

The art of handling uncertainty

We all face many uncertain times in our lives. But the current pandemic is a time of collective uncertainty, the like of which most of us have never experienced. What has Stoicism got to say in coping with a situation that is so uncertain? Our contributing editor Meredith A. Kunz offers a three-step plan based on Stoic principles to cope with uncertainty.

Chuck Chakrapani, Editor

A feeling of lack of control

The COVID-19 pandemic currently circling the globe has ushered in a time of enormous uncertainty, and it has left many feeling a lack of control. For these very reasons, it is the right time to practice a Stoic life philosophy.

Unless you are a medical professional, biomedical researcher, or government official, there's little you can do to "fix" this disease. Aside from the hygiene, distancing, and protective practices that can help isolate the virus, and aside from working to support our families, all we can really manage are our own attitudes.

It's not easy. A daily emotional roller-coaster is normal as we hear devastating news of the virus' impact on people's lives.

I am fortunate to be locked down with my family in California in relative comfort. And around my house, we're turning to Stoic-inspired strategies to keep our attitudes in reasonably good shape. Here is a three-fold plan:

1. Remember and honor our common humanity

Keep communicating with other people, with your friends, family, coworkers, despite this difficult "social distanc-



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ing" regime that's necessitated by the virus. Text someone. Give that person you usually see every week or two a call. FaceTime or Zoom or Skype a relative or a few. Write an email and include a photo. Or even send an old-fashioned, handmade card or note through the mail. What's old is new again when we can't see each other in person.

2. Cultivate awareness

Cultivate awareness that is rooted in self-control and the Stoic View from Above exercise. Awareness means living in this moment, not fretting constantly about tomorrow. It means working to control our fears and negative emotions.

We can turn our thoughts away from the emotionally distraught spiral and back to what we can do, purposefully, today—even if what you can do is just cook dinner for your family. Taking a moment to enjoy a game with a child or an old movie with a partner is an escape from the pressures of "what will the future bring."

In the View from Above, you allow your mind to float up above your home and town. When viewed from a distance, your problems seem smaller and more manageable. You also realize that everyone else has challenges too, and today, we all have many of the same ones (Where will we find toilet paper? How long can we get by without flour? Will we still have jobs in a month?). This practice can help us gain perspective.

3. Aim to practice the virtues

Aside from self-control (see above), the other ancient Stoic virtues are wisdom, justice, and courage. Today, we need courage as we face this disease and the psychological and economic stress it is causing without panicking.

But also justice: Let's remember, if we are sitting at home comfortably, all those who have no home, or who share their home with someone abusive. How can we help? I donated to a few local nonprofits that help the vulnerable, and plan to give again. But I wish there was more I could do.

About wisdom: We can acknowledge that this kind of outbreak is how the world works sometimes; that we must have patience; and remind ourselves that we can, each in our own way, work on strengthening our psychological/physical natures to be battle-ready if the worst happens.

Another thought: Keep sharing online, keep posting, keep listening to podcasts, and watching videos. Our virtual community is a vital lifeline to those living this philosophy on their own, divided in the physical world. Just knowing that we have comrades-in-arms brings hope.