living the Stoic way

The second kind of question may begin as a sideways tilt of the head. “Wow. Are you really able to live that way?” That’s harder to answer. I have to be honest: I don’t always “live that way”. Many Stoic ideas are aspirations. I strongly agree with the overarching tenets of Stoic philosophy, but I can’t live by them 24/7.

I go on to explain that I am inspired by the “maximizing of agency” and personal, reason-based choices that it promotes, the separation between what we can and cannot control as a guiding principle, as well as the goal of aiming for the four key virtues: wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control.

A role model?

But to say that I am a role model of Stoic living would be a stretch. In fact, another Stoic idea that keeps me going: We are all just trying to make progress. There is no Stoic sage in our world.

How could we expect that, when even a paragon like Marcus Aurelius was constantly checking and correcting himself?

The struggle of Marcus Aurelius

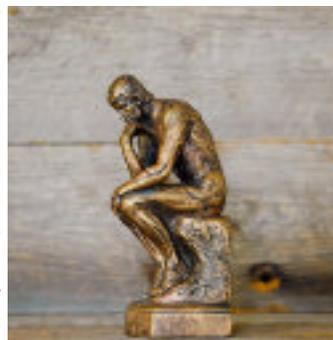
I like to think about Marcus in this light. The world’s most powerful and, perhaps, most respected man, replete with all the privileges of study and of wealth, could not live perfectly by his ideals. He struggled and questioned, he tried to understand and improve, and in the end, it was that process that produced *The Meditations* – one of the world’s most cherished books of self-reflection.

And last, I tell my interlocutors that I’ve adopted a Stoic life philosophy for a rather counter-intuitive reason: As an antidote to the forces in the modern world that work against it.

We all need to “fight the power” that tells us to consume goods, to fret about our appearance, to compete with our neighbors or colleagues, to pressure family and friends to behave exactly as we want them to. A Stoic framework helps stiffen the backbone a bit, keeping me upright in the face of challenges.

And now, this

When I get those questions, it provides an opportunity to share ideas. Encouragingly, I’ve started to encounter another question recently. It begins with “Cool. Did you hear this new podcast about Stoicism by... [insert well-known person’s name here]?”



People are taking Stoic ideas to heart – and not just the people you’d expect. It’s more and more discussed in our culture, with more diverse individuals getting involved. They’re talking about it and sharing it. So for me, this last question is not an inquiry, but in fact a piece of fantastic news.

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