

# Preliminary Introduction & Overview

**NB:** This document contains a rough copy of the online lesson for convenience, so that it can be easily read offline on mobile devices, etc. It may omit some content, such as hyperlinks, images or audio-video files, which you will have to download from the course web page. If you're reading this after the course has finished, you will not be able to participate in discussions, or submit the questionnaires, etc. However, you should still be able to benefit from the contents - just ignore any parts that relate to activities that are no longer available. Audio files will be made available for download along with this document, so that you can use the exercises they contain.

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## Introduction

### ***Welcome to Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training!***

This short online lesson will provide your introduction to the rest of the course. You should make sure you complete it before the official start date shown on the main course page.

This lesson can be read at any time prior to the start of the training proper, as it doesn't require you to undertake any practical exercises at this stage. It contains some information to explain the course and your role as a participant.

It also contains links to four online questionnaire forms, which it's essential you complete before beginning Week One of the course.

Make a start now, and read the contents very carefully. Try to prepare yourself mentally and physically for the four weeks ahead. Begin making arrangements so that you will be able to follow the course through to completion and apply the contents consistently to your daily life. We ask that you give 100% and really put your heart and soul into the process, and in return we promise that we'll do our best to help and support you.

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## About the Course

This course is part of a larger programme of research carried out by the "Stoicism Today" group responsible for the Stoic Week event. We are a multi-disciplinary team of psychologists and academics led by Christopher Gill, former (recently retired) Professor of Ancient Thought at Exeter University. Over 2,400 people around the world took part in Stoic Week 2013 but this course is intended to be smaller in scale and more focused. You can find out more about Stoic Week and the people involved at the Exeter Stoicism Today blog.

Our previous Stoic Week 2013 Handbook contained a seven-day program of training, which covered a different aspect of Stoic practice each day. This course was designed to be more focused in greater depth on a small handful of core Stoic practices, and to allow more time for participants to test them out in daily life. So it's not intended as an overview of Stoic philosophy or Stoic psychological practices but rather an experiment to test the effectiveness of some central Stoic concepts and techniques. This was one of the main things people asked us to develop following on from Stoic Week 2013 and other events.

We've chosen to focus on aspects of Stoicism, which are:

- Recognizable as being central to ancient Stoicism
- Fairly simple to learn and apply to modern life, within the time available
- A good foundation for learning more about Stoic theory and practice
- Usable without a detailed preliminary knowledge of Stoic history or philosophy
- We hope you'll find this course interesting and valuable, but it will take some thought and commitment on your part, to apply the practices to your own life.

(This course was developed by Donald Robertson, with help and support from some of other Stoicism Today team members.)

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## What is Stoicism?

Stoicism is an ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy. It was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 301 BC. The name comes from the painted porch (*stoa poikilê*) where he lectured his students. Stoicism later became very popular in ancient Rome, where it continued to flourish after the disappearance of the original Greek school. Less than one percent of the original literature of Stoicism now survives, though. The most significant ancient sources we have available today are:

1. The many Letters and Dialogues of the Roman statesman Seneca, who was a practising Stoic, and advisor to the Emperor Nero.
2. Four lengthy collections of Discourses and one concise Handbook of sayings compiled from the lectures of the Roman slave Epictetus by his student Arrian – Epictetus is the only Stoic teacher whose work survives in any significant quantity.
3. The private Stoic journal, the Meditations, of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the last famous Stoic we know about, and followed the teachings of Epictetus.

### **The Stoic Goal of Life**

Stoicism is a complex philosophy in some respects and its beyond the scope of this training to go into it in much detail. However, the central teaching was summed up fairly concisely. Stoicism teaches that the goal of life is “living in agreement with Nature”. The Stoics took that to mean, not retreating to a quiet life in the countryside, but rather living “in accord with virtue” or excelling as a human being. Living in agreement with our own nature means flourishing and fulfilling our potential, by cultivating reason and thereby achieving strength of character and practical wisdom. The outcome of our actions, whether we achieve external “success” or “failure”, is therefore less important than the nature of our own character.

### **The Stoic Concept of Virtue**

The concept of "virtue" (*aretê*) is absolutely central to Stoicism but it's important to realise this means something quite different from what many people today might take the word to imply. Virtue in the Stoic sense denotes something more like "excelling" and flourishing as a human being, by fulfilling one's true potential. It implies having what we sometimes today call "positive qualities" or "strengths" of character. The classic "cardinal virtues" of Stoicism were wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline. Wisdom, particularly practical wisdom, was the most important. Indeed, the word philosophy means "love of wisdom" and the Stoics took that quite literally. We don't assume today that virtue is synonymous with wisdom, so it's worth bearing this in mind when reading about Stoicism to avoid confusion.

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## Learning More about Stoicism

This isn't a course on the history or theory of Stoic philosophy or a general introduction to the subject. It assumes no prior knowledge but it focuses on a specific handful of key Stoic practices. You don't need to know anything else about Stoicism to take part. However, it will probably help if you do want to find out more.

One of the most common misconceptions about Stoicism is that it requires us to be completely unemotional. That's not really what the Stoics meant, but rather the overcoming of irrational, unhealthy, or excessive fears and desires, etc. In fact, Marcus Aurelius went so far as to describe the goal of Stoicism as being "free from irrational passions and yet full of love" or natural (philanthropic) affection for the rest of mankind. Although it's not essential, doing some additional reading about Stoicism may help you to better understand their philosophy and practices and to get more benefit out of this training.

There are many good books available. We'd encourage you to begin with a modern introduction and then read some of the classic texts themselves.

- The *Stoic Week 2013 Handbook* provides a more details introduction to Stoic practice.
- Books like William Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life* or my own *Teach Yourself: Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* are intended to be easy to read introductions to Stoic theory and practice for non-academics.
- The most popular Stoic text that survives from ancient times is the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, so you may want to read that before looking at other ancient sources.
- The *Handbook* of Epictetus is also a good starting point, as it provides a concise summary of the key sayings of a famous Stoic teacher.

If you're able to do so, we'd like you to post a quick review of your favourite book on Stoicism to the Discussion Forum, as soon as you get a chance. It doesn't need to be longer than a couple of paragraphs.

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## Poem

### The Old Stoic

Riches I hold in light esteem,  
And love I laugh to scorn,  
And lust of fame was but a dream  
That vanished with the morn.

And if I pray, the only prayer  
That moves my lips for me  
Is, "Leave the heart that now I bear,  
And give me liberty!"

Yes, as my swift days near their goal,  
'Tis all that I implore –  
In life and death, a chainless soul,  
With courage to endure.

– From Poems of Solitude by Emily Brontë

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# Course Goals

When doing a course, it's important to be clear from the outset how the goals are being defined.

Your overall goal in this four-week training program is to learn to live more consistently in accord with traditional Stoic values, or with “virtue” and practical wisdom, and to evaluate the results for your quality of life. The most important aspect of this will be training yourself to consistently place more importance on your own character and actions than upon external events. You'll also be training yourself to cultivate mindfulness so that you avoid going along with any thoughts, actions, or feelings, that may interfere with that goal.

If you're unclear about anything or have any questions about the course goals, feel free to contact your course facilitator.

The aspect of Stoic practice we've chosen to focus upon is the advice to distinguish carefully between what is “up to us” and what is not, in any given situation, particularly when distressing emotions arise. This is the foundational Stoic practice described in the opening sentences of Epictetus' famous Handbook (Enchiridion) and it's the dominant theme that recurs throughout his Discourses. So there's no doubt that it's a central feature of ancient Stoicism and something most people would recognise as characteristic of the surviving Stoic literature. Epictetus consistently recommends this as a starting point to novice students of Stoicism and it can be seen as the basis of more advanced practices. It's also a very simple and versatile way of coping with situations and one that modern students of Stoicism report finding beneficial and easy to put into practice. So we'd like you to reflect on ways that you can expand on this basic strategy and gain more benefit from it over the next four weeks.

Focusing on living with virtue might seem like a different thing from mindfulness to begin with but for the Stoics they were intimately connected. The central premise of Stoicism is that virtue is the only true good, the most important thing in life. When we view it this way we naturally come to pay more attention to our own character and actions, which take place in the present moment.

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## Overview of Course Contents

### Course Sections (Weeks)

The Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training lasts four weeks and is therefore divided into four corresponding sections or chapters. You should read each section in full at the start of the corresponding week, i.e., on the Monday, and then apply the concepts and techniques throughout the following week.

1. Orientation and Preparation. This section is loosely based on the Stoic approach to ancient “Physics” or “natural philosophy”, and encourages you to become more mindful of the present moment and to view your experiences objectively, from a detached “scientific” perspective, as a way of living more in agreement with the nature of the world.
2. Stoic Virtues. This section is loosely based on Stoic Ethics, and the importance of acting in accord with certain values or virtues.
3. Stoic Mindfulness. This section deals with subjects related to Stoic Logic, and theory of knowledge, and involves learning to live in harmony with reason by suspending value judgements when they arise and viewing automatic impressions with greater psychological “distance”.
4. Stoic Resilience. This chapter focuses on ways to maintain your well-being in the long-term by anticipating future adversity and potential setbacks and preparing yourself to cope with them resiliently.

Each section contains several major components. We've summarised them below so that you can easily see the progression from one week to the next, under each heading.

### **Specific Daily Exercises**

During each week, there will be one short meditation exercise that you will practice for at least a few minutes each day:

1. **Mindfulness of the Present Moment.** This exercise is designed to help you ground your awareness in the "here and now" and view your experiences from a detached and objective perspective, as the ancient Stoics described.
2. **Contemplation of the Good.** This exercise will help you connect with your fundamental values by contemplating the nature of virtue, in the Stoic sense. You will also prepare for the day ahead by planning how you can act more consistently with your core values in life.
3. **Cognitive Distancing.** This exercise is designed to improve your ability to notice automatic thoughts (impressions) and let go of them, rather than going along with them, and being swept away by unhealthy feelings or desires.
4. **Rapid-Frequent Mindfulness.** This exercise differs from the others in that it's intended to be practiced repeatedly and frequently throughout the day, applying your skills across a wide range of different situations and activities. This is designed to help you maintain a more general "Stoic" attitude toward life and build longer-term emotional resilience.

### **Continual Self-Monitoring**

Throughout each week, there will also be a different form of self-monitoring or self-assessment, which you will complete each day:

1. **Keeping a tally of unhealthy emotions and desires.** You're going to begin self-monitoring simply by keeping a tally or count of how frequently you find yourself doing things you'd like to stop, such as dwelling on unhealthy thoughts, feelings, or desires, etc.
2. **Rating consistency of actions with values.** Setting goals and rating consistency with values (Stoic virtues) at the end of each day is a powerful way of remaining connected with a sense of value and purpose in life, as well as identifying areas for improvement.
3. **Worry postponement.** You're going to now keep a record of the amount of time you spend ruminating about things beyond your control, and try to reduce the duration of these episodes, by postponing thinking about them until later.
4. **Blueprint for Stoic resilience.** In the final week, you're going to develop a blueprint or "coping plan" for maintaining your resilience in the future, and review this each day to make sure you're able to follow it satisfactorily.

### **Audio Recordings**

Finally, to help your practice, we've designed four short MP3 recordings, one of which you will listen to each day throughout the course:

1. **Rehearsal of Stoic Attitudes (15 min.).** This recording contains some simple relaxation followed by a script describing basic Stoic values and attitudes, which you should contemplate and mentally-rehearse each day.
2. **Morning Meditation (4 min.).** This short recording encourages you to prepare for the day ahead by planning actions and goals consistent with your core values, and preparing to accept setbacks with Stoic equanimity.

3. Evening Meditation (6 min.). This recording will encourage you to reflect at the end of each day on your actions and to consider how they serve your fundamental values, or the virtues you seek to cultivate.
  4. Mindfulness and Premeditation of Adversity (15 min.). This recording encourages you to mentally-rehearse coping with an upsetting situation, using mindfulness and your Stoic principles to prepare in advance for a range of anticipated challenges in life.
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## Group Discussions & Social Media

We also want to help participants to feel more deeply engaged with the training by encouraging you to take part in discussions as an online community, using forums on the e-learning site and social networks, if possible. We believe that you'll be able to benefit by collaborating with and supporting each other online, and learning from other people's experiences.

You can receive updates and get in touch with other students using social networking as follows:

- Join our Google+ Stoicism community and turn on the notifications (amount: more).
- Follow our @StoicWeek Twitter account, and switch on mobile notifications.

If you choose to do so, you can receive notifications of announcements and group activity via your mobile device, which can help act as a reminder of your commitment to Stoic practice, throughout the day.

Indeed, the ancient Stoic school was itself a community of like-minded students of philosophy, and this social dimension can be a powerful aspect of training. Talking to others can help generate insights, overcome problems, and boost your confidence or motivation if they are flagging. So please do your best to contribute your own thoughts to the discussion forum as regularly as possible, and to comment supportively and constructively on other people's posts there.

Here are some examples of the sort of questions we'd like you to reflecting upon and discuss in the forum:

1. What do you think would be the pros and cons of living a life in which you take virtue or excellence of character to be the only thing that's intrinsically good?
2. What is "virtue" in the ancient sense meaning excellence of character? What do you think makes a person exceptional? What qualities define someone's character as truly good or bad?
3. What are the benefits of recalling what's under your control and what isn't in difficult situations? How do you distinguish between things under your control and things not? Are the Stoics right to say that only our own actions, in a nutshell, are truly under our control?
4. What would be the consequences of continually remembering, when starting to feel distressed about a situation or event, that it's not things that upset us but our judgements about things?

At the end of this introduction, you'll be asked to briefly introduce yourself to the course facilitator and other students via the discussion forum. Start thinking now about any initial questions you may want to ask, though.

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## The Research Project

The first time this course runs we'll be collecting data from all participants for the purposes of research on Stoic practice. By enrolling on the course, therefore, you grant us permission to collect and analyse your data and you agree to provide a valid email contact address and your real name. We also require you to use your real name

because it's better for collaboration with other students if people aren't using pseudonyms. We want to create a safe and transparent atmosphere for online learning and peer support.

