• TEACH • LEARN • GROW • WATCH • LISTEN •

• EXCELLENCE • TRUTH • GROW • LISTEN • REASON • INDEPENDENCE •

• COMPREHEND • DESTINY • CONVICTION • ORDER • EDUCATION •

LIVE LIKE A STOIC

52 EXERCISES FOR CULTIVATING A GOOD LIFE

MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI
AND GREGORY LOPEZ

• DISCIPLINE • KNOWLEDGE • HAPPINESS •

CONTENTS

About the Authors

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ALSO BY MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI

How to Be a Stoic:
Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life

Answers for Aristotle:
How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to a More Meaningful Life

Nonsense on Stilts:
How to Tell Science from Bunk

Making Sense of Evolution:
The Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Biology with Jonathan Kaplan

Denying Evolution:
Creationism, Scientism, and the Nature of Science

Phenotypic Plasticity:
Beyond Nature and Nurture

Phenotypic Evolution:
A Reaction Norm Perspective with Carl D. Schlichting

Acclaim for

LIVE LIKE A STOIC

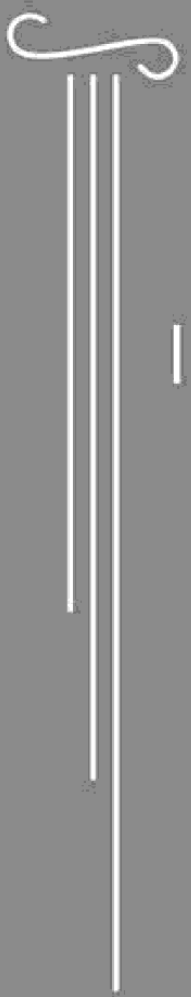
"A wonderful and potentially life-altering way to encounter the wisdom of the Stoics, *Live Like a Stoic* provides readers with structured lessons and exercises to explore Stoic philosophy alongside the lives they, themselves, are living."—**Professor William B. Irvine,** author of *A Guide to the Good Life*

"A wonderfully simple approach to the core concepts and techniques of Stoicism, *Live Like a Stoic* gives readers an easy way to train themselves in Stoic practices, broken down into weekly exercises spanning a whole year. Through this book, Pigliucci and Lopez have managed to make Stoicism accessible to anyone."—**Donald Robertson,** cognitive behavioral psychotherapist and author of *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*

"*Live Like a Stoic* not only serves as a cure against an age that equates virtue with frenzies of outrage and denunciations of others' failings. It is also an inspired self-help manual that, with insight and sympathy, nudges a person in the direction of the happiness and equanimity born of strength of character and wisdom."—**Rebecca Newberger Goldstein,** author of *Plato at the Googleplex*, and recipient of the National Humanities Medal

"In this book, Pigliucci and Lopez offer a great hands-on introduction to Stoic philosophy and practice while also providing valuable ideas for long-time students of Stoicism. Well-researched and carefully structured, with practical exercises that complement ancient texts, *Live Like a Stoic* will guide you through Stoic practice step-by-step throughout the year."—**Gregory Sadler,** editor of *Stoicism Today*

Any references to 'writing in this book' refer to the original printed version. Readers should write on a separate piece of paper in these instances.



INTRODUCTION

GETTING STARTED

Mike's twenty-five-year college reunion was supposed to be fun. Instead, it has turned into an exercise in inadequacy. His classmates Aziz and Saliah are still together, ever since their first date during sophomore year; Mike's marriage lasted less than five years, leading to financial trouble and an insecurity about romantic relationships that persists to this day. Steve, Mike's former roommate, has maintained his athletic physique while Mike's potbelly has only grown, a charming accompaniment to his thinning hair. And his roommate's business major propelled him to the C-suite, while Mike has stagnated in middle management of a company whose products he doesn't even believe in. Everywhere he looks, Mike sees success, but when he faces himself in the bathroom mirror after the cocktail hour, he can't help but feel like a failure. *No wonder I'm unhappy,* he thinks. *It's because my life is bad. Everything is awful.*

The Best Bet for Happiness

There are many things that we want and events we want to happen. We want to lose weight, get a raise, be liked by the people around us. Yet for many of us, including Mike, these desires never materialize, and we're left feeling inadequate, frustrated, and stuck. And it can get worse—for all of us. Things we specifically *don't* want actually *do* happen, ranging from trivialities (getting stuck in traffic) to more serious events (illness and aging). Getting what we don't want can be just as painful as not getting what we do want, and often more so. However painful this is, we keep on placing the same bad bets, staking our happiness and well-being on things outside our control through a cosmic roll of the dice.

What if we were able to train ourselves to desire only things that are firmly within our control? Then, in a very real sense, we'd always get what we want, and never get what we don't want. Our happiness would never spill, since the cup of our desires is reliable and holds firm.

The fundamental question, then, is: What is in our complete control? What's the sure bet?

Betting on Character: Why Stoicism?

The unreliability of obtaining certain goals—such as wealth, health, and other people's praise—is one of many common problems. Often, even when we're lucky and achieve these ends, we're still left wanting. Had Mike gone to his reunion a successful executive with a family and a still-boyish figure, he would likely still have found room for complaint.

Many of us can see this in our own life. We eat great food without even noticing the taste. When we do savor it, the pleasure quickly fades and is forgotten. We have to shift positions to remain comfortable on a nice, new sofa, which will become stained and worn with time. Status is nice when we get it, but we're often left wanting more. We get a new car that we love at first, but soon take for granted. We may succeed in starting a business, but protecting our assets and growing the company cause us to lose sleep. We can be head over heels for our romantic partner today, but may grow irritated by their habits with time. Many of the things we pursue don't satisfy—and can't provide lasting happiness.

Even if we achieve the objects of our transient desires, it doesn't guarantee we will use them well. What determines their good use is the character of who's using them. People with poor character put external advantages—money, fame, the U.S. presidency—to bad use. Those with good character will use what they have, no matter how limited, for the

benefit of themselves and others. If they endure hardship, or if the cosmic dice roll snake eyes for them, a good character will help them persevere.

Here is the great insight of the ancient philosophy of Stoicism: Shaping your character is ultimately the only thing under your control. So in order to exploit your good luck and cope with the bad luck, it is necessary to be a good person. Through a combination of rational introspection and repeated practice, you can mold your character over the long term.

Betting on your own improvement is a guaranteed win with the biggest payoff. The goal of this book is to help you collect.

Meet the Stoics

Stoicism is a Greco-Roman philosophy that began around 300 BCE with Zeno of Citium (modern-day Cyprus). Zeno was a merchant who lost all of his goods in a shipwreck and arrived in Athens with a few drachmas in his pockets. He heard the keeper of a bookshop reading some philosophy and became intrigued by the subject, so he asked the shopkeeper where he could find a philosopher. He was told to follow a man who just happened to pass by, Crates of Thebes. Zeno listened and became Crates's student. Eventually, Zeno founded his own school, which came to be known as the *Stoa*, because its members discussed philosophy under a public colonnade called the *Stoa Poikile*, or painted porch.

