Stoicism: a Masterclass in Emotion Regulation

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Consider the girl who, no matter how determined her efforts, or how much she tries to motivate herself to complete the urgent task in front of her, opens up Instagram instead. Such a dire lack of willpower is recognisable by all. I dread to think how much time I've wasted on insipid bullshit instead of doing something difficult and valuable. When a challenging task is before me, and I'm taut with anxious doubt, it isn't a lack of willpower that makes me open Instagram, but my inability to deal with the anxiety. I'd do anything not to feel that emotion, and I have the most distracting and entertaining thing imaginable at my fingertips: the internet.

We don't procrastinate because we lack self-control, but because we're in the grip of an unpleasant emotion, and don't know how to handle it. This is called emotion regulation—the ability to respond to negative emotion in a way that is mentally healthy, and socially acceptable. Instead of having the fortitude to wade through the unpleasant emotion, we reach for the nearest comfort instead—social media, television, drugs, or whatever is easiest. Without the ability to regulate our emotions, we can become depressed, anxious, develop eating disorders, and abuse substances[1]. We might also have fewer and shallower personal relationships.

The stoics were masters of emotion regulation, which is one of the reasons that their philosophy endured, and continues to grow in popularity. Though the concept of emotion regulation wasn't clarified until the 20th century, the stoics appeared to practice a method that is now called reappraisal, which is interpreting an event in a way that will reduce its emotional impact. The following example might have been lifted from the journal of a Roman stoic:

"Somebody stole my sandals from outside my door. I needed those sandals to walk across the city for an important meeting at the Senate, which I now won't be able to attend. At this point, the theft is already done, and there's nothing I can do to change what has happened, so the only thing to do is carry on with my day."

A well-practised stoic is able to reappraise the situation and lessen its power, suppressing any negative emotion that might compromise his virtue. Consider the moment that Seneca was ordered to commit suicide by the Roman emperor Nero, who suspected Seneca of being a conspirator in an assassination plot against him. This is the ultimate test of emotion regulation. Upon hearing the news, Seneca made out his will, asked his wife not to grieve, and then opened his veins without fuss. He was so well-practised in reappraisal, so at peace with his lack of control and the fate that had been written for him, that he was able to face his death with courageous equanimity.

The Death of Seneca, by Manuel Dominguez Sanchez

How did he do it? The stoics have a few reappraisal theories and techniques that they use to regulate their emotions.

Dichotomy of control

> *"The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control."*
>
> —**Epictetus, The Discourses**

The dichotomy of control tells us that some things are in our control, and some things aren't. This idea is key to a stoic's ability to regulate his emotions. The vast majority of what happens to us is outside of our control, and when something "bad" happens—a car accident, your mother's death, buying an all-yellow bag of Starburst—a stoic knows the futility of getting upset. He's wise enough to make a good calculation of the matter, by understanding the difference between what is controllable, and what is not. For a stoic such as Seneca, this understanding was visceral. He knew that the will of the emperor was beyond his control, and running away wasn't an option. In such a situation, getting upset is illogical, leaving acceptance as the only remaining answer.

Genuine acceptance of your fate cannot produce emotional turmoil, even for something as drastic as your death. Stoics such as Seneca understood the dichotomy of control so viscerally that they were able to use it to regulate their emotions, by reappraising the situation from something awful, to something uncontrollable, and therefore to be accepted.

Our transitory nature

> *"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."*
>
> **—Heraclitus**

Everything in our universe obeys an ironclad rule: things must change. The stoics recognised that everything preferable in their lives (what they referred to as "preferred indifferents") could be taken away from them in an instant, whether it was their children, their home, or their own lives. In the tender moments that you're kissing your wife, Epictetus advises you to tell yourself that you're kissing a mortal, as a reminder of their impermanence. By constantly reminding yourself of the transience of people you adore, even going so far as to meditate on their death, you're practicing for the possibility of their actual death, which you'll be able to reappraise and remain calm if it actually happens. This technique is called negative visualisation, and is a form of adversity training; a toughening against the harsh realities of the world. It also makes us more grateful for what we have—a powerful perspective that has proven to make us happier[2].

Understanding the changing nature of the universe helps a stoic to remain emotionally stalwart in the face of adversity. Seneca knew that just like every other organic thing in the universe, his mind and body would eventually change into something else. Nero just happened to speed it up.

Impressions

> *"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."*
>
> **—Marcus Aurelius, Meditations**

Stoics recognise that the harm of an insult isn't from the words themselves, as though the breath of another person carries a debilitating poison, but from our impression of the words. Like everything else in the universe, words don't have objective meaning. Our species has *given* them meaning as a way to survive and procreate. If somebody tells you that your nose looks like a pickle that's been rejected by the local supermarket, you can judge the words to have value, or you can identify them as the bleatings of a man without virtue.

We're bombarded with impressions and judgments every day, and while we can't control an initial impression, we can use reason to evaluate its benefit, and change it if necessary. A stoic has the capacity to reappraise her initial impressions of the world, changing the detrimental into the beneficial—a more fitting impression for a judicious philosopher.

Courage

> *"Sometimes even to live is an act of courage."*
>
> **—Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius**

Courage is a chief virtue for the stoics, defined as the ability to face misfortune with bravery; in recognising the mental turmoil that an event such as your death can create, and facing it with equanimity because you know it's outside your control. The courageous man experiences just as much fear as everyone else, but acts in spite of it.

The stoics realised a fundamental truth: life is suffering, and if we want to be happy, we must be courageous enough to face our problems head on. An obstacle isn't something to be feared, but an opportunity to practice reappraisal; a moment that demands our courage, followed by the use of reason to reappraise the situation into something favourable.

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Being able to regulate our emotions is critical for our well-being[1]. The reappraisal technique reduces physiological, subjective, and neural emotional responses. That sentence remains true when swapping the words "reappraisal technique" for "stoic philosophy." The wonderful philosophy of Stoicism can make us masters of emotion regulation, allowing us to reappraise negative impressions, and transform them into emotions that contribute to our happiness.

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