It's essential that you complete all four questionnaires before beginning Week One of the course. You'll be able to do that using embedded forms on the next few pages.

It's also extremely important that you complete the same forms after you've finished the course. We need your data even if you do not manage to complete the course. Everyone who has enrolled should therefore complete two sets of questionnaires, before and after the course.

We're very grateful for the time you take in completing these forms. You'll be helping other people by doing it. We've also found that many participants in the past have told us they found the forms interesting and helpful to do, especially the Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours scale, which will also give you a kind of rapid overview of certain aspects of Stoic theory and practice.

You'll receive email confirmations automatically when you complete each online form, containing information on your scores. So it's essential that you provide a valid email address. Check your email within a few hours. If you haven't received a confirmation then check it's not been blocked by your spam filter. (Add our modernstoicism.com domain and the email addresses used to your email client's "safe sender" list, if possible.) It's also essential that you use exactly the same email and name in every form you complete, including the ones at the end of the course. Otherwise, we can't match up your scores for analysis.

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## Completing the Questionnaires

It's absolutely essential that you complete all of the measures provided, before and after the training, if you wish to take part. The percentage of people who complete the forms at the end of the study can have an impact on the validity of the statistical conclusions drawn. The more the better, basically. So even if you do find yourself struggling to complete the training, it's still extremely important that you complete the end-of-study questionnaires. We'll contact everyone who takes part to remind them to do these forms again when the times comes.

Please complete the first set of questionnaires before proceeding - it should only take about ten minutes. There's one long scale, the Stoic Attitudes and Behaviors Scale (SABS), which people often find very interesting to complete as it contains a summary of many Stoic (or notably non-Stoic) attitudes and behaviours. So it gives some insight into the nature of Stoic theory and practice. The other three scales are very brief and we're using them mainly because they allow us to make comparisons with other types of research. Click on each link below in turn to open the form in a new browser window. Please remember to use exactly the same name and email address for all questionnaires and to click "submit" when you've entered your responses. You should receive an email confirming your responses for each form, within the next week. This will also include some interesting notes on your scores and comparisons with previous student averages for the SABS.

1. Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours Scale (SABS). This scale was developed by our research team and has gone through various revisions. The items have been checked with academics for their relevance to Stoicism and revised based on feedback from hundreds of previous participants.
2. The Flourishing Scale (FS). This brief scale provides a measure of general psychological wellbeing, such as your sense of having a meaningful life.
3. Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE). This brief scale measure a range of different emotions, like joy, contentment, anger, sadness, etc.

4. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). This is another brief scale, designed to measure your overall level of contentment with life.

Thank you very much for taking the time to do this! Just press "continue" again when you've finished...

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You should be familiar with the general site policies before proceeding. Read them now if you haven't already. Your responsibility and commitment as a participant in this course is to complete the required questionnaires, interact politely and constructively with the facilitator and other students at all times, and to do your best to complete the whole training as described.

Below are the terms and conditions of use for Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training. It's essential that you read them before taking part in this training.

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## Troubleshooting

One of the integral features of Stoicism is the emphasis it places on being prepared for future setbacks. We want to make sure that everyone who enrolls on this course manages to complete it, insofar as that's realistically possible. It's therefore important to consider potential problems, and how to overcome them, from the very outset if you want to be sure you'll see the training right through to the end.

Use the course discussion forum to post your reflections on possible setbacks you might encounter over the next few weeks.

- What could possibly prevent you from completing the whole course?
- What could you do to avoid that happening?
- What strengths and resources do you have, which might help you to overcome any obstacles that you may encounter?

Try to anticipate the obvious setbacks or obstacles that may occur during a training course of this nature, and do your best right now to reduce their potential impact.

If problems arise during the course, please contact your course facilitator immediately. We'll get back to you as soon as possible and try to offer as much help and support as we can. Use the course facilitator and your fellow students as resources to help you get past any practical or psychological barriers that might otherwise stand in your way during the course.

## Time Management

One of the most common reasons for people dropping out of a training course is that they felt they didn't have enough time or energy to participate. Think carefully before proceeding about whether or not you are physically able to undertake a four-week training course right now and if you're able to make a commitment to see it through to completion.

The good news is that, done correctly, this training potentially takes no time at all! That might seem paradoxical. However, it's because a lot of the changes you'll be making involve doing less of certain things and generally making better use of your time. So overall you should actually find yourself saving time in your daily routine. "Self-help" can consist in doing fewer unhelpful things in life as well as doing more of the helpful ones. Sometimes less is more, and the Stoics definitely realised that. We've deliberately designed the training so that it takes very little time indeed to do the key exercises, and so that overall they should free up more time during your day. However, there are also some optional exercises included that you may want to use if you have some additional time available.

If you catch yourself worrying about whether you have the time to participate, pause to consider how much time you're potentially going to save by sticking with the training program and learning to reduce unnecessary or unhelpful trains of thought, and patterns of behaviour, etc. Some of the audio recordings do take about fifteen minutes each day but you can potentially listen to these at night as you're falling asleep, as long as you feel you're still managing to take on-board some of the content, and so that means they take no time at all from your day.

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## What Next?

Now that you've completed the introductory lesson, you should have a clear idea what the course entails. The key points to remember from this lesson are:

- This course is about testing out specific aspects of Stoic practice – it's not about Stoic philosophical theory.
- The course is four weeks long, and each week covers a different aspect of Stoic practice.
- It's extremely important that you complete all of the questionnaires before and after taking part, even if you don't manage to complete the course.
- We want you to collaborate with the other students and to help and support each other as much as possible.

Your next step should be to visit the course Discussion Forum and introduce yourself to the course facilitator and the other students.

### Discussion Forum

Just post a message saying your name and, if possible, a little bit about what brought you to the course and what you hope to achieve by completing it. If you have any initial questions about the course make sure you use this opportunity to ask them. If you're able to do so, we'd like you to post brief reviews of books or articles on Stoicism you've read, just a few paragraphs, to help others to become familiar with the literature available on the subject.

Thanks for your participation! We look forward to hearing from you over the next few weeks. Feel free to get in touch with the facilitator if you have any questions or need help.

O ye who've learnt the doctrines of the Stoa  
And have committed to your books divine  
The best of human learning, teaching men  
That the mind's virtue is the only good!

She only it is who keeps the lives of men  
And cities safer than high gates and walls.  
But those who place their happiness in pleasure  
Are led by the least worthy of the Muses.

– Athenaeus the Epigrammatist

# Week One: Orientation & Basics

## Introduction

### ***Welcome to Week One of Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training!***

You should read this lesson through completely on the Monday, and apply the exercises throughout the following week.

If you've made it this far, you should already have read through the Preliminary Section and completed all four of the initial intake questionnaires. If for any reason you haven't, then please go back and submit them before proceeding any further – it's essential you submit them all before starting the course.

During Week One you'll be training yourself to become more mindful of the present moment and to view your experiences objectively, from a detached "philosophical" perspective, as a way of living more in agreement with the nature of the world.

It won't take you long to read this short lesson. You can see the table of contents on the "lesson menu" to the left. We've kept it quite brief and focused on the practical and interactive components. If you want more reading, etc., you'll find a plethora of optional extras on the main course page for this week, below the current activity.

*So let's get started...*

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## Course Structure

First a quick recap, to put things in context... This training course lasts four weeks in total. Each week has the same format, as described in the Preliminary Section, where you saw an overview of the whole thing. So the structure looks like this:

1. **Lesson.** There's a short online lesson or reading (like this one), which you should complete on the Monday, as it explains what you'll be doing throughout the rest of the following week.
2. **Daily exercise.** You'll read a description of a brief psychological exercise or meditation that we'd like you to practice at least once each day, which should only take a few minutes.
3. **Audio recording.** For each week, there's a different audio recording, containing a guided contemplative exercise, which you should listen to at least once each day. These range from about 5 - 15 minutes in length but you can listen to some of them in bed at night.
4. **Self-monitoring.** There's a simple self-monitoring component to each week, which will help you to develop greater mindfulness of your own thoughts, feelings, and actions – these aren't just about gathering information, though, as people often report they also lead to beneficial changes.
5. **Discussion questions.** There will be one "big question" for group discussion each week, which we'd like everyone to contemplate, reflect upon, and post a comment about to the course forum, to help generate collaboration and a sense of community.
6. **Optional extras!** We know many of you want things simple and concise; we also know some of you will have a thirst for more. So we've included a treasure-trove of optional extras for each week. Ignore these if you don't have time for them but if you do then we think you'll find they enrich your experience of the course.

The idea is that the whole training should take a pretty negligible amount of time to follow each day. One of your goals throughout the next four weeks should be to save yourself time each day, by simplifying life where possible, and reducing the frequency and duration of unproductive trains of thought or activity. In general, we'll be focusing on three overarching practical themes throughout the training:

- Developing greater mindfulness of your own (mental and physical) actions, particularly your value judgements, and the relationship between your thoughts, actions, and feelings.
- Distinguishing very clearly between things under your direct control, and things not, i.e., between your own activity and everything else that happens to you.
- Placing greater importance on the quality of your own character and (voluntary) actions in life, which the Stoics called "virtue".

*Now let's look more closely at what you'll be doing this week...*

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## Overview of Week One

So that's the general format. This is what it looks like for Week One...

1. **Lesson.** You're doing it now! You're going to be reading some more about the basic Stoic concepts we're employing, though, over the next few pages.
2. **Daily exercise.** This exercise is designed to help you ground your awareness in the "here and now" and view your experiences from a detached and objective perspective, as the ancient Stoics described.
3. **Audio recording.** This recording contains some simple relaxation followed by a script describing basic Stoic values and attitudes, which you should contemplate and mentally-rehearse each day. Listen with headphones using an MP3 player or computer – or burn it to a CD.
4. **Self-monitoring.** You're going to begin self-monitoring simply by keeping a careful tally or count of how frequently you find yourself doing things you'd like to stop, such as dwelling on unhealthy thoughts, feelings, or desires, etc.
5. **Discussion questions.** "What do you think would be the pros and cons of living a life in which you take excellence of character (Stoic 'virtue') to be the only thing that's intrinsically good?"
6. **Optional extras!** You'll find a variety of additional materials in Week One, below this lesson.

This week is very important because it provides a solid foundation for the concepts and practices to follow. If you really reflect on the questions we're raising, observe yourself very closely, and stick with these initial daily exercises, you're bound to get much more out of the weeks that follow.

If there's anything you don't understand or get stuck with, let us know immediately, by posting on the Course Discussion Forum or emailing the course facilitator, and we'll do our very best to help you.

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## Stoic Mindfulness

What thing, out of all those that go to make up our lives, is done better by those who are inattentive? [...] Do you not realize that when once you let your mind go wandering, it is no longer within your power to recall it? Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.12

This course will require you to pay attention to yourself more carefully than normal, and to the way you actually live your life each day. As Socrates said: "The unexamined life is not worth living." You should aspire to "know yourself" by using this opportunity to study your own daily routine, and train of thought, from the detached perspective of a natural philosopher. Learn to patiently examine your way of living each day as if you were an ethnographer studying an exotic tribe, and documenting their culture and rituals, or a naturalist studying the behaviour of some newly discovered species of mammal.

There's a special form of continual self-awareness that ancient Stoics trained themselves to develop, which we can reasonably describe as "mindfulness", although it differs in some respects from similar ideas in Buddhist meditation practice. For Stoics, we should naturally be mindful, from moment to moment, of the most important thing in life: the character of our own thoughts and actions. They even used a technical term in Greek, *prosochê*, to describe this mindful attention to oneself. The eminent French scholar Pierre Hadot, has probably done more than anyone else to document the extent to which psychological exercises can be found in the literature of ancient philosophy, particularly Stoicism. He wrote:

Attention (*prosochê*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his action fully. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*

For Stoics, mindfulness of breathing, for example, wouldn't necessarily be a particularly helpful exercise. (Although, maybe there are ways it could be made appropriate.) It's attention to our judgements that really matters, especially our value-judgements and whether we lapse into placing too much importance on things outside of our direct control or not. In doing this, don't try to force yourself to change. You may find that many things change just by being observed. However, you may also find that you can simply step back from certain trains of thought or actions, from the outset, and choose not to go along with them or waste your time on them. Sometimes, less is more. This strategy may help you save time and energy throughout the day, by reducing the frequency and duration of unnecessary activities and, in a sense, simplifying your life. It starts with self-observation, though, and noticing what you're actually doing, from moment to moment, as you're doing it.

That's the theme that runs through this course. It might seem a bit challenging or paradoxical at first but we're confident it will come to make more sense to you if you persevere with the practical exercises each day and, perhaps more importantly, if you engage in discussion with the other participants about the "big questions" we've prepared for each week.

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## The Basic Concept

There are lots of components to this course but we want to keep the focus on one or two key things. So the main question we'd like you to keep asking yourself and reflecting upon throughout the first week, and beyond if you like, is this:

**“What aspects of this situation are under my direct control?”**

One of the central recurring themes of Stoicism is the importance of continually distinguishing between what is “up to us”, in the sense of being under our direct control and what is not. We might call this fundamental dichotomy the "Stoic fork".

## The Stoic "Manual"

If you're new to Stoicism, it may come as a bit of surprise to discover that there's literally a manual, dating from the Roman Imperial period, designed to teach Stoicism as a way of life to novice students. It's called the Handbook (*Encheiridion*) and consists of the key sayings of the famous Stoic teacher Epictetus, compiled by his student, Arrian. If you want to learn more about Stoicism, it's one of the first things you should consider reading. We're just going to get you started, though, by focusing on what the initial passages say, because they're arguably the foundation of everything that follows. The very first sentence makes it pretty clear where Stoic students should begin their training:

Some things are "up to us", or under our direct control, whereas others are not up to us. *Encheiridion*, 1

In the next sentence, Epictetus explained that Stoics mean what is "up to us" in the sense of being completely voluntary and within our sphere of control. In a word, as he puts it, this means our actions. That includes our external behaviour but also certain mental acts, such as voluntarily judging something to be desirable or undesirable. Everything else is only under our control indirectly, as a consequence of our actions, which means that other factors can always intervene to thwart our intentions. Those things, which are not our actions, are referred to as "externals" or "indifferent" things. The Stoics often sum up the most significant and problematic externals as: health, wealth, and reputation. Pain and pleasure are also "indifferent" in the sense of being things that happen to us, rather than things we do. When our voluntary actions are good, that's called "virtue", and when they're bad, that's called "vice". So acting with virtue rather than vice, in this sense, is the main thing that is "up to us". Indeed, we're told the Stoics sometimes defined the fundamental goal of life as "living in accord with virtue".