During the last century BCE, Athens declined as a political power and cultural capital of the ancient world, and Rome took up both mantles. Shortly after, many of the prominent Stoic philosophers became active in the capital of the Roman Empire. The four major ones, whose writings survived to this day, are Seneca, a Roman senator and advisor to the emperor Nero; Musonius Rufus, a renowned teacher; Epictetus, a slave-turned-teacher who was Musonius's student; and Marcus Aurelius, one of the few philosopher-kings in history. It is from their writings that we will draw inspiration throughout this book.

Stoicism dwindled as a formal school of philosophy by the third century CE, but Stoic ideas continued to influence a number of important thinkers throughout the history of the Western world, from Paul of Tarsus to Augustine of Hippo, from Thomas Aquinas to Descartes, from Montaigne to Spinoza. In the twentieth century, Stoicism inspired a family of schools of effective psychotherapy called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), starting with Albert Ellis's rational emotive behavior therapy in the 1950s. The ideas of Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus, and others have also inspired a vibrant movement of new Stoicism in the modern day, attracting people from all over the world, such as the readers of this book, who want to find a better way to live their lives, and to become full members of the human community.

The Very Basics

While we will explore the philosophy of Stoicism through the fifty-two weekly exercises in this book, we present here a brief overview to get oriented. Stoicism's basic tenets can be distilled into three major topics: live according to nature, three-disciplined practice, and the dichotomy of control.

Live according to nature

> "What should we do then? Make the best use of what is in our power, and treat the rest in accordance with its nature."
>
> , Discourses I

The Stoics thought that the best way to live our life, to make it count and derive meaning from it, is to live according to nature, particularly human nature. How do we

determine what this means, in practice? By studying three interrelated topics: "physics," "logic," and "ethics." Each of these three terms had a much broader meaning in ancient times than it does today (hence the scare quotes).

By *physics*, the Stoics were referring to the study of all the natural sciences, as well as metaphysics—the understanding of how the world hangs together. *Logic* included what it does today, that is, the formal study of reasoning, as well as psychology and even rhetoric more broadly—everything you need to think and communicate well. *Ethics* was not limited to understanding right and wrong, as it largely is today, but was more broadly construed as the study of how to live with meaning.

To decide how best to live (ethics), one has to understand how the world works (physics) and reason appropriately about it (logic). Which brings us to the idea of living according to nature. The most important aspects of human nature, the Stoics thought, are twofold: that we are social animals (and are then deeply interdependent with other people) and that we are capable of reasoning-based problem solving. So to live according to nature means using reason to improve social living. Or as Seneca put it, "Bring the mind to bear upon your problems."[1] This aspect of Stoicism sets it somewhat apart from other forms of self-help, which focus more on making you *feel* better. Stoicism tackles this and goes beyond it by helping the practitioner, and the world around them, *be* better.

The three disciplines

How, then, do we live according to nature? The Stoics, and Epictetus in particular, translate this into living by practicing three disciplines: desire, action, and assent. This book is organized around these three disciplines, with weekly exercises that will help you master each.

The Discipline of Desire teaches us what is best to want (or to avoid): What should our goals be? Where do we channel our energy, time, and resources? The Discipline of Action shows us how to act in the social sphere: How should we behave toward others? And the Discipline of Assent helps us arrive at correct judgments about obstacles that life throws at us: Should we be angry at this person? Should we indulge in that pleasure?

Stoicism is roughly one part theory and nine parts practice. The Stoics were very clear that understanding the philosophy (not that difficult) without putting it to use is a waste of time and energy. Epictetus said, "If you didn't learn these things in order to demonstrate them in practice, what did you learn them for?"[2]

The dichotomy of control

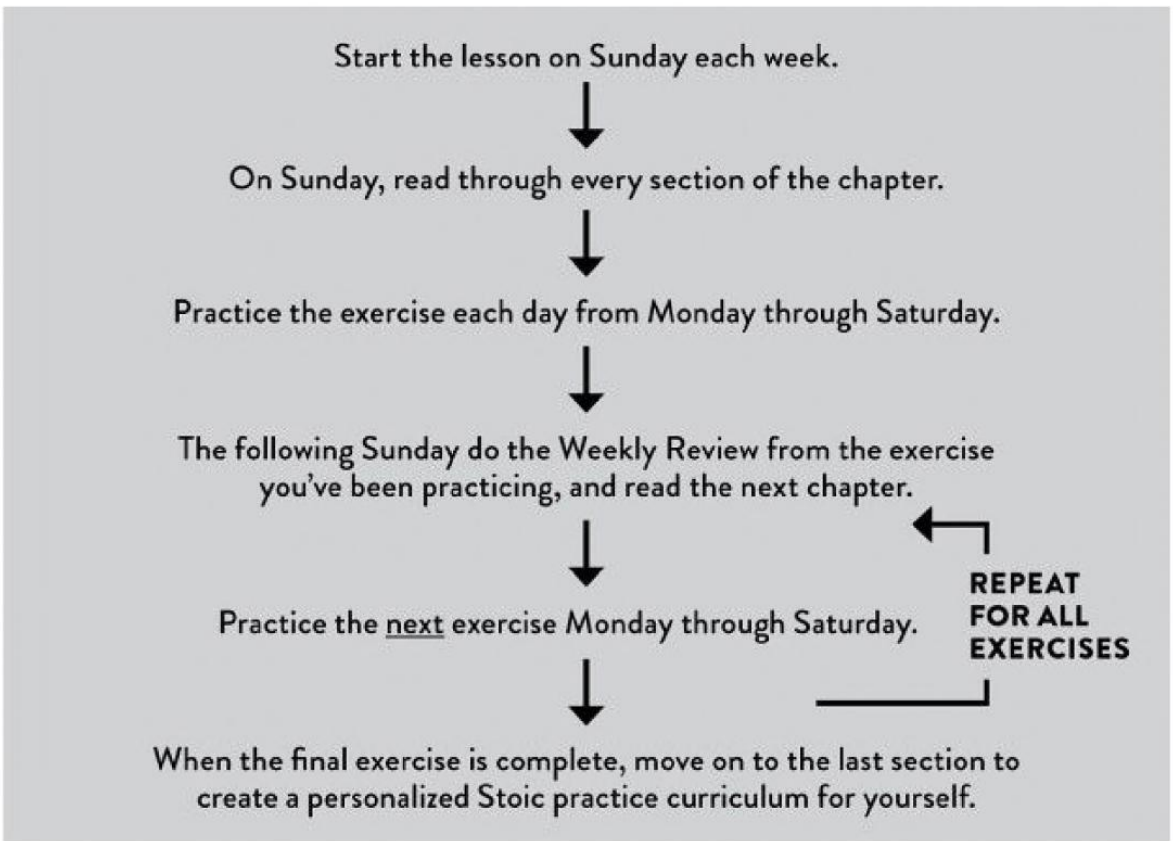
The dichotomy of control is *the* central concept in Stoicism. Because of its importance, it's the very first exercise in this book. What is it? Put simply, it's the idea that certain things are under your control, while others are not. This may seem obvious—and it is—but from this observation stems the foundation of our practice: that we should focus our energy and resources on affecting what we *can* control, and turn away as much as possible from what we *can't*. This, as you may suspect, is much more easily said than done. There's a crucial difference between understanding something, which we can do by reading and reflecting on it, and internalizing that same thing, which can only be done with repeated practice. And that is precisely what this book is for.

