

On dealing with stress

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The Stoic approach to dealing with stress

One of the most enduring stereotypes about Stoicism is that it is mostly a defensive strategy. We tend to call it to mind and use it in hardship, or in some dark or difficult moments. In my writings and teachings I usually reject this position. I argue that there is much more to Stoicism – that it is a thorough and all-encompassing philosophy of life, one which arms us for both crunch time and good time.

Today tough, I will dig a bit into one of the mentioned “defensive strategies.” A lot has been written about the Stoic way of dealing with pain, disease, death, and loss. But what about stress? It’s a very modern concept and a strikingly modern challenge. In a time of so many connections and distractions, in a time of precarious jobs and uncertain future with the pandemic to boot – we are all stressed out. How can we deal with it stoically?

Denying stress as a symptom

One particular point about stress in general is that once someone assumes about us that we are “under stress” – there is no easy reply to that. Picture this. Someone says that we seem stressed out. What do we reply? We can admit that indeed, we are under some stress. But what

if we don’t feel it’s true, what if we want to deny? When I say the words “No, I’m not stressed,” they simply chalk it up to another sign of stress. Denying stress turns into a symptom of stress. It becomes surprisingly difficult to reject. This is how it gets tricky. Saying that someone is under stress carries a fair deal of performative power. We make someone stressed by saying they are stressed.

Stress is not a personal experience

Stress is not a personal experience then, there is a social dynamic inherent to it. Which of course doesn’t make dealing with it easier. What’s the Stoic coping strategy then?

We can use the described dynamic to our benefit. And we don’t even need a real interlocutor to do so. The point is to imagine that all the things that put pressure on us don’t really concern us, but someone else. I’ve got work to do with deadlines looming? A lot on my plate? OK, but why don’t I imagine this is someone else’s plate, not mine. Why don’t I separate myself from it, why don’t I take a step back? I need to do whatever I need to do, but without taking it personally.

How does it even work?

It’s been said that everyone’s self is their own source of misery. Therefore, we need

to distance ourselves from the part of ourselves that brings misery upon us. Or, in our case, from the part that feels stressed out.

Thus, I need to comprehend a given stressful situation not in terms of a personal challenge, but in terms of objective obligations, expectations, and commitments. This and that needs to be done? Okay, it needs to be done in a certain way.

The rules, procedures, timetable

The rules, procedures, and timetable for executing it are as follows. I may proceed with it. The more external I make these procedures and rules, the more action and less stress they entail. I – as a self – am not concerned anymore. I’m just doing my duties whatever they happen to be (like always in Stoicism). Whatever is the source of my stress, externalization of it transfers it into the “not within my power” category. All else follows. And also, this is the reason why bullet journals, to-do lists, and all sorts of productivity apps are so wildly popular. Once our duties and commitments are outside of our mind (be it on the phone or on old-school paper) – they are easier to deal with.

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