Epictetus goes on to say that the root cause of most emotional suffering is placing too much value on these external things, on things beyond our direct control. Becoming overly-attached to externals makes us all the "slaves" of our passions, he says. That's definitely something worth thinking about, isn't it? The Stoics therefore repeatedly advised their students to notice when they were experiencing unhealthy emotions or desires, feelings they might want to change. When this happens we're to pause for a moment and try to grasp very clearly what aspects of the situation are entirely within our sphere of control.

Their advice seems like it must, ultimately, have been the inspiration for the famous *Serenity Prayer* used by Alcoholics Anonymous and many modern counsellors and therapists:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
The courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.

The Stoics similarly advise us that "wisdom" consists in making a clear distinction between things under our control and things not. However, they make it more explicit that the only things we can truly change in life are our own thoughts and actions. When we do influence other things, including other people, it's always indirectly, as a result of our own action. Placing absolute importance on the nature of our own character and voluntary actions encourages us to focus attention on the very centre of our sphere of responsibility, the point from which they arise.

Doing so obviously requires paying close attention to your own judgements and actions, throughout the day, which is the subject we'll turn to shortly, after a brief practical exercise and example...

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## Two-Column Exercise

Take moment right now to think of a situation that seems to make you upset or irritated... Practice distinguishing between the aspects under your direct control, and those not. You could draw two-columns on a piece of paper headed "control" and "not control", or use the HTML form on the website.

First consider how much control you have over the situation, while thinking about it right now. Probably not much because it's in the past, right? But remember that you do still have some control over the way you think about it and respond, and that, in turn, may affect how you feel about it.

### **1. What's the problem you want to evaluate?**

Try to describe the troubling scenario you're imagining as concisely and objectively as possible.

### **2. How much control do you have over the situation?**

Rate your control over the situation as a whole, including your reactions, from 0-100%.

### **3. Why don't you have zero control?**

If you rated it above zero, then what aspects are actually under your direct control? Try to draw up a short list.

### **4. Why don't you have complete control?**

If you rated it below ten, then what aspects are not under your direct control? Try to draw up a short list.

### **5. What would happen if you adopted a more "philosophical" (Stoic) attitude toward the things beyond your control?**

Consider how it might change things, over the longer-term, if you were to consistently focus on doing the things that are up to you to the best of your ability while completely accepting that other aspects are simply beyond your direct control.

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## Daily Exercise

This exercise is designed to help you ground your awareness in the "here and now" and view your experiences from a detached and objective perspective, as the ancient Stoics described.

Your main goal during the first week is to develop more self-awareness and insight into your own thoughts, actions, and feelings, and how they're related to each other. You'll be trying to do this more or less continually, from moment to moment, throughout each day. That will mean developing greater "mindfulness" of your own judgements and actions, and a greater awareness of what's happening "here and now" in the present moment, as it happens.

### **Mindfulness of the Present Moment**

You can develop greater self-awareness and attention to the present moment by using the following mindfulness exercise derived from Gestalt Therapy. You're going to practice the art of patiently observing and describing your own experiences from a detached perspective. The ancient Stoics employed a number of similar exercises, involving attention to the "here and now". These often involved adopting an attitude comparable to that of a "natural philosopher", suspending any value-judgements or emotive rhetoric, and patiently describing the observable qualities of physical objects in completely neutral and objective language.

- Begin with your eyes open, although you may close them in a moment if you wish to do so. You might want to take a minute just to settle down and bring your attention to the present moment.
- Say to yourself, silently in your mind: “Right now I am aware of...” Keep repeating that phrase and putting your own ending it, as you slowly describe your experiences.
- Try to suspend any value judgements and just describe specific things that you notice, as concisely and objectively as possible.
- Use the tactic of putting things into words to make your attention linger for longer than normal on the features of the present moment that you experience.
- Take your time and proceed very slowly and patiently; don't rush to describe everything. Just notice what comes to your attention.

Let go of the past, the future, and the realm of imagination, for a few minutes, and train yourself to remain with the present moment and the reality of your immediate surroundings. Allow yourself to notice what you're actually doing right now, from moment to moment. What do you think the long-term consequence of training yourself in this way, and getting good at staying with the "here and now" for a while, might be? You don't have to keep doing this forever, but it might be useful to be able to do it whenever you choose to, and to spend more time noticing your own experiences and what's going through your mind in response to them. In a sense, you're learning to make the unconscious conscious, or at least to become more aware of yourself and what you're actually doing.

The more you practice doing this simple exercise the more you'll develop a number of basic psychological skills, which will provide a solid foundation for the rest of the training that follows. The first time you do this you might want to spend a few minutes away from distractions. However, as you practice you should find that you can do it more or less in any situation. You could be sitting on a bus, pausing for a couple of minutes while sitting at your computer, or relaxing in a bath. Some people have told me that they take time to do this exercise during the commercial breaks between segments of a television programme, or even while sitting on the lavatory. It doesn't really require any additional time or effort during your day – you just need to remember to do it. So try to do this as often as possible for as long as seems helpful. We'd recommend doing it for a minimum of 3-4 minutes, at least once per day during the first week of the training. If you want to do it more frequently, for longer periods, or throughout the subsequent weeks of the training, though, that's absolutely fine. Later in this lesson we'll look at some ways to prompt or remind yourself to practice mindfulness throughout the day, in case you forget...

**Go ahead and do it right now!**

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## Example & Questions

Here's an example of what this exercise might be like in practice...

I'm sitting typing these words at my computer right now, of course. I'm going to pause right now to do the exercise. I'll keep an eye on the clock on my desk and aim to do it for about 3-4 minutes but I'm not going to worry too much about the time...

Well, how did I get on? I actually got interrupted by someone - which I didn't expect - but after they'd left I just started again. I got a little distracted thinking about what I would write but once I noticed that I just brought my attention back to my experiences in the present moment. I said things like “Right now I'm aware of the ticking of the clock... Now I'm aware of the rise and fall of my breath... Now I'm aware of the sunlight on the desk... Now I'm aware of a twinge in my lower back... Now I'm aware of the sound of traffic outside...”, etc. It took some effort, some self-discipline, to let go of thoughts that threatened to take my



attention away from the present moment but one way to do that is to say "Right now I notice that I'm starting to think about work...", to step back from the train of thought, and look on it as just another activity happening in the present moment...

Afterwards, I'm left noticing more of what's going on around me for a while, although that's not the main goal of the exercise. The key thing is that I've practiced taking a step back from my experiences and observing them, as they happen "here and now", in a more detached way.

## Questions for Reflection

After doing the exercise, please take a few minutes to carefully think over the following questions:

- How else could you help yourself to become more mindful of your own judgements and actions throughout the day?
- To what extent do your thoughts and actions change just by being observed more carefully?
- What are the pros and cons of being more tuned into the "here and now"?
- What might be the long-term consequences of training yourself in this way each day?
- What's genuinely under your control during these exercises, and what isn't

Marcus Aurelius explains, for example, that for Stoics everything is, in a sense, "indifferent" except our own mental activity, because this is ultimately our locus of control in life. He goes on to spell out that because our own past and future actions are not within our immediate control, they are also classed as "indifferent" (Meditations, 6.32). According to the Stoics, from moment to moment, only our own current thoughts and actions can be said to be intrinsically important – everything else lies outside our direct control in the "here and now".

If you like, with this in mind, pause for a few minutes longer, and repeat the same exercise again, before continuing...

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## Self-Monitoring

Modern research on therapy often begins with some form of self-monitoring, such as a record sheet in which you note down your thoughts, actions, and feelings in separate columns, in response to upsetting situations. You may wish to employ a similar method if you have time and you're experiencing difficult feelings such as worry or anger, etc. However, for the purposes of this study, we're going to recommend that most people employ one of the simplest approaches used today: keeping a simple count or tally. Epictetus actually told his students to do something similar, keeping a count from day to day of the number of times when feelings such as anger became a problem for them (Discourses, 2.18).

You might do this by literally keeping a tally in your diary, on a piece of card, or your mobile phone. Some people like to use a mechanical or electronic counter, concealed in their pocket, such as those used by doormen, golfers, or knitters. An added bonus with this minimalist approach to self-monitoring is that it's more confidential. Even if someone else saw your tally, they would probably have no idea what it meant unless they knew what you were counting.

What should you count? Anything you might want to change, basically. Epictetus' advice was to keep a tally of what the Stoics called the "passions", which includes both unhealthy emotions and desires. You might also want to record whenever you engage in some "bad" habit or external behaviour that you want to change, including things you say aloud or even things you fail to do.

Some examples:

- How many times you notice yourself becoming upset at anything, in general.
- Starting to worry or fretting about some worst-case scenario in the future.
- Ruminating about the past or getting depressed.
- Feeling your anger rising, becoming irritated or annoyed.
- Experiencing an urge or craving that you want to overcome, such as for chocolate or cigarettes.
- Beginning to engage in a habit you want to break, like fingernail biting, or compulsively apologising.
- Getting anxious, nervous, or physically tense.
- Saying something inappropriate, negative, overly-apologetic, submissive, or hostile to someone else.
- Avoiding saying or doing something, or failing to do something properly, such as failing to be assertive.

This is a useful way of measuring your progress. However, there's also a more subtle and potentially more important reason for keeping count in this way. It will often help you develop greater self-awareness and detachment, particularly if you manage to spot undesirable habits at the earliest possible stage, before they have a chance to develop. Catching habits early makes it easier to “nip them in the bud”, sometimes just by choosing to mentally “take a step back”, as we’ll see later. We call this spotting the “early-warning signs” of unhealthy emotions or behaviour and gaining psychological “distance” from them. You’ve been practicing viewing your own experiences from a detached, objective perspective during the “mindfulness” exercise this week. Approach keeping your tally in a similar way. Each time you notice something and add it to the count, pause for a few moments and view it as if you were an impartial scientist calmly studying and recording someone else’s thoughts, actions, and feelings. Research shows that when approached carefully and systematically, self-monitoring of this kind can, all by itself, reduce the frequency and intensity of emotional distress and bad habits. This part of the training should also take virtually no time as it’s very quick and easy to keep a simple tally. In fact, if you find yourself reducing the time spent worrying or engaging in bad habits, then you’ll almost certainly save a lot of time each day.

Modern therapists might advise clients to spot the early-warning signs of anger and to take a "time-out" rather than "acting out" their feelings through aggressive behaviour. The Stoics often gave very similar advice, e.g., the first Roman Emperor, Augustus, reputedly had anger-management problems and was taught by his Stoic tutor Athenodorus to spot his temper rising and pause for a few moments, while reciting the Greek alphabet, before saying or doing anything he might regret. This sort of strategy is often misused as a way of trying to suppress feelings, though, which is something you should be careful to avoid doing. Accept the presence of your feelings or bad habits, with "indifference", but pause, and take a step back from them rather than going along with them and allowing yourself to act on them impulsively.

If you want to do so, you can also try employing the slightly more complex self-monitoring technique we developed for Stoic Week 2013, based on modern Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). There's a Stoic Self-Monitoring Record Sheet you can download and print, which will help you monitor your individual thoughts, actions and feelings, and the relationship between them.

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## Download Audio Recording

This MP3 audio recording contains some simple relaxation followed by a script describing basic Stoic values and attitudes, which you should contemplate and mentally-rehearse each day. The Stoics didn't expect people just to agree with them but to rationally evaluate the truth of their doctrines for themselves. So we assume there will be two ways of using this recording:

1. If you're new to Stoicism you may just want to listen to and contemplate the ideas in a detached manner, giving yourself a chance to critically-evaluate them later.
2. If you've come to agree with some, or all, of these ideas, or share similar values, you might want to use this as an opportunity to absorb them more deeply.

The Stoics believed it was important to continually remind themselves of their core philosophical doctrines and values so that they would come to gradually permeate their character and behaviour. Marcus Aurelius did this by writing down hundreds of memorable sayings, which formulate related Stoic ideas in different ways, thereby immersing himself in contemplation of their meaning. Some people find it extremely helpful just to relax and listen contemplatively to some basic Stoic attitudes being described.

## How to Use the Recording

Just press play on the embedded audio player on the course webpage to listen to the recording on your computer. We recommend that you use headphones for this. You can also right-click to download the Stoic Attitudes Meditation exercise audio recording in MP3 format, so that you can play it back on your computer, mobile device, or MP3 player.

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## Cues & Reminders

Setting aside a regular time to practice "formal" mindfulness exercises is probably going to be essential. However, you shouldn't confine your practice to a few minutes each day. Try to practice "informally" by being constantly more mindful of what you're doing in the present moment, throughout the whole day. Epictetus asked his students the rhetorical question: Is there anything you can't do better by doing it with greater self-awareness? (Okay, maybe sleeping, but not much else.) Self-awareness isn't self-consciousness. We tend to speak of someone being self-conscious when they're overly-preoccupied with the importance they place on other people's perceptions of them. That's the opposite of Stoic mindfulness, which asks us to let go of attachment to things not directly "up to us", like other people's opinions, and to focus instead on whether our current patterns of thinking are healthy or not. We should continually remind ourselves to let go of trains of thought that are unhealthy, excessive, or irrational, rather than going along with them. Imagine that your troublesome thoughts are like a bus going to the wrong destination. Once you've realised where it's headed, you don't need to jump on the road in front of it and try to stop it with force... but you don't need to get on it and let yourself be taken for a ride either. You can just step back and allow it to drive on. Troublesome thoughts and feelings, impressions which pop automatically into our mind, aren't "bad" in Stoicism; they're "indifferent", and we should practice being indifferent toward indifferent things. As Epictetus and Seneca explained, even the ideal Stoic Sage may experience anxious thoughts and feelings sometimes, such as during a storm at sea, but he doesn't allow himself to be carried away by them.