How to Use This Book

The book you're holding is designed so that you can practice a modern Stoic exercise, pulled from an ancient source, every week for an entire year. We've divided it into fifty-two chapters, grouped into three parts. To help you track your progress, each part includes a questionnaire that you can fill out both before and after you finish the section, to keep track of the progress you've made in the three disciplines of Stoic training.

Each week starts with a lesson and continues with a practical exercise related to the lesson. At the beginning of each lesson you'll find a real-world scenario, followed by an ancient text relevant to the scenario, and an explanation. The exercise for each week is based on the lesson and is meant to be practiced throughout the week. We've also provided a reason for doing the exercise, and finally a space to reflect on your experience each week. At the beginning of each week, first read through the entire chapter to learn about the exercise; then start practicing the next day. At the beginning of the following week, take some time to reflect on your practice during the week before, completing a weekly review before moving on to the next chapter to prepare for the week ahead. We chose to start on Sunday, but you can choose any day that works for you. At the end of the year, you can proceed to the final section of the book, where you will put together your own set of Stoic exercises to continue using for as long as you'd like. This will provide you with a unique, personalized Stoic curriculum for a lifetime of practice.

The following is a diagram summarizing how to work through the book over the course of a year. For this example, we chose to start each chapter on a Sunday.



We realize that not everyone is ready to commit to a year-long effort right away. If that's the case for you, we suggest you sample a few of the chapters and exercises from each of the three parts and see how it feels. If a deeper commitment to Stoicism intrigues you, go back to the beginning and follow the full series in the order presented. Here are some exercises you can try from each section if you are not quite ready to commit to a full year yet.

The Discipline of Desire

The Discipline of Action

Week 16: Keep your peace of mind in mind (page 103)

Week 24: Premeditate on encountering difficult people (page 146)

Week 29: Review your actions nightly (page 172)

The Discipline of Assent

Week 36: Catch and counter initial impressions (page 213)

Week 37: Work with your impressions and impulses in more detail (page 218)

Week 39: Keep basic Stoic concepts ever at hand (page 230)

Hopefully this gives you a good idea of how to put this book to use. The next step is to jump right in! Choose a day when you'd like to start your year of Stoic practice (it can be today!), and write it down.

You may also want to set a reminder or put the date you chose on your calendar at this time. When the day arrives, proceed to the next chapter and get started.

Happy practicing! We hope this book guides you toward a more satisfying life for you and all those whose lives you touch.

PART I

THE DISCIPLINE OF DESIRE

THE GOAL

“There are three things in which a man ought to exercise himself who would be wise and good. The first concerns the desires and the aversions, that a man may not fail to get what he desires, and that he may not fall into that which he does not desire. The second concerns the movements (toward an object) and the movements from an object, and generally in doing what a man ought to do, that he may act according to order, to reason, and not carelessly. The third thing concerns freedom from deception and rashness in judgment, and generally it concerns the assents.

Of these topics the chief and the most urgent is that which relates to the affects [i.e., the Discipline of Desire]; for an affect is produced in no other way than by a failing to obtain that which a man desires or falling into that which a man would wish to avoid. This is that which brings in perturbations, disorders, bad fortune, misfortunes, sorrows, lamentations, and envy; that which makes men envious and jealous; and by these causes we are unable even to listen to the precepts of reason.”

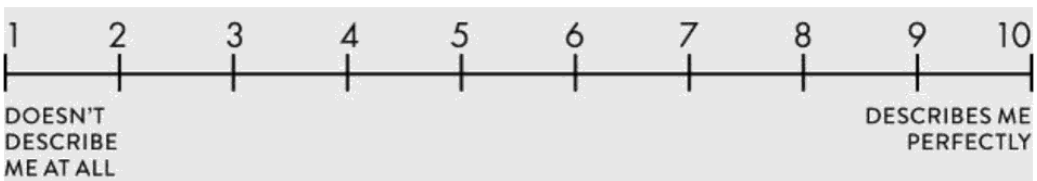
-3 Discourses III

Quiz

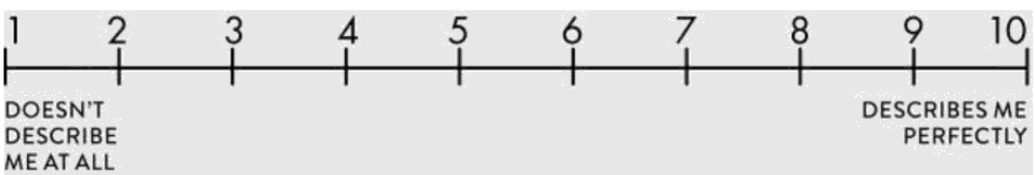
Before you begin, take a moment to briefly rate yourself on the following items, which evaluate the main goals of the Discipline of Desire. After you complete Part I, you can answer these questions again to see if you've made progress.

Rate how much the following statements describe you as you currently are on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning it doesn't describe you at all and 10 meaning it describes you perfectly.

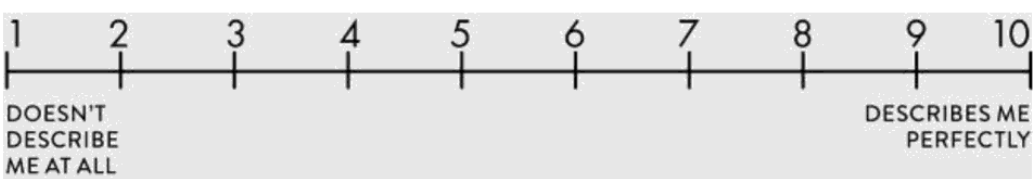
I get really upset when I don't get what I want or things don't go my way.



I put a lot of effort into avoiding things I don't like or that I'm afraid of.



I spend a lot of time pursuing comfort and pleasure.



WEEK 1

Discover what's really in your control, and what's not

It's easy to think that we have control over our lives when things are going the way we want. But what happens when we experience uncertainty? Consider our friend Alice who faces this question at her job. Her quarterly performance review is coming up, and though she's been doing well, a familiar anxiety floods her body as negative what-if scenarios cross her mind. Could learning more about what's really in her control help Alice? What effect would that have on her psyche?

