

Stoic-style coping: New research

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Science confirms what the Stoics already know

A study led by researchers at Harvard confirmed what modern Stoics already knew: It’s not the situation itself that causes our emotional turmoil, it’s how we think about it. The study offers scientific evidence that Stoic-style approaches of reframing our thoughts can improve our ability to cope during tough times.

The research, published in *Nature Human Behaviour* in August 2021, looked at how people were responding emotionally to the current pandemic, which has unleashed a wave of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. (The full title: “[A multi-country test of brief reappraisal interventions on emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).”)

What did the scientists find?

In the study – conducted in 87 countries with 21,644 people – participants were divided into four groups. Two of the groups used methods that the authors labelled “reappraisal” approaches to cope with their emotions when viewing photos from the pandemic. Another group simply thought about their emotions, and a final group did not receive instructions.

The two reappraising groups were able to handle their emotional response to the images more effectively. The authors termed their reappraisal approach “an emotion regulation strategy”.

How to reframe your thinking

What’s reappraisal? The authors used two approaches to help people re-frame their thinking. One was “reconstruction,” where someone conceptualizes a situation. For instance, instead of focusing on the danger of the virus, participants are encouraged to think about how they could exercise some control over their risk by practicing good hygiene and social distancing. The second was “repurposing,” where participants changed their perspective to focus on a potentially positive outcome of the situation, such as how this pandemic could prepare us for future ones.

The study authors underline the importance of using reappraisal in a public health crisis, when mental health professionals can’t always be available. “The findings demonstrate the viability of creating scalable, low-cost interventions for use around the world,” they wrote.

Stoicism as emotional regulation

Fortunately, the ancient Stoic ideas that are at the heart of these approaches have been available to all since ancient times. Stoicism could also be labelled an “emotion regulation strategy,” one of many reasons that I adopted it in 2016 for myself as a person and a parent – which I write about in my blog, *The Stoic Mom*. I am in good company. In an ancient plague, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius turned to Stoic methods of reframing his thoughts, strengthening himself to “regulate his

emotions” and lead. In a Renaissance plague, French writer/philosopher Michel de Montaigne did much the same, using Stoic and other philosophies to “reappraise” his world and bolster his spirit as those around him perished.

Today, many people worldwide have adopted modern Stoicism.

Stoicism and “reappraisal” are forms of self-therapy and re-tooling of our relationship to the world we live in. While pop psychology veers towards “positive” thinking, putting a happy face on things, that’s not appropriate in a pandemic in which millions are dying (over 4.6 million worldwide so far). The promise of Stoicism, and of this study’s reappraisal, is that we can remain clear-eyed and realistic – able to visually take in images of a plague – while maintaining our equilibrium and ability to persist through tough times.

Stoicism is more than a strategy for feeling better

Stoicism is more than a strategy for feeling better, however. Stoic concepts offer a life philosophy that strengthens us for healthier emotional living while also grounding us in the reality of mortality, acknowledgment of our constraints, and recognition of the importance of our decisions and actions on the world around us. The hope is that what begins with regulating our emotions can flourish into a more courageous, wise, just, and disciplined way to live – even in a world filled with trauma.