Finding or creating cues in your environment to practice the mindfulness exercise we described earlier will help you to develop this ability to detach from automatic thoughts, which modern psychologists sometimes call "cognitive distance". For example, you might do this at certain times of the day, for a few minutes, or whenever you're about to begin a new task, or move to a new location, during the day. You may also find it useful to create reminders or "cues" for yourself to engage in Stoic practices, or just remember your goals during the course. The Stoics and other schools of philosophy appear to have used images of their founders for this purpose, such as the gem reputedly depicting Zeno of Citium shown on the first page of this lesson.

## Desktop Wallpapers

You'll find a folder of downloadable images after this lesson with some Stoic-themed computer wallpaper images designed by Rocio De Torres and others. (Also a Stoic infographic provided by Michel Daw.) You might want to use these wallpapers on your desktop computer or laptop during the course, to act as a cue to practice mindfulness and act in the service of your core values.

Make it your goal to be continually aware of your own actions in the present moment, throughout each day. Keep count of unhelpful thoughts or feelings, and step back from them rather than indulging in them and going along with them. In particular, keep an eye on whether your thoughts place more importance on things (objects, people, events) outside your direct control than upon the way you deal with them, which is where your true locus of control resides. Think of this as a basic training in mental self-discipline and your first step on the ladder of achieving Stoic resilience.

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## What Next?

You've made it. You've finished the lesson for this week. Now it's time to start putting things into practice!

Remember, one of the most common mistakes people make is just to read self-help material without testing it out in practice. The ancient Stoics constantly warn us against becoming lazy armchair philosophers. There's no better time to start changing things than right now. The Stoic gauntlet has been thrown down before us. It's up to us whether we choose to pick it up or just stand and look at it. It's time for you to start engaging with the material, interacting with the rest of the community, and testing what you've been reading out in practice – in the laboratory of your own experience.

Your first step should be to visit the Discussion Forum, as soon as you're ready, and post your thoughts on the question for this week:

What do you think would be the pros and cons of living a life in which you take excellence of character (Stoic "virtue") to be the only thing that's intrinsically good?

As you read this, think it over, and type your responses... do it with greater attention to the present moment and observe your own character, attitude, and actions. What's "up to you" about this training and what's not? What would it mean to approach the course itself with a more "philosophical" attitude and to make use of it wisely?

Here's a second question for you to consider, and discuss, if you want:

How do you think Stoicism might be adapted to suit our modern world-view and way of life?

Go to the course Discussion Forum now and look for the topic entitled "Week One Question". When you've done that, take a look at some of the other resources in this section. If there's anything whatsoever you could use help with, either technical stuff or the course content, please don't hesitate to email the course facilitator.

# Introduction

## **Welcome to Week One of Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training!**

You've made it to the second week. Well done!

The hardest part is now *over* for most of you. People say it takes more fuel to start an engine than to keep it running – that's certainly true when it comes to changing *habits*. You're just beginning to conquer your old habits and develop new ones, which takes a lot more self-discipline at the start but usually becomes much *easier* with practice. Next you're going to build on the solid foundation you created in Week One.

This section will challenge you to live in accord with Stoic values (virtues) and to set consistent goals in your daily life. It focuses more on your intentions and actions, i.e., your behaviour throughout the day. The ancient Stoics viewed their ethics as the very *cornerstone* of their philosophy. Their conception of what it means to live a good life was what distinguished the Stoics from other ancient schools of philosophy. Epictetus summed up the key doctrines of Stoicism to his students as follows:

Of things that are, some are good, and some are bad, and some are indifferent: the good then are virtues, and the things which participate in virtues; and bad things the opposite; and the indifferent things are wealth, health, reputation. – *Discourses*, 2.9

The goal of life in ancient Stoicism was “living in accord with virtue”, living *virtuously*. Indeed, they went as far as to say that virtue was the *only* truly good thing in life, although other things may be of some practical value. Contemporary behavioural psychologists talk about “valued living” as the key to overcoming many common psychological problems, especially depression. We're going to combine these ideas: the ancient and the modern. The more-recent term “valued living” probably sounds less *pompous* than “living virtuously”, so sometimes we'll use that. Nevertheless, to keep the classical connection, it perhaps helps link this with what the Stoics would have called “living well”, “living in accord with virtue”, “living wisely”, etc. That's what this week is all about...

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## Overview of Week Two

This is the overall plan for Week Two...

1. **Lesson.** You're going to learn about a fundamental distinction between two different *types* of value, “good” things and “preferred” things.
2. **Daily exercise.** This meditation is designed to help you find time to contemplate and connect with the concept of virtue, throughout the day.
3. **Audio recording.** This short (4 min.) recording will help you prepare for the day ahead, by planning your goals and actions, in accord with your core values, while employing the Stoic acceptance of potential setbacks.
4. **Self-monitoring.** You're going to try to monitor how well you manage to live in accord with your values, your conception of virtue, throughout the day, and how you spend your time.
5. **Discussion questions.** “What constitutes true human ‘virtue’ or makes a person genuinely admirable? What qualities might define someone's character as truly good or bad?”
6. **Optional extras!** You'll find a variety of additional materials in Week Two, below this lesson.

This week builds on Week One, and you should continue some of your Week One practices if you're able to do so, particularly trying to live more centred in the “here and now”. You'll find these things complementary because,

in a sense, *virtue* resides in the present moment. You can only bring your character and actions into line with your core values if you remain mindful of them, from moment to moment. You may also find it helpful to continue listening to the Stoic Attitudes recording each day, if you have time to do so.

The common thread running through all four weeks is an emphasis on the distinction between things “up to us”, or under our direct control, and things not. The Stoics said that, in a nutshell, only our own actions are truly “up to us” and everything else is to some extent in the hands of fate. When we act well or badly, that’s “virtue” or “vice”. Everything else is ultimately “indifferent” with regard to our flourishing, they argued, although some external things or outcomes are certainly “preferred” over others, as we’ll see. These ideas can be a bit tricky at first but don’t worry as we’ll be exploring them together in the discussion forums. You don’t need to understand much about Stoic Ethics to benefit from the exercises that follow, although it helps to provide a rationale for the type of exercises you’re going to be doing.

If there's anything you don't understand or get stuck with, let us know immediately, by posting on the Course Discussion Forum or emailing the course facilitator, and we'll do our very best to help you.

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## The Basic Concept

The Stoics had a specific ethical theory, and definition of virtue. They believed that by nature humans value certain things, although most people are confused about how to apply these values consistently to daily life. Animals and human infants value *survival*. As we acquire reason and language, though, adult humans gradually come to identify with and value certain character traits more highly. Eventually, reflection may lead to us to value “virtues” such as wisdom and integrity as the highest good, indeed the Stoics believed that virtue is the *only* true good. This transformation in our values, toward the love of wisdom and virtue, is started by nature, the Stoics thought. However, it is then left “up to us”, to be completed (or not) by our own volition. Virtue is what makes us fundamentally “whole and complete” as human beings, by allowing us to “ripen” and flourish in accord with our rational nature, and as part of the community of mankind.

The majority of ancient philosophers actually agreed with the Stoic view that developing virtue is central to the goal of life, although they didn’t go as far as the Stoics in claiming this was the *only* thing required for a good life. The Stoics wanted to be able to say that if someone is truly wise and virtuous, their life is as good as it gets, no matter how unfortunate they may be in other respects, such as being poor, weak, or outcast. Socrates’ life, they would say, would not have been fundamentally *improved* if he had somehow possessed greater wealth and social status. To have a good life, they might say, it suffices to be a good person. This hard line on the nature of the “good life” was one of the most important and distinctive aspects of Stoic Ethics but also one of the most controversial. It’s something we’ll need to evaluate carefully over time.

Likewise, some of the more-specific moral views of the ancient Stoics, about matters like religion, sexuality and slavery, reflect the historical period and culture in which they lived, and may be very different from the values of most modern readers. However, they also believed:

1. That most reasonable people, on reflection, share fundamentally similar preconceptions about morality but differ when it comes to applying them in practice.

2. That being committed to living in accord with virtue was the most important aspect of morality, even if we sometimes differ over the correct course of action in specific situations.

So don't worry! In this course, we're not going to try to indoctrinate you into ancient Stoic values. However, we're going to ask you to carry out a two-fold experiment:

1. **Values clarification:** Reflect on your own fundamental values more rationally and philosophically, and try to clarify what you consider to be the most important things in life.
2. **Living virtuously:** Try to live your life, over the next three weeks, more consistently in accord with your own core values.

Following Socrates, the Stoics believed the most important use of philosophy was to reflect upon and critically evaluate our own conception of what it means to live a good life, or to live wisely. That can take the form of clarifying our values by reflecting on them, carefully defining them and checking their consistency with each other, and with our own actions. This aspect is sometimes neglected in modern discussions of Stoicism, which focus on its "self-help" or "therapeutic" applications. Ironically, though, modern ["third-wave" cognitive-behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) now places considerable emphasis on "values clarification" and "valued living" and cautions against placing too much importance on avoiding or reducing anxiety and other unpleasant feelings.

It's a curious fact that despite cultural differences, when asked to clarify their values through reflection, people often (but not always) do tend to converge on surprisingly similar conclusions, at least when speaking in general terms. Most (but not all) people tend to agree, for example, that harming others for pleasure is, in some sense, morally wrong. For our purposes, right now, it probably doesn't matter if everyone agrees but you may find it interesting to discuss your conception of virtue with others in the forum, and swap notes. There's a great deal to be gained by talking collaboratively with other people about your core values in life.

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## Living Virtuously

Ambition means tying your well-being to what other people say or do.

Self-indulgence means tying it to the things that happen to you.

Sanity means tying it to your own actions. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

There's an *aspect* of this Stoic theory of value we'd like you to adopt, though, as a kind of behavioural and philosophical *experiment*. It turns on a crucial distinction between two different types of motivation. Today, behavioural psychologists express something similar as follows:

1. External "goals" are the outcomes or consequences of your actions, such as losing weight, getting a job, finding someone you love, etc.
2. Internal "values" are qualities of your own character or actions that you value, such as exhibiting friendship, integrity, generosity, patience, or perseverance, etc.

The outcomes or "goals" of our actions may or may not be achieved, and we anticipate getting them in the future, which leaves our mind somewhat in suspense. Inner "values" are qualities of actions themselves, and we have them *immediately*, in the "here and now", as soon as we start acting in the right way. That also means that the

pursuit of such external things can, theoretically, end, when we get them, although then we tend to move onto something else. The pursuit of character-based values, however, never really *ends* in the same way – there’s no end to “being a good friend” or “living with integrity”.

This is quite similar to the distinction made in ancient Stoicism between:

1. *Externals*, such as health, wealth, and reputation, which are merely “preferred”.
2. *Virtues*, such as wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline, which are considered the chief “good” in life.

You’ve already practiced distinguishing carefully between what’s “up to you” and what is not. For the ancient Stoics, only what’s under your direct control, only your own acts of will, can be virtuous or vicious, i.e., intrinsically good or bad. The Stoics refer to external events as “indifferent” and view them. Nevertheless, they “prefer” some outcomes to others, they just don’t “demand” that things turn out as they prefer but try to pursue these things “lightly” and with detachment. To paraphrase slightly, the early Stoics joked that although the wise man believes that virtue is the only *true* good in life, he can still “prefer” to own a bar of soap and have a bath occasionally rather than remain dirty. (They actually refer to the ancient practice of [cleaning with oil](#).)

Current behavioural therapy approaches for clinical depression, and many other problems, encourage clients to experiment for several weeks by paying more attention to their “values” in this sense, meaning the quality of their own actions, rather than *external* goals or outcomes. As we’ll see, this can be done by actively planning and scheduling even small periods of additional time each day to carry out activities that are considered more *intrinsically* rewarding, and in line with your core values, such as cultivating “virtue”. Once again, it doesn’t necessarily take more time overall to do this, and you may actually save time by reducing the frequency and duration of activities that serve no purpose, in relation to your core values, each day, such as procrastination, etc.

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## What is Virtue?

For I go around doing nothing but persuading young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: “Wealth does not bring about virtue, but virtue makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively.” – Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*, 30a-b

To re-iterate something mentioned earlier: the word “virtue” is being used here in the *ancient* sense. It means *excelling*, flourishing as a human being, and having “strengths” of character, or important “positive qualities” such as wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline. It’s a broader concept than the Christian virtues many people are more familiar with. There’s no modern English word that perfectly conveys what the Stoics meant, “virtues” is the closest, but a phrase like “excellent character traits” or “personal strengths” might be more accurate. It’s perhaps not a good sign that modern society doesn’t even have very good language express this idea!

We’d like you to clarify your own values with regard to your character and actions, i.e., your own conception of “virtue”. Then we’d like you to practice making these positive strengths or virtues your absolute priority over the next few weeks and monitoring your ability to act consistently with them, and cultivate them in yourself. You might refer to that as a form of “self-improvement”, which is in a sense both moral and therapeutic, in that it deals with your own core values but does so in a way that’s likely to improve your quality of life. However, be under no illusions, “valued living” can be difficult and may mean sacrificing other things in life. It may also mean challenging your old habits, moving out of your “comfort zone” and even enduring anxiety and discomfort, or sacrificing short-term pleasures, for the sake of your own deeper values.



The Stoics believed that humans have “virtue”, and flourish, when they achieve moral wisdom and act with justice, benevolence, and fairness toward others. They also believed that in order to live *wisely* and act *justly*, we must conquer our own contrary fears and desires, through the two ancient virtues of self-mastery: *courage* and *self-discipline*. These were known throughout the centuries as the four “cardinal virtues”: *wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance*. Similar “virtues” still feature today in modern research on the psychology of personal strengths. However, you can just treat these as *examples* of what’s meant. As long as you’ve got the general idea, we’re going to encourage you to *think for yourself* about the meaning of “virtue” in terms of your own core values in life.