> "Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power. In our power are thought, impulse, will to get and will to avoid, and, in a word, everything which is our own doing. Things not in our power include the body, property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything which is not our own doing."
>
> ***Epictetus,*** ***1*** **Enchiridion,**

Epictetus's words may be more familiar to you in the form of the famous Serenity Prayer adopted by a number of twelve-step programs:

> *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*
> *Courage to change the things I can,*
> *And wisdom to know the difference.*

The prayer was written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1934, but it reflects wisdom that is common to Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist traditions, and of course to Stoicism. Indeed, the underlying concept is central to Stoic practice and is often referred to as the "dichotomy of control." Epictetus begins the *Enchiridion*—his manual on Stoicism—with it, and it is one of the most cited Stoic sayings, having countless applications in daily life. So, too, we begin our practice, and our study of the Discipline of Desire, with a study of control.

Let us first understand exactly what Epictetus means by his words. He is dividing the world into two big chunks: the set of things under our (complete) control and the set of things not (completely) under our control. If it occurred to you that there has to be a

third set, that of things over which we have *partial* control, don't worry—we'll get to that concept next week.

The basic idea is that it is imperative to use our mental energy to focus on what is under our *complete* control, while regarding everything else as indifferent. For those things that are *not* under our complete control, it isn't that we stop caring about them, but rather that we come to a deep understanding that we cannot guarantee that these indifferent things will turn out the way we wish them to. The way we come to this understanding is through constant practice. This practice is the path toward *ataraxia*, the Greek word meaning serenity. We become serene by training ourselves to only want what is completely in our control—so in a very real sense, we'll be serene because we always get what we want! This is the promise of the Discipline of Desire.

Taking a closer look at Epictetus's categories, what does he say is in our control, and what is not? Under our control, according to him, are "thought, impulse, will to get and will to avoid, and, in a word, everything which is our own doing." We need to be careful here, because these English words don't necessarily carry the same connotations as their original Greek counterparts. Moreover, modern Stoics (such as ourselves!) may want to take into account advances in the cognitive sciences that were not available to Epictetus, and so we may arrive at a somewhat modified list of what truly is under our control. To understand what Epictetus is getting at, let's break down the process further, starting with "thoughts" since it is listed first (for good reason, as we'll soon see).

"Thought" here is the English translation of *hypolepsis*, literally "grasping under" or "taking up." More figuratively, this means "judgment" or "opinion" (similar to scooping up an idea or viewpoint—you're grabbing under it to grasp or cradle it). These can be types of thoughts, and are not necessarily fully conscious ones. Epictetus may have listed "thought" first as it's the first step in how we upset ourselves: We judge things to be inherently good or bad. Sometimes these judgments are explicit (e.g., thinking to yourself *That guy's a moron!*). But they don't have to be. For example, if you get angry at a person, you are implicitly judging the person's actions as bad, even if the words "that person is doing a bad thing" never cross your mind.

Next comes "impulse" (*horme* in Greek). This is an impulse to act, but not necessarily in a base or automatic way (what we may think of as impulsive). Pulling your hand away from a hot stove and screaming is not an impulse in the way Epictetus uses the term. Instead, impulses come about from the first step of "thought" or "judgment." If you judge something to be good, you'll want it. If you judge it to be bad, you'll want to avoid it. Impulses are then urges to act based on value judgments.

From thought (the judgment) and impulse (the desire to act) comes the "will to get and to avoid." We decide if it is worth spending the energy, time, and money. For example, we consider these expenses when buying a brand-new car, reflecting the value judgment that possessing it is a good thing. Then we go about and make complex plans to acquire the new car. So our complex, conscious actions come about from value judgments and impulses to act.

Epictetus claims that all three of these things (thoughts, impulses, and the will to avoid and to get) are ultimately under our control. It is no accident that these three areas of complete control correspond to Epictetus's three disciplines: You work with thoughts in the Discipline of Assent, impulses in the Discipline of Action, and the will to avoid and to get in the Discipline of Desire. In this way, Stoic practice trains you to master all areas of what in theory you can control. That's Stoic training in a nutshell.

Just because these things are in your control doesn't mean that they aren't sometimes influenced by external factors (such as other people's opinions) or by internal ones (such as your physical sensations or more automatic urges, like a craving for a snack). But, ultimately, they are under your control because you can make a conscious decision to ignore your cravings or to override the opinions of others when it comes to your own choices.

What about the sort of things that Epictetus says are *not* under our control? They include "the body, property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything which is not our own doing." This is a very large set that essentially comprises all things external to our conscious mind. Our body can get sick despite our best efforts at taking care of it; we may lose our property because of accident or theft; our reputation may be ruined

due to circumstances we cannot influence; and we may lose our job through no fault of our own.

You may object that the sort of things we just mentioned are, however, under our partial control. They are not similar to, say, the weather, about which we can truly do nothing at all. Of course, Epictetus knew this! What he is saying here is akin to the "best bet argument" (see pages 1–2): If you bet your peace of mind on things not completely in your control, you're willingly forfeiting part of your happiness to random chance.

We'll explore this topic more next week. For now, let's move on to your first exercise.

What to Do

This week's exercise will help you explore the dichotomy of control. Take time now to choose when you'll do the exercise each day for the rest of the week. Try to place the exercise toward the end of the day. You can plan to do it at a specific time (e.g., at 9:00 PM) or after an activity you do every day (e.g., brushing your teeth at night). Write when you'll do this exercise.

Sit down at this time Monday through Saturday of this week and choose something that happened that day to write about. It can be anything from seeing a friend for lunch to a meeting at work. We suggest that you choose an event that wasn't too emotionally upsetting, which could make the exercise more difficult, and you're just starting out! List what aspects of the event were *completely* in your control and which weren't. It may help to add some quick reasons *why* the thing was or wasn't in your complete control.

If you have trouble with the exercise, you can use Epictetus's suggestions of separating out value judgments, impulses, and what you wished to avoid or obtain, as things under your complete control. You can also try separating aspects of the event by "internal" factors (thoughts, desires, wishes) and "external" factors (results), since we can mostly control what goes on inside our heads, and much of what we can't control happens in the outside world. Don't feel shackled to these categories. Part of the goal of this exercise is to see whether Epictetus's suggestions hold true to your experience. Perhaps you'll find he was correct, and perhaps not.

Let's look at an example of how this would work. Suppose Alice chooses to do this exercise every day after her daily evening jog. After she runs, she sits down and chooses a meeting with her boss as the event she'll focus on. Here's what she writes.

> *Met with the boss at 2 PM to discuss latest sales numbers. I was a little nervous going in since I'm not quite at quota yet. We sat down and discussed what action steps I could take to reach quota by the end of the quarter. A lot of the suggestions were useful.*

Notice that Alice chose an event that she was a little nervous about, but that wasn't extremely distressing for her. After Alice writes about the event, she rereads the narrative, looking for things that were completely within her control. She comes up with the following list.

COMPLETE CONTROL	INCOMPLETE CONTROL
The intent to show up on time to the meeting	*Actually showing up on time (I could have been delayed by that business call that ran over before the meeting!)*
Valuing my boss's opinion of me and my work	*My boss's actual opinion of me and my work*
The wish to meet my quota	*Meeting my quota (I can't force people to buy from me)*
The desire to get actionable tips from my boss (it'd help meet most of my goals above!)	*Actually getting useful tips*
Conscious nervous thoughts/what I tell myself	*Automatic nervous thoughts and the physical feelings of nervousness*

Alice repeats this exercise daily through Saturday after her run.

