

On being tired

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“Tiredness is not just tiredness itself, but it is also a microcosm of human experience.”



Tiredness is common

Tiredness, exhaustion, being drained, spent with labor – I doubt there is a reader out there who doesn't know it. In the 21st century, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus lockdowns this is a sentiment shared by almost everyone. We are all over-worked and under-rested. Tiredness is one of the most common pains of humanity. Also, it's one of the biggest human foes. Why is that so?

The basic intention of the Stoics is to strengthen and extend our agency, to make it more stable, more coherent, less dependent on outside circumstances, yet more reflective and self-aware. This promise stems out of the dichotomy of control and the subtle art of applying it. The more we are aware of what we can and cannot do and the more precisely we define the domain of our decisions, the better Stoic agents we are.

Tiredness shrinks our agency

Tiredness, on the other hand is the exact opposite of that. Tiredness shrinks our agency, scratch that, tiredness is shrinking our agency by its very definition. After all, what does it mean to be tired? It is a slightly altered state of mind in which the mind is, in a way, narrower. The judgment becomes foggy and the train of thought is easily derailed, even on the slightest

obstacles. We can absorb less and produce less, everything happens less organically but requires more and more attention instead. In serious exhaustion all conscious action starts to disintegrate and simply keeping life going requires an effort. On an extreme level this can lead to quite graphic scenarios. It's no coincidence after all that tiredness induced by forced sleep deprivation is called the most powerful torture of all.

The less mental power we have the more crucial it is to manage it

Extreme situations aside, what we can learn from being tired? Dichotomy of control comes handy again. The less mental power we have left the more crucial it is to manage it smartly. And there is no smarter way to organize our energies and skills than with the dichotomy of control. I have less to invest than usual, thus I need to be even more selective than usual. Mental capacity has its budgetary limits, just like all things.

But let's reverse the problem here. Does it mean that we are supposed to ditch all this once we are rested? Are we supposed to be wasteful just because we have more in our mental stock? Of course not! Once we are able to operate more freely (e.g., we have slept well and long enough, etc.) we still should stick to what we learned while under duress. We can benefit greatly from

that! If we train to calculate the “budget of willpower” while it's in shortage, we'll be better off once we have a surplus of it. Hence the vital point. We need to stick to dichotomy of control not only when we are forced to, but at all times.

Tiredness is a test for Stoicism

In this respect tiredness can be seen as a testing ground for Stoicism. And even more than that. Tiredness is not just tiredness itself, but it is also a microcosm of human experience. All human agency is limited after all, whether we are tired or rested. Testing these limits and learning our own reactions to them is an invaluable lesson for a Stoic.



Dr. Piotr Stankiewicz, Ph.D., is a writer and philosopher, promoter of reformed Stoicism. He authored [Manual of Reformed Stoicism](#), and [Does Happiness Write Blank Pages?](#)