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## Values Clarification Exercise

Let’s begin by considering your own values very carefully. We will start right now but this process can take patience and effort, as you work through your thoughts and try to apply your values in daily life. So think of “values clarification” as an ongoing process and try to reconsider these things each day. Although it can be challenging at times to question yourself so deeply, this has a reputation for being an exercise many people find extremely enlightening and rewarding. It’s a modern echo of the Socratic approach to ethics, which centred on the use of rational questioning and reflection, and the attempt to expose and resolve inconsistencies in our thinking. In the *Discourses* of Epictetus, we can read transcribed conversations showing him employing a similar “Socratic” method in debate with his students.

In a sense, we’re facing the ultimate question... What’s the most important thing in life, to you? What are your deepest values? Can you actually put them into words and clarify them in your own mind? When they’re clear in your mind, your deepest values can give you a sense of direction in life and help to define your personal philosophy. However, if you’re unclear or confused about them, then you may potentially feel quite *lost* and frustrated in life. It’s within your power to gain further clarity, through your own reflections, and discussions with others, though. So how much time have you spent recently exploring your own conception of the most important things in life? How much time each day do you spend living in accord with these values? Where are you heading? What sort of *person* are you becoming and what direction is your life taking?

To what use then am I putting my own soul? Never fail to ask yourself this question and to cross-examine yourself thus: “What relation do I have to this part of me they call the Ruling Faculty? And whose soul do I have now anyway? The soul of a child? Of a youth? [...] Of a tyrant? Of a grazing animal? Of a wild beast? – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.11

Try using the following questions now to clarify your core values and conception of virtue...

### Direct Questions

- What’s ultimately the most important thing in life to you?
- What do you want your life to “stand for” or “be about”?
- What would you most like your life to be remembered for after you’ve died?
- What sort of thing do you *most* want to spend your life doing?
- What sort of person do you most want to be in your various relationships and roles in life, e.g., as a parent, a friend, at work, and in life generally?

You should keep returning to these very fundamental questions. Perhaps even talk to your friends about them, if possible. If you’re ready, the next page contains many *more* questions, to help you take your philosophical self-examination further...

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## More Values Clarification

These questions are more *indirect*. That means some of them may not make sense to you or may not be helpful, whereas others will hit the nail on the head. So you may be selective about which ones seem most appropriate to spend time considering right now. If you don't have time, write down six key questions from this list, or bookmark this page on the internet. You can come back to these questions and spend time really contemplating one of them in depth each day, if you want...

### Modelling Questions

- Think in general terms of the types of people you admire. What qualities make them admirable?
- Think of three specific people, real or fictional, that you admire. What qualities make them admirable?
- Try to imagine the ideal Stoic Sage, someone perfectly wise and good. What virtues would they possess?

### Chain Questions

Pick some examples of things you currently spend your time voluntarily doing, such as visiting friends, or going to work, etc. Ask yourself what you're trying to achieve by doing those things? For the "sake of what" do you do them? Keep repeating this question and probing further in the direction of your underlying values. You may find this sheds light on your priorities in life. Alternatively, it may lead you to question the importance of some of the things you're actually doing. (Aristotle described a similar technique.)

### Perspective-Shifting Questions

- If you knew for certain that you only had one month left to live, how would you want to spend the remaining time before you die?
- If you didn't have to contend with anxiety, or other uncomfortable feelings, what would you choose to spend your time doing?
- What would you choose to spend your life doing, if you were free to do anything, and if you knew you couldn't fail and were always guaranteed to succeed?
- If you had *one* opportunity to give advice to your child about life, what would you tell them is most important?

### Additional Questions for Reflection

- What do your answers to these questions tell you about your core values in life?
- What do they tell you about the type of person you might want to be or the virtues you'd like to possess?
- How do the virtues compare to each other?
- Which, if any, is most important?
- Fundamentally, is there just one, or are there many virtues?

These questions may seem overwhelming to some people. Just be patient and reflect on one at a time, if that's easier. Keep your purpose in mind, though. How *e/se* could you really help yourself clarify your core values and conception of virtue?

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## Praiseworthy versus Desirable versus Healthy

Here's another values clarification exercise, based on Stoic Ethics. The Stoics believed that virtue was fundamentally synonymous with a number of other qualities, which generally fall under two broad headings:

1. Virtue is *healthy*, beneficial, rewarding, helpful, or good "for" us

## 2. Virtue is *honourable*, meaning admirable, praiseworthy, and even “beautiful”

These are similar to what’s meant today by something being “therapeutic” and “moral”, and it comes as a surprise to many people that these two dimensions of life are so closely entwined in Stoic Ethics.

For instance, here Epictetus argues that we all, on reflection, share the preconception of virtue as something both beneficial and praiseworthy.

For which of us does not take it that a good thing is advantageous and worthy of being chosen, and something we should seek and pursue in every circumstance. Which of us does not take it that justice is something honourable and fitting? (*Discourses*, 1.22)

He goes on to say that he believes we can all agree, at least in broad strokes, that “evil” is something “harmful” and to be thoroughly avoided in life. Again, let’s not assume the Stoics were correct but try to explore the question further for ourselves. Whether or not we agree with them, or even arrive at a firm conclusion, this will probably be a valuable philosophical exercise...

Draw up *three columns* on a sheet of paper, headed “desirable”, “healthy”, and “praiseworthy”. It’s important to do the columns one at a time. Start with the first question below and try to make a list in the first column, then proceed to complete the other two columns based on the remaining questions.

1. **Desirable:** What things do you find most *desirable* in life or spend most time pursuing?
2. **Healthy:** What do you think are the *healthiest* character traits a person can possess? For example, what qualities might make someone emotionally resilient and contribute to mental health?
3. **Praiseworthy:** What qualities do you find most *admirable* or praiseworthy in other people? Consider real people you know, historical figures, or even fictional or legendary characters.

Now pause to consider your lists. Are the qualities in the three columns the same? If not, why are they different? What are the main qualities that might be both *healthy* and *praiseworthy*? What would happen if you also *desired* them more than anything else and sought them out consistently in your life?

You may want to return to this exercise throughout the week, and give yourself time to keep exploring it from different perspectives.

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## Valued Living & Activity Scheduling

Clarifying your values is ultimately pretty pointless unless you’re *acting* in accord with them, and that often means changing your behaviour, which can take courage and self-discipline.

Try to think of specific ways in which you can live more consistently in accord with your core values. Most people find that they need to identify quite specific activities in order to actually change anything. However, you may find it helpful to brainstorm a list of both general strategies or categories of things you can do, such as spending more time with your children, and very specific activities that would fall under those headings, such as preparing lunch together. You may also want to consider two ways of living in accord with values or virtues:

1. *Acting* consistently with a virtue, such as ways of exhibiting wisdom or fairness in your actions, etc.
2. *Cultivating* a virtue within yourself, such as spending time reading about good role-models or meditating on what it means to be a good friend or parent, etc.

It may also be that you're *already acting* in ways that are very consistent with your core values but nevertheless failing to make the connection in your mind. Being conscious of the link between your actions and values can be very important for some people, otherwise we can easily lose sight of the ultimate reason for our actions, *why* we're doing the things we do each day. Regaining the connection between our actions and values can make subtle but important differences to the way we go about doing things. For example, you may work on a computer all day because your circumstances make this a prudent way to support your family and you consider that part of being a good spouse or parent. It may be easy to lose sight of that core value, though, and allow the task and its external goals, such as finishing work on time, to predominate.

Each morning plan *at least one specific activity* that you can engage in that will allow you to live more consistently in accord with your core values, and be the person you want to be in life. This week's audio recording will help you to do that. At the end of the day, you'll be reviewing how well you've done by rating yourself in terms of your core values or virtues. Remember that this usually consists in making *very small steps* to begin with – a small practical change can often have a big significance in life.

The Stoics employed an important psychological strategy called the “reserve clause”, which consisted of undertaking every action with the implicit caveat: “if nothing prevents me.” (Sometimes, in theological language they would say “Fate permitting” or “God willing”.) That's because we can't guarantee that we'll succeed and our future actions and their outcomes are therefore viewed with detached indifference, as merely “preferred”. In practice, this means we should be prepared in advance to accept failure with equanimity. As the Stoics liked to point out, obstacles or setbacks to virtuous action merely provide *another opportunity* to exercise a different sort of virtue, such as patience, perseverance, or Stoic acceptance. Notice that this is yet another form of the basic Stoic distinction we met in Week One, between things “up to us” and things not. Our intention and commitment to act in a certain way is up to us, but whether not we *succeed* may be partly down to external circumstances.

How *else* might you help yourself to live each day more consistently in accord with your conception of virtue? You can share your ideas with others in the discussion forum.

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## Self-Monitoring

In addition to the tally you're keeping of unhealthy feelings and desires, you're going to simply add another very quick and easy measure. At the end of each day, give yourself *marks out of ten for virtue!*

That might sound very simplistic but it actually works quite well in practice as a rough subjective measure. You can always make the process more sophisticated if you want by rating your actions in specific situations or giving yourself a *percentage* score across several different character strengths, such as “integrity”, “self-discipline”, and “friendship”, etc. However, to begin with, you may find it suffices to use the simplest approach and just rate yourself from 0-10. You'll find this much easier to do, of course, if you managed to set specific goals for yourself in the morning and reviewed your actions at the end of the day. Nevertheless, we'd like everyone to try to rate themselves in this way at the end of each day.

Think of this as a kind of “learning cycle”, consisting of three stages:

1. **Beginning:** Preparing each morning by planning what you're going to do differently, to act in accord with virtue, and preparing to accept setbacks with equanimity.

2. **Middle:** Acting as best you can in accord with the plan you've created, and recalling the link between your actions and core values throughout the day, mindful of how things are going in the "here and now".
3. **End:** Reviewing how things went each evening, rating your progress, and considering what you can learn from your experience and where improvements might be made.

Setting goals and rating consistency with your most important virtues at the end of each day is a powerful way of remaining connected with a sense of value and purpose in life, as well as identifying areas for improvement. It should help you to pause more often throughout the day and ask yourself: "How does this fit with my core values?" Likewise, people often report that anticipating the review of how well they did at the end of the day makes them more mindful of their character and actions, from moment to moment. So from now on, to recap, you're going to keep a tally of your negative thoughts, feelings, or actions – the bad habits you want to change – but you're also going to rate your actions out of ten on a positive scale, measuring how well you've acted in the service of your core values.

However, sometimes you may find that you struggle to think of specific changes to your behaviour or activities you could engage in to make better use of your time each day, in line with your core values. In that case, as we'll see, you may want to set aside time simply to connect with your core values through meditation by contemplating the nature of virtue. That's something we're going to ask you to do at least once each day anyway, in your daily meditation practice...

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## Daily Exercise

This exercise will help you connect with your fundamental values by contemplating the nature of virtue, in the Stoic sense. You should do this at least once per day during this week, although you may want to do it more often or continue throughout the rest of the course.

### Contemplation of Virtue

We can call this "contemplating virtue" or "contemplating the good". It's based on a very simple and general-purpose technique developed by Prof. Herbert Benson, at Harvard Medical School. It's been found effective as a method of physiological relaxation in a number of scientific studies, although we're going to use it more for its *contemplative* value. The Benson technique mainly involves repeating a word in your mind each time you exhale. It seems that any word will do, you could just repeat the number "one". However, you may wish to repeat a word that relates to your Stoic practice. Perhaps the English word "good" or a Greek word like "*areté*" (virtue) could become your "centring device", the thing you focus your attention upon, during meditation.

1. Adopt a comfortable position, close your eyes, and take a few minutes to relax, e.g., sit in a chair with both feet flat on the floor and your hands resting on your lap.
2. When you're ready to begin, focus your attention on your breathing, breathe naturally, and mentally repeat the word "good", or some other word of your choosing, each time you exhale.
3. Repeat this for about 10-15 minutes, or longer if you prefer.
4. Don't try to block out distractions but simply notice when thoughts or feelings intrude or your mind naturally wanders, and gently return your attention to the exercise as if you're saying "So what?"

Benson's research suggested that this attitude of *detached acceptance* toward distractions was one of the most important factors in meditation. During this exercise, contemplate which aspects of your conscious experience are *under your direct control* and which are not. Practice accepting, with Stoic "indifference", any intrusive thoughts or feelings ("impressions") that automatically pop into your mind.

## Breathing with Virtue

Here's an *alternative* contemplative exercise, you may wish to try. Let's call this "breathing with virtue"...

- This exercise involves sitting quietly and comfortably, with your eyes either open or closed. Take 3-4 minutes, or more, to contemplate the *meaning* of virtue, or your most important core values.
- How could you flourish in terms of your character? What would it mean for you to improve as a human being and become more like the type of person you aspire to become?
- If it helps, you can imagine that with each inhalation of breath you're drawing more of the positive quality you want to possess into the core of your being and with each exhalation it's radiating through your body, and permeating through your actions, and being expressed toward the world around you.
- For example, you might imagine drawing more courage into your body and mind on each in-breath and strengthening that quality in your character, while imagining that on each out-breath you're feeling more courageous toward external events and other people in your life, and more able to act that way.
- Likewise, you may wish to imagine that you're breathing like someone with the virtue you want to possess, if that makes sense. For example, you could imagine that you can feel "courage" slowly spreading into the rhythm and pattern of your breathing and your bodily posture, facial expression, etc.

Don't worry if that doesn't seem natural to you, as you can always try another approach of your own. The main thing is that you take time to connect with your values, and contemplate their meaning, even if that's in the form of symbolic imagery.

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## Download Audio Recording

This short MP3 recording encourages you to prepare for the day ahead by planning actions and goals consistent with your core values, and preparing to accept setbacks with Stoic equanimity. Try to listen to it at least once, but preferably each morning, if possible.