Notice that the left-hand column is mostly filled with internal things like wants, desires, wishes, and conscious intentional thoughts. The right-hand column is mostly filled with external results. The exception is the final row, which has automatic thoughts and physical sensations as not within complete control. This highlights the important point that not everything that goes on in our bodies and minds is willed. Alice didn't choose for her heart rate to rise, nor did she rationally decide to dwell on worst-case scenarios. However, once those have occurred, she can consciously choose what to tell herself and how to act in spite of those automatic responses.

Now it's your turn. Over the next week, use the following template for this exercise.

Why Do It

By doing this exercise daily, looking at specific events in your life, you'll start to internalize what is really under your complete control and what isn't. As this principle sinks in, you will be equipped to practice the Discipline of Desire in future exercises. This exercise will also give you a clearer picture of what exactly you should focus your desires and aversions on to achieve peace of mind.

Weekly Review

On the seventh day of the week, after you've practiced exploring the dichotomy of control, set a timer for 5 to 10 minutes and write your impressions. Was this week's exercise useful to you? How? Did you discover anything about yourself or your world? Did you find it useless? Is there any way you could tweak your approach to make it easier or more useful in the future? Write about your experiences.

Finally, if you think this exercise is useful, bookmark this page.

This will serve as a reminder at the end of the year that you found this exercise worth pursuing. You're now ready to read the next chapter and prepare for next week.

WEEK 2

Focus on what is completely in your control

At some point in your life you've probably tried to prevent something from happening, but it happened anyway. Do you remember how upset you were by it? If you did everything within your power to prevent it, then *why* were you upset? This question haunted Suki after her annual physical. Although she's always been the paragon of health, her doctor has referred her to a cardiologist after a dizzy spell she experienced at the gym, and she's terrified. Let's explore why Suki is upset and, more importantly, what can be done about it.

> Remember that following desire promises the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion promises the avoiding that to which you are averse. However, he who fails to obtain the object of his desire is disappointed, and he who incurs the object of his aversion wretched. If, then, you confine your aversion to those objects only which are contrary to the natural use of your faculties, which you have in your own control, you will never incur anything to which you are averse. But if you are averse to sickness, or death, or poverty, you will be wretched. Remove aversion, then, from all things that are not in our control, and transfer it to things contrary to the nature of what is in our control."
>
> ***Epictetus,*** **Enchiridion** ***, 2.1–2***

No matter how much we plan, worry, and attempt to prevent misfortunes from occurring, they sometimes do. People have very different reactions to similar misfortunes. Some shrug them off, some go numb, and some, like Suki, develop anxiety and fear. Why do we react in different ways? Epictetus suggests that those who fall into circumstances they wish to avoid are those who suffer misfortune, by which he means that much suffering comes from a disconnect between what you want to happen and what actually happens. Or, as the Stoics would say, what is in accordance to nature as opposed to contrary to nature.

Epictetus lists telling misfortunes: It is senseless to nurture aversion to poverty, illness, or death because these things are outside of our (complete) control. After all, illness and death are natural and unavoidable aspects of human existence, and while

some people manage to avoid poverty, it, too, can strike at any moment independent of one's efforts to avoid it. Similarly with desires. If we desire great wealth, perfect health, or a lasting reputation, we are striving for things that we cannot control (though we may influence them), which will inevitably make us unhappy.

You may have noticed that we've been focusing on aversion in the Discipline of Desire. That's because aversion can be seen as a type of desire: the desire to avoid misfortune. We use the Discipline of Desire as shorthand for the Discipline of Desire and Aversion, the shortened name given to this discipline by French scholar Pierre Hadot.[1] The crucial idea here is to redirect our aversion away from things that we dislike but are not in our power, and to transfer it to things that we can completely control. You have a list of such things from last week (see pages 17–18). Similarly, we need to stop desiring things that we cannot control and instead develop a desire for what we can be guaranteed to achieve.

Let's look at an example: Suppose you are up for a possible promotion at your job. Your natural desire is to get the promotion, but this is not under your complete control. The promotion depends on possible competition from your colleagues, on the relationship you have developed with your boss, and even on random occurrences, such as your boss's mood or the weather. However, what *is* in your power, and what you then *should* desire, is putting forward the best possible case for a promotion, based on your best efforts in recent months to do your job well.

If you have a strong aversion to failure you might be unhappy if you don't get the promotion—as when trying to avoid poverty or sickness. But if your desire is directed properly, toward doing the best job you are capable of doing, then you cannot possibly fail. In fact, if you do the best job you can at every moment, you've already succeeded! Moreover, since there is, presumably, a correlation between doing a good job and getting a promotion, you will increase the chance that you will, in fact, be promoted. When your desires and aversions are "aligned with nature" (i.e., with what is in your complete control), you are *guaranteed* to not be unhappy regardless of the outcome.

There are countless other examples of this principle. You should not desire to be loved by your partner, but only to be the most lovable person you can be. You should not indulge an aversion to losing a match when you play a game or sport, but instead focus on playing to the best of your ability. Once you internalize the distinction between proper and improper desires and aversions, the world will look very different to you. You will find serenity that springs from a magnanimous attitude toward whatever the universe happens to throw your way.

Finally, notice that this resolves a problem we encountered last week: the apparent neglect, by the Stoics, of the large category of things we can influence but not completely control. That third category, in Stoic philosophy, is itself split into two: the part you cannot control but can influence (e.g., your boss's decision, your partner's love, your chances of winning a match) and the part you can control (e.g., working hard and well, being lovable, playing your best game), which may influence the final outcome.

What to Do

This week, we begin by building on last week's exercise. You'll do this in two broad steps.

1. Look for patterns from your lists from last week to see how aversions to things outside of your control may have been influenced by things within your complete control.
2. Explore how to transfer your aversions from those things that aren't under your complete control to those that are.

First, flip back to what you wrote for last week's exercise and write down things in your "Incomplete control" column that describe something you were averse to. In Suki's case, it's the results from the cardiologist's exam.

Next, look at your "Complete control" column for each of the items you listed above. What was in your complete control that preceded each aversion? Suki found that her thoughts about the test results bringing really bad news were in her complete control. Write your answers.

Now set a timer for 3 minutes and brainstorm how the items that were under your control may have led to your aversion about those that weren't. Be sure to explicitly tell the story of how things in your control could have caused the aversion.

Finally, set another 3-minute timer and try to come up with ways you could transfer aversion from external things not in your control to things you can completely control. Suki found that the steps above helped her realize that her thoughts about the situation caused the aversion. So, she decided to explicitly remind herself that her thoughts were causing the upset, and to examine her thoughts more closely. What ways would work for you, in transferring aversion from things that you can't completely control to things that you can? Write your answers.