It's meant as a reminder to prepare for the day ahead and briefly mentions a selection of Stoic techniques you can choose between:

1. Think of the sun rising and the cosmological perspective at the start of the day, to help you put things within a larger perspective.
  2. Imagine life as a festival, something to be appreciated from moment to moment, but accepted as transient and finite.
  3. Calmly and rationally plan your day ahead, in accord with your core values and conception of virtue.
  4. Plan your preferences, fate permitting, accepting the possibility of failure, even the worst-case scenario, with the Stoic "reserve clause" in mind.
  5. Imagine responding to events with the Stoic cardinal virtues (or your own conception of virtue).
  6. Meet adversity by asking yourself what resources nature has given you to rise above them and make the best of the situation.
  7. Consider how a wise philosopher like Socrates or Zeno, or anyone exhibiting virtue, might handle things.
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## What Next?

***Congratulations on completing the lesson for Week Two. Now it's time to start putting things into practice!***

You should start using the techniques covered right now, if possible, and continue with them each day throughout the following week. If you think you might have any problems adhering to the daily practices, or need any clarification, get in touch right away with the course facilitator.

However, your first step should be to visit the Discussion Forum, as soon as you're ready, and post your thoughts on the question for this week:

“What constitutes true human ‘virtue’ or makes a person genuinely admirable? What qualities might define someone's character as truly good or bad?”

As you think this over, consider how even a simple act like answering this question and commenting on the forums might relate to your personal conception of virtue. How could your interaction with others be made completely in harmony with your own core values?

Here's a second question for you to consider, and discuss, if you want:

What's the relationship between what's truly “healthy” or beneficial for you and what's genuinely “praiseworthy”? How do these compare to what's desirable or worth choosing to pursue in life?

Go to the course Discussion Forum now and look for the topic entitled "Week Two Question". When you've done that, take a look at some of the “Optional Extras” in this section. In a day or so you'll also get a follow-up message via the forum asking for an update on how you're getting on with the daily practices.

If there's anything whatsoever you could use help with, either technical stuff or the course content, please don't hesitate to email the course facilitator.

# Introduction

## ***Welcome to Week Three of Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training!***

Well done, you've made it to the third week. Now you're ready to deepen your understanding of Stoic practices.

This section involves learning to suspend value judgements when they arise and viewing automatic impressions with greater psychological detachment. It will introduce the concept of "cognitive distancing" from modern psychology to help us interpret one of the recurring themes in Stoicism: the practice of reminding ourselves that our impressions are just thoughts and not the same as the external things they represent.

You've already touched upon this concept in Week One when you trained yourself to ground your attention in the "here and now". This time you're going to build upon that foundation by learning to choose voluntarily when to set aside thoughts and when to return to thinking about them, rather than simply going along with your initial, automatic impressions.

We're also going to return once again to the basic distinction between what's "up to us" and what is not. This time you'll be looking at ways to help yourself make that distinction even when challenging situations or strong feelings and desires threaten to derail your practice.

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## Overview of Week Three

This is the overall plan for Week Three...

1. **Lesson.** This week's lesson returns to the theme of Stoic mindfulness and explores it further, building upon your attunement to the "here and now" and adding strategies for gaining "cognitive distance" by taking a step back from your automatic thoughts, following advice given by Epictetus.
2. **Daily exercise.** You're going to adapt a simple meditation technique used in modern behaviour therapy, sometimes called "leaves on a stream", to train yourself in some of the psychological skills described by the ancient Stoics.
3. **Audio recording.** This is a short (6 min.) guided evening contemplative exercise, that builds on your practice from last week, by encouraging you to review a summary of the day's events from a detached perspective, as described by Seneca.
4. **Self-monitoring.** As well as rating your consistency with your core values each day, you're also going to try to keep track, as objectively as possible, of how much time you actually spend on unhealthy trains of thought or activities.
5. **Discussion questions.** "What are the benefits of recalling what's under your control and what isn't in difficult situations? What would be the long-term consequences of blurring this distinction?"
6. **Optional extras!** You'll find a variety of additional materials in Week Three, below this lesson.

As always, if there's anything you don't understand or get stuck with, let us know immediately, by posting on the Course Discussion Forum or emailing the course facilitator, and we'll do our very best to help you.

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## The Basic Concept

This week you'll be deepening your understanding of Stoic Mindfulness by returning to some of the themes in Week One and building on the skills you've developed. The Stoics believed that we must train ourselves to make



a clear distinction between things “up to us” and things not. When we do the things up to us well, and act wisely, that’s “virtue”, which the Stoics considered the most *important* thing in life. In fact, they believed that “virtue is the only true good” and that external events, including the outcome of our actions, should, at most, be “preferred”, or sought lightly and in a somewhat detached manner, because they’re not entirely under our control.

Stoics naturally focus their attention on the “here and now” because only our actions in the present moment are “up to us” – it’s too late to change the past and the future hasn’t happened yet. The most important thing in life, our ability to act with virtue, resides squarely in the present moment, in other words. However, if we try to remain grounded in the present moment, as you did during Week One, it’s soon apparent that our thoughts and feelings can easily sweep us away from it into the past, into the future, or into the realm of fantasy. When we spot this and bring our attention back to the present moment, something strange happens... We shift from thinking “What if xyz happens?” to thinking “Right now I notice I’m having the thought ‘What if xyz happens?’” That’s a subtle but incredibly important difference. In other words, we shift from looking at the world through the lens of our thoughts to looking at our thoughts, as if they were objects. Epictetus appears to take this distinction for granted. For example, he says:

Therefore train yourself without hesitation to say in response to every harsh appearance that “you are [merely] an appearance and in no way the thing appearing.” Epictetus, *Handbook*, 1

The map is not the territory, as Alfred Korzybski put it. Thoughts are not facts. This ability to take a step back from our thoughts and view them objectively is called “cognitive distancing” in modern psychology and there’s a very large volume of evidence now showing its value for mental health. Consider the difference between being completely “lost in a story” and pausing to notice instead *how* the story is being told: the tone of voice, the words, the pace, etc., of the storytelling. What if worry, for instance, were like a story we tell ourselves? We can choose whether to lose ourselves in the story of worry or whether to pay attention instead of the *way* in which we’re worrying, as it’s happening, how long we’re spending on it, the language we’re using, etc. When we gain distance from thoughts in this way, they generally have far less hold over our feelings.

Thoughts are just “impressions” as Epictetus puts it, and not to be confused with things themselves. For the Stoics, this is especially important when it comes to thoughts containing value judgements and associated feelings. This is particularly a concern for Stoics when we get the automatic impression that something not “up to us”, or under our direct control, is supremely important in life, and we allow our emotions and desires to be swept along with that initial impression rather than questioning it from a philosophical perspective. Hence, the most famous passage in the Stoic *Handbook* says:

It is not things themselves that upset us but our judgements about these things. Epictetus, *Handbook*, 5

That quote actually became one of the fundamental slogans of modern cognitive therapy. Clients were taught it in their first therapy session and asked to think about its meaning. It provided a foundation for everything that followed but recent research has suggested that this attitude of “cognitive distance”, viewing our own thoughts more objectively, may be one of the most important factors determining the *outcome* of psychotherapy. For ancient Stoics, this kind of “cognitive distance” was a way of life, though. This week your self-monitoring and daily

exercises are going to focus on generating greater “cognitive distance”, in a way that draws directly on ancient Stoicism.

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## Some Examples

This idea of “cognitive distance” can be tricky at first so let’s explore it in a little bit more detail. Once you grasp the basic idea, it’s actually quite simple. One of the most common analogy used by therapists is that the role of value judgements is like wearing coloured spectacles. If I look at the world through yellow lenses then everything looks as if it’s yellow but that’s just an appearance and not the way things are in themselves. I can also take the glasses off and look at them, as an object, instead of looking through them. That’s like pausing to observe our thoughts and judgements with detachment rather than blending them with external reality.

As we saw, Epictetus said that it’s not (external) things that upset us, but our (value) judgements about things, i.e., our judgement that what befalls us is *more* important than how we respond. The Stoics would say that external events that befall us are, by contrast, “indifferent”, or trivial, and that what really matters is the way we cope and the type of person we become. This strategy of gaining distance from our initial impressions rather than being swept along by them is recommended to Stoic students quite frequently throughout Epictetus’ *Discourses* and *Handbook*. Here are a few more examples:

- Do not be carried away by the impression of someone else’s good fortune, if they achieve wealth or status; instead remind yourself that the only good that can befall you is inner freedom and that is within your own power to achieve, if you can look down on external things with indifference. (Handbook, 19)
- Even if you witness a bad omen, like a raven croaking, do not be swept away by the appearance of prophesied misfortunes; remind yourself that misfortunes can only be predicted for your body or your property but your mind is always available to turn it into good fortune, internally, by responding with virtue. (Handbook, 18)
- When you see someone else in misery do not be swept along by the impression that some catastrophe has befallen him; remind yourself that it is not the thing itself but his judgement that upsets him otherwise others would be affected in the same way. (Handbook, 16)

In other words, don’t be carried away by your initial impressions but pause, take a step back, and realise that you’re projecting values onto something that, in itself, is merely a fact. Try to separate your value-judgements and emotions from the things they refer to. Modern therapists do something similar by telling clients to shift from saying (or thinking) “this is catastrophic” to saying “I’m *catastrophising* things” – I’m judging it to be catastrophic although someone else might judge it differently.

Throughout the next week, try to distinguish between your judgements and external events, to view your thoughts in a more detached and objective way, almost as if you were a psychologist observing the thought processes of another person, a subject in a research study, and noticing how their thoughts, feelings and actions might be interacting and influencing one another, etc. This is not unlike the attitude people experience during certain forms of meditation and you can refer to it as another aspect of the Stoic “mindfulness” you’re cultivating throughout this course.

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## Daily Exercise

This is an exercise adapted from a modern “third-wave” form of CBT called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). However, it provides a good way to practice some of the psychological skills that the ancient Stoics described. The foundation of wisdom and virtue, according to Epictetus, is to make the “correct use of our impressions”, and this begins with our being able to spot them without being “carried away” by them, often postponing any response until later. This exercise is likewise designed to improve your ability to notice automatic thoughts (impressions) and let go of them, rather than going along with them, and being swept away by unhealthy feelings or desires. Think of it as a way of exercising and strengthening the basic cognitive skills required throughout the day if you’re to retain your Stoic mindfulness throughout other situations, like doing sit-ups each morning.

Read the steps below carefully then pause for a few minutes to try the exercise before continuing with the lesson. Throughout this week, we’d like you to practice this meditation at least once per day...

### Leaves on a Stream

1. Close your eyes and sit in a comfortable position, take a moment to relax and settle down as you begin to observe your stream of consciousness more closely.
2. Picture a slowly-flowing stream or river; this can be a memory or an image you’ve made up. Imagine that it’s autumn and there are a few leaves falling in the river and being slowly swept past you and off downstream. Imagine you’re observing things from a distance, from high up on the bank or a bridge overhead. This gives you something to keep bringing your attention back to.
3. It’s natural that from time to time your attention will wander or other thoughts and feelings will spontaneously pop into your mind. Rather than interpreting these as distractions and struggling to prevent them, just accept your automatic thoughts (or “impressions”) as normal and harmless, view them with “indifference”, and incorporate them into the exercise as follows.
4. When a thought intrudes, or your mind wanders, just catch it as early as possible, and bring your attention back gently to the image of the river rather than allowing your attention to be swept along with the content of the thought or associations it triggers in your mind.
5. Turn the thought into an object. For example, if words cross your mind, imagine they’re written down on a slip of paper; if a memory or image pops into your mind, turn it into a photograph; if a feeling or bodily sensation grabs your attention, picture it as a colour or shape.
6. Now place that object on one of the leaves, “out there”, at a distance from you, on the river, and just let go of it, and allow it to drift naturally downstream, until it eventually disappears from view.
7. Keep catching your automatic thoughts or impressions early, turning them into objects, putting them on leaves, at a distance, and letting go of them, in this way. Even if the same thoughts or feelings keep popping back into your mind, that’s absolutely fine, just keep responding in the same way.

You should keep doing this for roughly five minutes each day, or more if you want. It’s important that you don’t approach this as a way to avoid or “get rid” of your automatic thoughts, as if they were something “bad”. Rather, your goal is to focus on acknowledging and *accepting* anything that automatically enters your stream of consciousness, with a sense of detached indifference.

Ideally, you’re neither grabbing onto these thoughts nor trying to push them away, but allowing them to fade naturally from the mind, in their own time. The Stoics believed that “impressions” occur automatically in the mind and that these are inherently “indifferent” but that our response to them is the most important thing in life.

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## Self-Monitoring

We saw earlier how Epictetus advised his students to keep a daily count of how many times they'd been overwhelmed by unhealthy thoughts and feelings. A slight variation on that strategy is to keep track of how much time you're spending each day engaged in activities or trains of thought that are unhealthy or undesirable. For example, how much time do you potentially waste worrying about the future or ruminating unproductively about the past? How much time, likewise, is spent in unnecessary or unrewarding activities such as watching television or browsing the internet, where this is simply "killing time" or serving as a distraction rather than something you genuinely want to be doing. We said earlier that this course was partly about saving time and simplifying your life. Monitoring how much time you spend wastefully is one of the main ways you can potentially change your behaviour to make better use of each day.

Worry and rumination are particularly common time-wasters, which modern psychologists tend to understand as follows:

- Worrying consists of prolonged chains of catastrophic "What if?" thoughts about the *future*, which cause excess anxiety, leading to frustrating and unproductive attempts at problem-solving.
- Rumination consists of prolonged chains of unanswerable "Why?" questions about the personal "meaning" of *past* events, which tend to lead to self-criticism, undermining self-worth, and leading to feelings of low mood.

It's useful to think about problems if we can arrive at a solution, or learn something, but not if our thoughts just go round interminably in circles, as this often leads to escalating frustration and despair. People tend to say they "lose track of time" when lost in their thoughts or in distracting activities such as watching television, and that usually means they've lost touch with the "here and now" and mindfulness of their own actions. Bringing our attention back to the present moment and the way we're using our mind can help us to "snap out" of the mindless, hypnotic trance of worry or distraction. One way of helping yourself to do this is to learn to track how much time has elapsed while you've been dwelling on some thought or engaged in some activity of questionable value.

Throughout the next week, supplement your existing self-awareness and self-monitoring by tracking how much time you spend worrying each day, or engaged in other unhealthy or unproductive activities. You can choose how you do this. You might make an estimate at the end of each day, of the percentage of time that you spent poorly. Alternatively, you might actually keep a closer record by creating a sheet with one section for each hour of the day and noting down, as frequently as possible, how many minutes during each hour were spent badly, on worry or distractions, etc. As always, don't *blame* yourself for lapses, just try to become more aware of them, and notice any patterns to them. What's past is past, and "indifferent" from the Stoic perspective. Your goal is to become more aware of the early-warning signs in the "here and now" and to voluntarily snap out of mindless activities or trains of thought when you choose to do so.

It's important that you don't do this by *struggling* against your thoughts and feelings and trying to forcefully suppress them or block them from your mind, as if they were "bad". Rather, practice viewing your own thoughts and actions objectively, taking a step back from them, and simply refraining from going along with them any further. The leaves on a stream exercise will be a great help in learning to do this. You should also find that at first it's difficult to spot how much time you spend lost in thought – precisely because you lose track of time. However, if you persevere and make the effort to track how you spend your time, you'll gradually find it becomes easier and you'll develop greater self-awareness by doing so.

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## Worry Postponement

When worry, rumination, or other troubling thoughts grab our attention for prolonged periods, it can be difficult to stop them. However, Epictetus describes dealing with intrusive thoughts in a way that's similar to a highly-effective modern psychological strategy used in behaviour therapy, called the "stimulus control" method or "worry postponement". Research has shown that ordinary students who employed this strategy for a few weeks were able to roughly halve the frequency, intensity, and duration of upsetting worry/rumination.

Epictetus tells his students repeatedly that they should spot automatic thoughts and feelings ("impressions") when they arise and refrain from allowing themselves to be swept along with them. He gives several different coping strategies, including postponing or delaying responding to them until later, once your feelings have settled down and you're more able to think things through calmly and philosophically, with mindfulness and detachment. This is an important strategy because worry often appears to be an attempt to solve real problems, so people have mixed feelings about whether or not to continue dwelling on their worries. However, the healthy response appears to be one that says "If this is really important, I'll choose to think about it when I'm ready, rather than allowing it to hijack my train of thought." It's perfectly natural to postpone thinking about problems. We do this when trying to go to sleep if something pops into our mind ("I'll come back to this in the morning") or when busy with some other task that requires our attention ("I'll think about this later, when I've finished what I'm doing"). Some people find it difficult to set aside thoughts temporarily, though, and that can make them more vulnerable to emotional disturbance, e.g., they may lie awake at night worrying about things. (The middle of the night, when you're half-asleep, often isn't the optimum time for problem-solving!)

There's another important situation during which people obviously have to set aside intrusive thoughts and feelings... during *meditation*. If I'm trying to meditate and suddenly a thought pops into my head about a problem at work, the best response is to accept its presence and view it in a somewhat detached manner, without *either* going along with the train of thought or struggling to try to block it from my mind. Psychologists call this "middle way" between worrying and suppressing thoughts "cognitive distancing", as we've seen. Epictetus describes something very similar:

Therefore train yourself without hesitation to say in response to every harsh appearance that "you are [merely] an appearance and in no way the thing appearing." Next examine it and evaluate it against these [philosophical] rules and standards which you have, but first and foremost this, whether it concerns things that are up to us or it concerns those things not up to us. And if it concerns something that is not up to us, have ready-to-hand the answer: "It is nothing to me." Epictetus, *Handbook*, 1

Elsewhere he says:

Bear in mind that it is not the man who reviles or strikes you that insults you, but it is your judgement that these men are insulting you. Therefore, when someone irritates you, be assured that it is your own opinion that has irritated you. And so make it your first endeavour not to be carried away by the impression; for if once you gain time and respite, you will more easily become master of yourself. Epictetus, *Handbook*, 20

This was actually quite a well-known strategy in ancient philosophy and similar methods were sometimes used then, and now, to deal with anger by taking a "time-out" from the situation until the feelings have naturally abated, and then returning to problem-solve things more rationally later.

Throughout the next week, we'd like you to spot when you're being "swept away" by unruly feelings and to take a step back from your thoughts, as you did in the Leaves on a Stream meditation. Agree with yourself, if appropriate, to postpone thinking about the issue until a fixed time later in the day, perhaps during your Evening Meditation routine, when you can give it your full attention and evaluate it more calmly and philosophically. As Epictetus says, the first question to ask yourself when doing this is: "Do these feelings concern something that's under my direct control or not?" Next, as he advises, you should consider the most "virtuous" way to respond, in accord with your own core values. Again, Epictetus mentions that it can be helpful when doing this to ask yourself what the ideal Stoic wise man (or woman) would do in the same situation or, as he puts it, what Socrates or Zeno would do, to provide yourself with a role-model. It's important that you understand worry postponement is about learning to take charge of when you pick up or put down thoughts, and not an excuse to either avoid thinking about problems or to dwell on them morbidly. Your aim is to pick the right time, when you're in the best frame of mind, and then tackle problems with greater patience and self-awareness, so that you can think them through rationally, and perhaps arrive at a decision.

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## Download Audio Recording

This short MP3 recording encourages you to prepare for the day ahead by planning actions and goals consistent with your core values, and preparing to accept setbacks with Stoic equanimity. Try to listen to it at least once, but preferably each morning, if possible.

Some of the ideas covered:

- Reviewing your goals and actions, from a calm, philosophical perspective.
  - Reviewing your conduct each night in this way helps you to become more mindful during the day.
  - Accept things not up to you with indifference, even if your plans were thwarted.
  - You cannot change the past, focus on what you can learn right now.
  - Study your own character and actions objectively, as if studying someone else.
  - What's praiseworthy or otherwise? What's healthy or unhealthy? What's wise or unwise?
  - Giving yourself "marks out of ten" for virtue.
  - Keeping a tally or self-monitoring record will help.
  - Rehearse true philosophical self-love, acting like a wise counselor or friend toward yourself.
  - You may sleep better if this is done well as you're letting go of worry and viewing the past with indifference.
- 

## What Next?

***Congratulations on completing the lesson for Week Three. Now it's time to start putting things into practice!***

You should start using the techniques covered right now, if possible, and continue with them each day throughout the following week. If you think you might have any problems adhering to the daily practices, or need any clarification, get in touch right away with the course facilitator.

However, your first step should be to visit the Discussion Forum, as soon as you're ready, and post your thoughts on the question for this week:

What are the benefits of recalling what's under your control and what isn't in difficult situations? What would be the long-term consequences of blurring this distinction?

Here's a second question for you to consider, and discuss, if you want:

Are the Stoics right to say that only our own actions, in a nutshell, are truly under our control?

Go to the course Discussion Forum now and look for the topic entitled "Week Three Question". When you've done that, take a look at some of the "Optional Extras" in this section. In a day or so you'll also get a follow-up message via the forum asking for an update on how you're getting on with the daily practices.

If there's anything whatsoever you could use help with, either technical stuff or the course content, please don't hesitate to email the course facilitator.

# Introduction

## **Welcome to week four of Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training!**

Well done, you've made it to the fourth and final week. This chapter mainly looks at ways to maintain your well-being in the long-term by anticipating future adversity and potential setbacks and preparing yourself to cope with them resiliently.

You're nearing the end of a four-week course, but what will happen next? Are you simply going to revert back to your previous habits or will you take forward some aspects of what you've learned? Will your future ways of responding be different from your responses in the past?

It's time now to prepare for the future by building on what you've learned. How can you ensure that you remember the most helpful parts, address any problems or obstacles you've still got to overcome, and anticipate any potential future setbacks? Pause to consider what advice you'd give someone else who was nearing the end of this training, to help ensure they continued to benefit...

The pages that follow contain some strategies derived from ancient Stoicism, combined with some very generic principles used in modern behavioural skills training. In particular, we're going to be looking at the ancient Stoic resilience-building technique called premeditation of adversity (*praemeditatio malorum*).

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## Overview of Week Four

The emphasis this week is on bringing together what you've learned so far, broadening its scope to apply across different aspects of your daily routine, and extending it to help prepare for potential setbacks in the future.

This is the overall plan for week four...

1. **Lesson.** This week focuses on general resilience-building and “relapse prevention” or how to strengthen your Stoic Mindfulness techniques in advance to face a broad range of potential future setbacks.
2. **Daily exercise.** Your daily exercise is going to change now from being a single-sitting meditation to being a more “rapid and frequent” approach, that requires mindfulness of yourself, and of your Stoic principles, much more regularly throughout the course of each day.
3. **Audio recording.** This week you'll be listening to a more intensive 15 minute meditation recording each day, on Stoic premeditation of adversity, that challenges you to mindfully confront imagined future “catastrophes” or setbacks while rehearsing philosophical “indifference”.
4. **Self-monitoring.** This week, instead of monitoring your thoughts, actions, and feelings, etc., you're going to work on developing a “blueprint” for future resilience and reviewing it each day, particularly by trying to expand your awareness of the “early-warning signs” of emotional disturbance or bad habits.
5. **Discussion questions.** “What would be the pros and cons of continually remembering, when starting to feel distressed about a situation or event, that it's not things that upset us but our judgements about things?”
6. **Optional extras!** You'll find a variety of additional materials in week four, below this lesson.

In this final week, it's particularly important that you make full use of the Discussion Forum and live chat, if possible. These have the potential to help you resolve any unanswered questions and tackle any remaining obstacles by talking them through with your fellow students. Often just the process of putting a question into writing and sharing it can help people arrive at a new way of looking at things, and find their own solution.



However, but the comments you receive from other people can also be extremely valuable, especially if you're able to contemplate a range of perspectives on the issues you face.

As always, if there's anything you don't understand or get stuck with, let us know immediately, by posting on the Course Discussion Forum or emailing the course facilitator, and we'll do our very best to help you.

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## The Basic Concept

The final stage of training in a psychological skill often concentrates on:

1. *Generalisation*, or applying it to a wider and wider range of situations
2. *Relapse prevention*, or anticipating potential setbacks in the future and preparing for them in advance

The ancient Stoics were interested in achieving comprehensive and lasting personal transformation, so it's not surprising that they employed a similar approach. They did seek to address short-term emotional problems, somewhat like we would in modern counselling or psychological therapy, such as coping with bereavement or other traumatic life events. However, most of the time, their focus was on building long-term psychological well-being and preparation for coping with *future* setbacks, which is similar to what we call emotional "resilience-building" today. To put it another way, Stoicism is more than a *therapy* – it's a philosophy of life. That said, even in the ancient world, many people were initially drawn to Stoicism as a way of coping with short-term emotional challenges, and only later became convinced of the philosophical truth of its underlying doctrines and its value as an actual *way of life*.

One of the best-known strategies employed in ancient Stoicism is called the premeditation of adversity (*praemeditatio malorum*, in Latin). This involves training yourself in advance to face future misfortunes or setbacks with philosophical equanimity by repeatedly visualising typical "catastrophes" or losses as if they're happening right now, while practising Stoic equanimity. (William Irvine describes a similar technique in his bestselling book on Stoicism, which he calls "negative visualisation", although the rationale he presents is somewhat different from the ancient Stoics.) What the Stoics describe happens to be very similar to one of the most robustly-established techniques in research on modern psychotherapy, called "imaginal exposure". (Many different names are used to describe roughly similar techniques.) We know quite a lot now about the psychological processes involved in this strategy and the best way to make it work. The most important fact is that anxiety and many other negative feelings, generally speaking, tend to naturally *abate* over time if exposure is repeated and prolonged enough, and certain interfering factors are prevented. Psychologists call the process by which anxiety naturally wears off "habituation".

For the purposes of general resilience training, therefore, we would recommend that you pick the things you're going to visualise carefully, and don't attempt to face situations that seem potentially overwhelming. Start with small things and work your way up, in other words. (Psychologists call this "graduated" exposure.) Don't rush things. Be *systematic* in your approach. The ancient Stoics left some comments that hint they may have been aware of the process of habituation. However, they didn't leave clear instructions about one key fact: the amount of time required. In therapy, clients with clinically-severe anxiety are normally asked to visualise upsetting scenes for roughly 15-30 minutes at a time, every day for a couple of weeks or more. One of the most common mistakes people make is cutting this process short, before their feelings have had time to fully abate. As a rough guide, it's

usually recommended that you rate the intensity of your feelings from 0-100% and continue the exercise, each day, until they've reduced to at least half their peak level. Again, if you begin with easy targets, mildly upsetting events, you're likely to find the process of imaginal exposure takes roughly 5-15 minutes or less. However, practising mindfulness strategies of the kind you've already been learning can often reduce the time required, and this varies considerably from one person to another. Don't try to force your feelings to reduce, though, your goal is to accept them, albeit in a detached manner, and allow them to settle down naturally over time. It's very important that you don't cut the exercise short as doing so can occasionally make negative feelings worse. You should continue to patiently visualise the problem situation until your discomfort has reduced enough. Doing this repeatedly, over several days or weeks, tends to lead to a permanent reduction in the emotional reaction caused.

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## Some Examples

The audio recording for this week will help guide you through this process. So don't worry if there seems to be a few more things to remember this time. You can always re-read these notes later or discuss your progress with the group as well. Let's look at some examples of how you might use Stoic premeditation of adversity that incorporate some of the concepts and techniques you've been practising over the past few weeks.

Suppose you've noticed, through your self-monitoring, that you become nervous during challenging conversations with certain people. You might begin by picturing a scene in which you try to assert yourself while talking to them. You'd pick a scene perhaps in which they're mildly confrontational, and your anxiety or discomfort could be rated about 30-40%, rather than one in which your anxiety is 100% and you potentially feel quite overwhelmed. Start with small steps and work your way up systematically. There are two main aspects of your Stoic practice that you might build upon during the audio recordings, while you're rehearsing ways of coping and exposing yourself to (potentially) "stressful" scenes in your imagination.