By now, you should have a short list of things you can practice over the next week that are in your complete control. Each day, choose

a specific time at which you'll set a 3-minute timer and review this list, and choose one to practice for that day. Write down when you'll do this exercise each day.

The item you choose may vary day to day, as some techniques you came up with may be specific to certain days of the week. If Suki will be seeing her cardiologist on Tuesday, she may choose to visualize her visit Monday night to prepare, but she won't do that every day.

Why Do It

The Stoics have many exercises within the Discipline of Desire that can help work with transferring desire and aversion from external things to things within your control, which you'll learn throughout Part I. The purpose of this exercise is to generate some of your own that may work for you! By transferring your aversions from things that you can't completely control to things you can, you will ultimately "never incur anything to which you are adverse."

Weekly Review

On the Sunday after you've practiced transferring your aversions, set a timer for 5 to 10 minutes and write your impressions of this exercise. Was it useful to you? How? Is there any way you could tweak this exercise to make it easier to do or more useful in the future? Write about your experiences with this exercise.

Finally, if you think this exercise is useful, bookmark this page.

WEEK 3

Take an outside view

You may excel at providing comfort to those in need, but are you equally good at comforting yourself? Robert just realized that he isn't. He has always been the person everyone turns to for comfort, and he rarely fails at helping others gain perspective on their situations. But as things have become stressful in his own life, it has been hard for him to gain a similar perspective. This Stoic exercise can help Robert—and the rest of us—gain equanimity through adopting a new perspective on our own troubles.

It is in our power to discover the will of nature from those matters on which we have no difference of opinion. For example, when another man's slave has broken the wine cup, we are very ready to say at once, 'Such things must happen.' Know then that when your own cup is broken, you ought to behave in the same way as when your neighbor's was broken. Apply the same principle to higher matters. Is another's child or wife dead? Not one of us but would say, 'Such is the lot of man'; but when one's own dies, straightaway one cries, 'Alas! miserable am I.' But we ought to remember what our feelings are when we hear it of another."

Epictetus, ***, 26*** **Enchiridion**

This is Epictetus at his most frank. It would appear that the Stoic philosopher is encouraging us to adopt a purposely callous attitude toward our own bad luck by viewing it as though it had happened to someone else. From a modern perspective, this isn't easy advice to swallow as we strive to cultivate empathy toward other people's situations. In fact, the Stoics, including Epictetus, aren't that callous—they were very clear that the goal of Stoic practice is not to turn us into lumbering robots incapable of emotional responses, because that would strip us of our humanity. As the Stoic philosopher Seneca writes to his friend Lucilius: "The first thing which philosophy undertakes to give is fellow-feeling with all men; in other words, sympathy and sociability."[1] If the Stoics promote this sense of shared feeling, what, then, is Epictetus trying to say?

To begin with, let's talk about the difference between sympathy and empathy. Both words entered our vocabulary much later than the times of Epictetus: in 1579 and

1850, respectively. Interestingly, they both carry the Greek root *pathos*, meaning "emotion," but they modify it in different directions. To have sympathy with another's distress, according to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, is to care for and feel sorry about another's grief or misfortune. To empathize, by contrast, means that—to the extent possible—you share another's experiences on an emotional level.

The Stoics suggest that we should cultivate sympathy more than empathy. Both modern psychology and philosophy provide some backing for this ancient insight. Yale University psychologist Paul Bloom[2] and City University of New York philosopher Jesse Prinz[3] have made compelling cases that empathy is ethically problematic because, as with all highly emotional responses, it is easy for others to manipulate. Empathy also tends to be disproportionate to the situation (we feel more empathy for people we know or see directly), and does not scale up (it is impossible to feel empathy for anonymous thousands or even millions of people, regardless of how deserving they are). By contrast, sympathy is informed by reason and is therefore more wide ranging. We can sympathize even with people we do not know, or whose specific situation we have never experienced, because we are able to recognize that similar situations would be distressing for us, and that it would be unjust both for us and for anyone else to have to suffer through them.

In a sense, then, what Epictetus is observing is that in the normal course of events we tend to self-empathize ("Alas! Miserable am I.") while we sympathize with others ("Such is the lot of man."). The difference stems from our capability for more balanced judgment when the event does not touch us directly. Attempting to rectify this imbalance does not make us callous; it simply makes us more reasonable.

Now let us turn this insight around to help ourselves and Robert, whom we met earlier. Once we recognize that helping our friends take a broader perspective on their troubles actually helps them cope with their situation, we can then accept and internalize the same insight and apply it to our own lives. Robert is able to aid his friends by helping them distance themselves from their natural and immediate emotional reactions. Reminding ourselves that difficult things happen—and not just to us—is comforting. We can start developing equanimity with respect to the things we don't fully control. Likewise, we can be grateful when things go our way but not become too attached to them, as they can just as easily be taken away. And when tough things happen, we are able to find the courage to face them in the best way possible, because such is the human condition.

WEEK 4

Take another's perspective

It's easy for us to justify our own feelings, yet not understand those of others. Take Felix, who has been waiting in line at the bank for what seems like forever. When he finally reaches the bank teller, the teller curtly informs him that the computer system is down and there's not much he can do about it. *Why the hell did he talk to me like that?! What nerve!* Felix thinks, feeling his anger rising. What Felix doesn't consider is that the teller has been dealing with frustrations of his own the entire morning and has reached his limit. Had Felix been practicing this week's exercise, he would have had a better chance of cutting off his anger at the pass.

> "Does a man do you a wrong? Go to and mark what notion of good and evil was his that did the wrong. Once [you] perceive that ... you will feel compassion, not surprise or anger. For you have still yourself either the same notion of good and evil as he, or another not unlike it. You need to forgive him then. But if [your] notions of good and evil are no longer such, all the more easily shall you be gracious to him that sees awry."
>
> ***Marcus Aurelius,*** **Meditations** ***, 7.26***

It's easy to feel righteous when we perceive that others are in the wrong. Our righteousness leads us to feel justified in retaliating, since we see ourselves as punishing them for their bad actions—which stem from their bad character. We are blind to the reality that the other person won't see it our way. They will likely see their actions as justified, given the circumstances, and our actions as stemming from *our* bad character!

This tendency to think that other people's actions reflect their character while our own actions depend on circumstance is called the *fundamental attribution error*, a term first coined by psychologist Lee Ross.[1] We favor our own skewed perceptions of things, mistaking them for objective truths, while at the same time downplaying how and why our fellow human beings may have a different perception. We easily convince ourselves that the asymmetry between how we behave and how we would want others to behave is, after all, perfectly justified.

Except that it isn't justified, as Marcus Aurelius reminds himself. It's likely that he, too, suffered the same error. The emperor-philosopher, unlike most of us, engages in a

remarkable dissection of the problem, allowing him to see more clearly. We have a lot to learn from him.

When we perceive that another person has behaved wrongly toward us, the first step is to figure out what incorrect notion led them to act as they did. We can imagine ourselves in the other person's situation, and, by thinking about what they value, can make sense of their actions—even if we don't agree with them—immediately squashing the rising sense of righteous anger we might experience.

Which leads to the next step: Now that we know what they value, we should ask ourselves whether we sometimes have the same values. If we don't—and we are reasonably confident that our judgment is on the mark—then we know that they were acting on the basis of a wrong judgment, and we should pity them, just as we would be sorry for someone who made an elementary mistake in logic or math.

And if we do hold similarly mistaken ideas of what is good or bad, then we must consider why we are faulting the other person instead of working on ourselves. This can motivate us to forgive them, since we, too, have made mistakes in the past—and could make them in the future.

How may this have helped Felix? Felix knew he was grumpy and frustrated because he had to wait in a long line. Similarly, the teller responded in a curt manner because he was also frustrated that he had to deal with a long line of people, and that the system was down! We all become grumpy sometimes when things don't go our way. If Felix had realized this, it may have actually made him less angry at the teller's response.

Lastly, as Marcus suggests, our own views of what is good and bad may have changed, because we have learned from our mistakes and are a little less unwise than we used to be. We can then afford to be charitable toward someone who hasn't had the same breakthrough, just as we would toward someone who had not yet mastered logic or math as well as we have.

A similar technique appears in modern psychology, based on the empirically supported idea that people become more compassionate toward others when they take another person's perspective. As Sara Hodges of the University of Oregon and her colleagues put it:

> People behave better—more acceptably, more admirably, more prosocially—after perspective taking. First, perspective-taking has been consistently found to increase compassionate emotions ... toward the person whose perspective has been taken. Second, perspective-taking leads people to view and treat other people more like the self, viewing them as possessing more traits in common with the self, and symbolically having 'merged,' at least partially, with the self in terms of cognitive representations and descriptions of personality and explanations of behavior.[2]

Just as the Stoics maintained, forcing ourselves to take seriously the point of view of another broadens our understanding. It reduces the likelihood that we will feel so emotionally attached to a particular perspective as to become angry when that view is challenged. Crucially, the Stoics are not suggesting that we necessarily agree with the other person; only that we give them a fair opportunity to make their case, in the spirit of human compassion and understanding.

A basic tenet of Stoicism is that nobody wants to do wrong on purpose, and everyone thinks they have good reasons for their actions. But it is up to us whether to indulge our anger, which the Stoics refer to as a "temporary madness," and likely make things even worse for both parties, or to be charitable and open-minded instead—ending up agreeing with our interlocutor if they are right, or just feeling sorry for them if it turns out that they are, after all, mistaken.

What to Do

For the next week, choose a time at the end of each day to think about someone you encountered who frustrated you or whom you perceived to do you wrong. What time each day works best for you? It might be the same time as last week's exercise or a different time. Write when you'll do this exercise each day.

Consider each of the following prompts each day. If you weren't frustrated with anyone, try to think of someone in your past who you feel did you wrong.

1. Who was it? What did they do? Why do you feel wronged? How do you feel about that person right now?
2. Why do you think they acted the way they did? What values might they hold that make sense of their actions? (Hint: From a Stoic viewpoint, these are usually values related to external things, beyond their complete control.)
3. Do you, or did you ever, hold any of those values, too? If yes, write about a time you acted on them, and perhaps frustrated or wronged another. If no, what internal character traits of yours do you value? List them, then write about how you could exercise those traits to lower your frustration with this person.
4. Take a final moment to express how you feel about this person now that you've gone through the exercise.

Why Do It

Last week you practiced focusing on an outside view in order to quash your desires for things to go how you want them to. This week is similar. You're now countering desires about other people's behaviors. Instead of doing so by taking an *outside* view of your own struggles, you're taking an *inside* view of other people's actions. By performing this exercise, you'll gain perspective on why people's actions may seem reasonable to them, and, through that, develop sympathy.

Weekly Review

On the Sunday after you've practiced taking an inside view, set a timer for 5 to 10 minutes and write your impressions of this exercise. How did it affect your understanding of other people's actions? Did it lead to more sympathy and less judgment? What similarities and differences did you discover with people who most frustrate you? Write about your experiences.

Finally, if you think this exercise is useful, bookmark this page.

WEEK 5

Strengthen yourself through minor physical hardships

It's really hard to keep your composure when you feel physically uncomfortable, whether from pain, tiredness, or hunger. Hunger is the one Henry's been struggling with. Henry often works through lunch, thinking he would continue to be productive. All it winds up producing is grumpiness coupled with visions of pizza. No matter how hard he tries to focus, his mind just won't settle down and spoils his mood for the rest of the day. The Stoics understood that physical discomfort can sometimes lead to emotional upset. This week's exercise offers a simple technique: intentional, repeated practice.

> Now there are two kinds of [Stoic] training, one which is appropriate for the soul alone, and the other which is common to both soul and body. We use the training common to both when we discipline ourselves to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, meager rations, hard beds, avoidance of pleasures, and patience under suffering. For by these things and others like them the body is strengthened and becomes capable of enduring hardship, sturdy and ready for any task; the soul too is strengthened since it is trained for courage by patience under hardship and for self-control by abstinence from pleasures."
>
> ***Musonius Rufus,*** **Lectures** ***, 6***

Even though the Stoics thought the mind was our most valuable asset—it's the most sophisticated and important tool we have at our disposal—they did not neglect the body. In fact, as Epictetus's teacher Musonius Rufus suggests, the mind (or "soul") and body work together, each influencing the other, for good or for bad.

We can and should train our mind, which is why we study philosophy to begin with. This book is, after all, a series of exercises to train your mind by thinking more precisely about what is worth pursuing, what you should avoid, and what it means to have a life worth living. But philosophy, the Stoics rightly insisted, cannot be solely a matter of theory. Just as we can't learn to ride a bicycle simply by listening to someone's

Now it's your turn: Pick a discomfort from your list that you'd like to practice over the next week, and write it down.

Now make sure your plan is safe. There are many conditions that may make exposure to discomforts unsafe. If you have *any* concerns, now is the time to raise them with your doctor or healthcare professional. Contact your physician with the plan you laid out above, and ensure that it is safe for you. If it is not, return to the first step and repeat the process. The final step is to create some "at-hand" phrases you can tell yourself when intentionally practicing discomfort. At-hand phrases are an important part of Stoic practice; we'll encounter them more throughout this book. They're generally used as reminders of basic Stoic principles. Here, the purpose of these phrases is to remind yourself why you're doing what you're doing, which will motivate you to continue—for example, "I'm doing this to become more resilient," or "This is so I can become a better person." Take some time to write one to three at-hand phrases that you can tell yourself before starting your exercise.

With your at-hand phrases in hand (we call them that for a reason!), you're ready to start practicing tomorrow.

Why Do It

Our aversion to physical discomfort often leads us to lose control of our mood and thoughts, Henry's hangriness being just one of many examples. The purpose of physical training is not to prove how tough you are, nor to be a punishment, but rather, as Musonius says, to train your mind to deal with hardships. By voluntarily exposing yourself to physical hardships you will build resiliance and strength of character, if you can act virtuously while enduring them. As a result, you will be prepared with a steady mind should these hardships arise by chance at other times in your life.

Weekly Review

Now that you've been practicing the endurance of a minor physical hardship for a week, set a timer for 5 to 10 minutes and write about your experience. Were you able to practice every day? If not,

what obstacles did you face and how could you have overcome them? Did the hardship ease over time? How useful were the at-hand phrases you used, and could they have been improved? And, most importantly, how useful did you find this exercise in building strength of character? Write about your experience.

Finally, if you think this exercise is useful, bookmark this page.

WEEK 6

Premeditation of future adversity

When you've experienced an inconvenience or misfortune, have you ever thought to yourself, *I can't believe it!*? James has exactly this thought as he sits in his motionless car, late for a promising job interview, having been unemployed much longer than is ideal. It crosses James's mind to call the interviewer to let him know that he's running late, but he's just too upset. The Stoics would say that much of James's distress is caused by his failure to anticipate how things might go wrong. This week's exercise is to soften the blow of misfortunes by anticipating them in advance.

> If an evil has been pondered beforehand, the blow is gentle when it comes. To the fool, however, and to him who trusts in fortune, each event as it arrives 'comes in a new and sudden form,' and a large part of evil, to the inexperienced, consists in its novelty. This is proved by the fact that men endure with greater courage, when they have once become accustomed to them, the things which they had at first regarded as hardships. Hence, the wise man accustoms himself to coming trouble, lightening by long reflection the evils which others lighten by long endurance. We sometimes hear the inexperienced say: 'I knew that this was in store for me.' But the wise man knows that all things are in store for him. Whatever happens, he says: 'I knew it.'"
>
> ***Seneca,*** ***Letters to Lucilius,*** *76.34–35*

Some modern Stoics refer to this exercise by the Latin term *premeditatio malorum*, the premeditation of bad stuff happening. It's not that Stoics are pessimists; on the contrary, they are among the most realistic of people—they know that sometimes things won't go their way, and are always mentally prepared for that occurrence.

Of course, having a prepared mind is not like having a magic wand; no matter how prepared James is, there will still be traffic, and he will likely miss the interview. But there are two additional aspects of his unpreparedness that make a difference. First, once it's inevitable that James will be late and miss the interview, thereby forfeiting the job, it becomes what the Stoics would call *dispreferred*, or something we'd rather not do or happen. Getting upset at this point won't solve anything, but it is guaranteed to make

you more miserable by adding a self-inflicted injury to one imposed from the outside. Second, James decided not to call the interviewer to alert him of the problem, because he was just too upset about his circumstance. This is a hallmark of what Stoics call a *passion*—it clouds your mind, stopping you from doing or thinking what is reasonable. (Not all emotions are passions, only the ones that take over your mind.) Had he been able to embrace the situation with equanimity, he may have realized that he had nothing to lose by calling the interviewer. The decision to call ahead or not was under his control; however, because of his distress, James could not bring himself to act in his own best interest.

The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Soli, the third head of the ancient *Stoa* (as the Stoic school was called) came up with a good metaphor for dispreferred situations, and, really, for life in general. Imagine a dog that is tied to a cart by way of a leash. The dog is minding his own business, maybe playfully barking at another dog nearby, just for fun. All of a sudden, the cart starts moving. The dog would rather stay a bit longer and keep barking at the other guy, but he has no choice. The leash makes sure that he will have to follow the cart. At this point, the dog could do one of two things: He could take note of the situation, accept what he cannot control, and gingerly start to follow the cart, maybe even hoping that he will meet other dogs down the road. Or, he could get upset, drag himself on the pavement, and try to resist the cart. Which do you think would be the wiser course of action?

As the dog and the cart, so we and the universe. Things will happen that will make it impossible for us to do what we intend to do. We can either approach the unwanted situation with equanimity and do the best we can given the circumstances, or we can drag ourselves kicking and screaming. The end result will be the same, but we can spare ourselves a hell of a lot of suffering.

What to Do

Last week we practiced coping with present-moment difficulties; this week we're focusing on possible *future* adversity. While *premeditatio malorum* is a fundamental Stoic exercise, there's one problem: no Stoic philosopher described how to do it. In true Stoic fashion, we're turning this lack of detail to our advantage. Instead of giving you one technique, we will offer three approaches. By completing this week's prompts, you'll gain experience premeditating on both shorter- and longer-term future adversity.

We suggest you do this exercise each morning, in order to help prepare for your day. Write the time you'll do the exercise.

Method 1: Plan for things to go wrong.

We'll start this exercise by writing out a few plans for the day. Then we'll assume that what could go wrong *will*. Next, recalling what we learned from Week 1 (page 19) and Week 2 (pages 23–24) about what's under our complete control, we'll write out how we could respond to the situation. If you need a refresher, flip back and review those chapters now.

This exercise, like many future exercises in this book, is bolstered by a technique called *implementation intentions*, which are a well-studied, effective way to increase the chances that you will remember to do something in a specific situation.[1] Instead of intending to do something, tell yourself under what circumstances you will do it. For example, rather than saying, "I'll remember what's under my complete control," you can say, "If my plan goes wrong, I'll tell myself that my thoughts, not the outcome, are under my control."

Monday

Use this table to strategize how you can respond Stoically if things go wrong. Try this for up to three of your plans for the day.

That's all for now. Come back at the end of the day to write about your experience in the space. How did you feel as you repeatedly reminded yourself that you could be susceptible to these misfortunes? Did your reaction change over the course of the day? What use, if any, did you find in the exercise?

Tomorrow, you'll practice this exercise again. In the morning, review the implementation intentions you set for yourself, and revise them if they didn't work for you. Then come back here at the end of the day to write about how this exercise went for you.

To wrap up, bookmark this page if you found the exercise useful.

Method 3: Practice imaginative premeditation

The final take on *premeditatio malorum* is to imagine a situation you wouldn't want to happen as if it's actually happening. This approach is similar to imaginal exposure, a type of exposure therapy used to help people overcome their anxieties.[2] However, while imaginal exposure is used to treat clinical conditions, the Stoic *premeditatio*'s goal is to loosen our attachment to external events in general, from something as simple as breaking your favorite cup (to use Epictetus's example from Week 3) to the death of a loved one. Since you're only doing this for a day, we do *not* recommend starting with a serious situation.

To get started, list five situations that are not under your complete control. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very easy and 10 being very hard, rate how difficult each would be for you to manage if it happened to you. Be sure to include at least one easy and one hard situation, though most should fall in the 2 to 5 range.

External situation	How hard would this be to cope with, on a scale of 1 to 10?

Now choose the easiest item from the list to work with today. Grab a timer and set aside 10 minutes to complete the exercise. At least 10 minutes are necessary to train your mind to become familiar with the event—perhaps even bored—as Seneca suggests at the beginning of this chapter.