### Detached Mindfulness

The first thing you should do when picturing (seemingly) upsetting events is to continually remind yourself, as Epictetus said, that it's not things that upset us but our judgements about things. Ancient Stoic students were told to have this maxim always metaphorically "ready-to-hand" to cope with adversity, and so you can repeat it to yourself as a "coping statement" while picturing stressful situations each day. Think of this as if you were doing "mental sit-ups" and strengthening your emotional resilience "muscles", your Stoic principles and values. Visualising difficult situations gives you a way to build up mental resilience even when you're not currently facing any significant emotional challenges in life. This "cognitive distancing" strategy alone, when used carefully, can have very powerful benefits during imaginal exposure. Practice it as a form of mindfulness. Be aware of your own value-judgements and automatic thoughts, and observe them in a detached manner while you picture future events. You don't need to try to *change* your thinking, just observe your habitual thoughts and judgements without "buying into them". Remember that an impression is just an impression and not the thing it represents, as Epictetus puts it. Don't allow yourself to be swept along by your feelings and impressions. Just do *nothing* in response to them except studying these subjective experiences in a detached and objective manner as if you were observing someone else's thought processes.

### Valued Action & Virtue

It's sometimes better to picture scenes more passively until your feelings have abated enough for you to begin the slightly more complex task of imagining yourself *acting* differently, in situations that require it. For example, if you feel ready to do so, you might focus on your core values, and mentally rehearse how you would respond if acting according to your conception of virtue. Perhaps doing what you would consider praiseworthy and healthy, or

emulating what you imagine someone wise, just, and courageous would say and do in a similar situation. The Stoics would advise us to focus on our commitment to doing the right thing, and to place more importance on this than upon the other person's reaction, or the outcome of the conversation. To put it another way, you'd distinguish carefully between what's up to you, or under your direct control, and what is not, in any situation you're mentally rehearsing. In a conversation, very simply, your own actions are up to you, but the other person's responses are not. When therapists train people in assertiveness skills, likewise, the first step is often to encourage them to accept that even if you're very skilled at being assertive, the other person can still respond negatively. So if you want to handle challenging situations well, you have to remember that their behaviour is not under your direct control, and be willing to accept that, whatever you do, your actions may fail to achieve the external outcome you'd prefer to happen. In other words, from a Stoic perspective, it's *your own* actions that really matter not the other person's. Focusing on the Stoic concept of virtue, as what's "up to us", and indifference toward what's outside our direct control, can be particularly helpful when mentally rehearsing situations that require you to interact with other people.

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## Some More Comments

From a technical perspective, in Stoic Ethics, future events can be "preferred" (or "dispreferred") but only our own current actions are judged truly "virtuous" or "vicious", "good" or "bad", "helpful" or "harmful". In the premeditation of adversity, however, future "misfortunes" are to be imagined as if they're happening right now, which actually means shifting them from the category of things "dispreferred" to that of things judged *absolutely* indifferent. In other words, for Stoics, this was a way of rehearsing total indifference and acceptance toward external "misfortunes". Once they've already happened there's no point wishing that they hadn't. We can't turn back the clock, and it would be irrational and unphilosophical to desire to do so.

By pretending things we'd naturally want to avoid have *already happened* we can prepare ourselves to cope with them if it turns out that we're unlucky and they do, in reality, befall us. Psychologists sometimes call this process of accepting things in a matter-of-fact way and focusing on coping sensibly with their consequences: "decatastrophising". It requires an ability to let go of our judgements of value about things that have already happened, our judgement about them being a "catastrophe" and deeply-distressing. If not that, it at least requires gaining "distance" from our distressing value-judgements, and focusing instead on problem-solving in light of the current situation.

### **Q: "What if I can't think of any upsetting situations to imagine?"**

When people are focusing on general resilience-building they sometimes work on a broad range of completely *hypothetical* situations, perhaps even ones they'll never face in reality. If you're doing this, you should try to work on a diverse variety of examples, if possible. People tend to brainstorm examples of situations that would make them anxious or uncomfortable if they were real, such as sky-diving, abseiling, being interviewed on television, speaking at a huge conference, being launched into space, or anything that might be a test of your ability to cope. The ancient Stoics typically rehearsed extreme life events such as bereavement, poverty, illness, exile, shipwreck, and ultimately facing their own death. Those examples are useful but we wouldn't *expect* people to mentally-rehearse very extreme emotional situations during an online course like these, unless perhaps they're completely confident in their ability to do so safely.

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## Download Audio Recording

This recording lasts about 15 min. and encourages you to mentally-rehearse coping with an upsetting situation, using mindfulness and your Stoic principles to prepare in advance for a range of anticipated challenges in life.

This week's recording is very important because the lesson involves a slightly more complex psychological process, which it will be much easier to understand if you've used the audio recording. The recording also differs from those in previous weeks in that it will require a little bit of preparation: just that you have a clear idea beforehand of a specific situation that you can visualise as if it's happening now. You should pick a scene that's *mildly* upsetting, but not one that might potentially be overwhelming. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Take things in small steps. You can work on more challenging situations later.

You're going to patiently replay this scene in your mind, repeatedly. That will require a little more concentration and patience perhaps than the previous exercises you've completed, which is why we've kept it until the last week of the course. You'll also be asked to make a mental note of the level of subjective discomfort you experience (from 0-100%) – which is normally roughly 30-40% for people working on a relatively *mild* problem.

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## Daily Exercise

This exercise differs from the others in that it's intended to be practiced repeatedly and frequently throughout the day, applying your skills across a wide range of different situations and activities. This is designed to help you maintain a more general "Stoic" attitude toward life and build longer-term emotional resilience.

You're going to try to remind yourself in a fairly rapid and frequent manner, throughout the day, of your Stoic principles. The idea is to introduce a structured routine that doesn't take any real time out of your day but will "spread" attention to your Stoic practices throughout as much of your day as possible, ideally developing an attitude of Stoic mindfulness that's as *near-continuous* as possible. A common way to do that is to remind yourself very frequently throughout each day, perhaps during every waking hour, to pause and reflect on your principles or employ some basic psychological practice, such as a mindfulness exercise, for as little as one minute at a time.

Here are some examples of ways that you can help yourself to practice very frequently each day:

1. Make a rule that for the next seven days you're going to try to do your daily exercise at least once during each waking hour of the day. Check the time frequently and try to make sure you don't let an hour go by without doing your practice even if it's just for one minute. You could set an alarm on your mobile phone to help you remember, for example.
2. Make a rule that you're never going to leave a room or begin a new activity or conversation without pausing for at least one minute first to engage in your daily practice. Alternative cues would be eating, drinking, or using the lavatory – which can be treated as signals to pause beforehand and do your mindfulness practice for at least a minute. Obviously, that won't always be possible but you can still try to use this as a reminder to do it as often as seems realistic and practicable.
3. Create cues or reminders for yourself such as setting an alarm, changing the wallpaper on your computer or mobile device, or even tying a piece of string around your finger. People often put (software) sticky notes on their computer desktop or real sticky notes around their home and office as reminders. You may need to change these cues slightly each day so that you don't become habituated to them through over-exposure, and stop noticing them.

People often report that it's easier to do their practice very frequently if they tell themselves something like "Even if it's just for one minute, I'm going to do this..." In reality, once you get started, you'll usually find you naturally

spend a little bit longer on your exercises. People virtually never complain that this takes up *too much* time in their day, though, as it seldom seems to eat into time spent on other worthwhile activities.

At first, as you've already learned, it can take quite a bit of determination to instigate a new pattern of behaviour but it helps to keep telling yourself that it gets easier with practice, which you're bound to find is the truth. People normally report that within a few days it starts to feel more "natural" and "automatic" for them to pause frequently and employ their mindfulness practice.

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## Brief Mindfulness Exercise

The daily exercise we're going to recommend is the one below. However, by this stage in the training you may have your own ideas about a brief strategy that you'd rather employ, perhaps drawing on material from previous weeks. You may also find that you can adapt previous meditation or psychotherapy strategies to support your Stoic training, and that should be fine.

Here's the standard "default" strategy we're recommending, though, in case you need something more specific as a guide:

1. Stop what you're doing for at least one minute, or more if you want.
2. Turn your attention inward and focus on observing your own mental activity, from moment to moment, keeping your attention firmly grounded in the "here and now".
3. Don't try to change anything, or stop anything from changing. Just notice the difference between what's "up to you" and what isn't.
4. If it helps, just repeat a word in your mind each time you exhale and notice the way you're doing this *voluntarily*, and how other thoughts and feelings cross your mind *involuntarily*.
5. Observe your automatic thoughts and feelings from an "indifferent" and detached perspective, without "buying into them; as if you were studying the thoughts of another person.

Essentially, you're being asked to ground your attention in the present moment, become more attuned to your own actions and judgements, and to recall two key Stoic maxims:

- Some things are "up to us" and some things are not; only our own voluntary actions and judgements are under our direct control.
- It's not things that upset us, but our judgement about things; remember that troubling impressions are just thoughts and not the things they claim to represent.

Similar brief exercise methods have proven very effective in behavioural psychology and in modern research on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. It's really just a way for you to squeeze more benefit out of your Stoic training by making it into something that's more familiar and habitual, and also applying it across a wider range of situations each day. The broader the range of settings in which you become adept at practising your strategies, the more robust the benefits will become, and the greater your emotional resilience will be in the face of unexpected future adversities.

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## Self-Monitoring

In the final week, you're going to develop a blueprint or "coping plan" for maintaining your resilience in the future, and review this each day to make sure you're able to follow it satisfactorily. The idea is to formulate a simple conceptualisation of the habits you're most determined to overcome, and to become crystal-clear about the key

factors you'd need to observe to implement any change. This doesn't necessarily take much time. You've should have plenty of time to reflect on things and try to simplify your observations over the past few weeks into a handful of key observations, worth remembering for the long-term.

A simple revised coping-plan might be composed of three main elements, which can be subdivided as follows:

### 1. Triggers

The signs or situations that you need to keep an eye on, and be particularly cautious about, in order to prevent yourself from relapsing into old habits...

#### a. *Early-Warning Signs*

These initial signs might be bodily sensations, such as trembling, or thoughts, such as "What's the point!, which you recognise as being early-warning signals of unwanted reactions.

#### b. *Situation*

These are the "high-risk" situations, in which you consider yourself most vulnerable to setbacks, and where you therefore need to be especially cautious and mindful of your responses.

### 2. Previous Response

This is the old pattern of coping, which you've decided to abandon and replace with something more constructive; these are voluntary responses, you can potentially choose to cease.

#### a. *Thoughts*

Sometimes this is the trickiest part because we often overlook our thoughts unless we've been practising mindfulness carefully. For that reason, though, it's especially useful to try to identify the ways of thinking that you could "do without", i.e., unnecessary and unhelpful ways of responding.

#### b. *Actions*

What unhelpful ways of coping, or behaviours, could be abandoned or replaced? The hardest part of this is noticing that *inaction*, or avoidance, sometimes in very subtle forms, is often the pattern of behaviour that needs to be reversed. That might include subtle patterns of mental behaviour such as distracting yourself or trying to block your feelings, etc.

### 3. Alternative Response

This is the new way of coping that you want to introduce into the situation, on the assumption that doing so will often take effort and perseverance, and that you shouldn't expect to succeed perfectly first time.

#### a. *Thoughts*

What would be a *more helpful thing to tell yourself* in these situations, or when you notice these early-warning signs arising? This should be realistic and truthful, but also constructive and helpful - not just "positive thinking" in the sense of *Pollyannaism*.

#### b. *Actions*

What would be a *more helpful thing to do* in these situations, or when you notice these early-warning signs arising? What would be a constructive way of responding or alternative to avoidance?

Once you've got a clear idea of your revised coping plan, it's helpful to write it down in a reasonably concise form, which you should review each day, and attempt to improve, where possible. You might want to write this down on a small card and keep it in your pocket, or save it on a notepad in a mobile device. Here's an example of how you might lay this out concisely. The gaps are filled in using an example of someone who wants to control their temper, especially in conversations with their partner...

### Example Coping-Plan

From now on, whenever I notice these early-warning signs...

[Clenching my teeth, frowning, tensing my shoulders, starting to raise my voice.]

...especially in situations like these...

[Arguments beginning with my partner, worrying about things at work.]

...instead of responding by thinking this...

["I can't handle this", "I don't know what to do", "What's the point!"]

...and doing this...

[Dwelling on things and worrying about the worst-case scenario, criticising other people unnecessarily, staying awake late at night worrying, getting into arguments, shouting.]

...I will practice telling myself...

["I'm not in the right frame of mind to deal with this; I'll come back to it later once my feelings have settled down"; "I can deal with this if I take things slowly; I've got through plenty of similar things in the past"; "It's not this situation that's upsetting me, it's my value-judgements, and placing too much importance on things outside of my direct control"]

...and doing this...

[Pausing, viewing my upsetting thoughts in a detached way, and postponing problem-solving until my feelings have calmed down; accepting my thoughts and feelings without struggling against them; viewing my thoughts with detached mindfulness; explaining to my partner that I can sense I'm becoming tense and that I need to take time to clear my thoughts properly before responding.]

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## What Next?

***Congratulations on completing the lesson for week four. Now it's time to start putting things into practice!***

You should start using the techniques covered right now, if possible, and continue with them each day throughout the following week. If you think you might have any problems adhering to the daily practices, or need any clarification, get in touch right away with the course facilitator.

However, your first step should be to visit the Discussion Forum, as soon as you're ready, and post your thoughts on the question for this week:

What would be the pros and cons of continually remembering, when starting to feel distressed about a situation or event, that it's not things that upset us but our judgements about things?

Here's a second question for you to consider, and discuss, if you want:

How can you help yourself to make the best use of this distinction in daily life?

Go to the course Discussion Forum now and look for the topic entitled "Week Four Question". When you've done that, take a look at some of the "Optional Extras" in this section. In a day or so you'll also get a follow-up message via the forum asking for an update on how you're getting on with the daily practices.

If there's anything whatsoever you could use help with, either technical stuff or the course content, please don't hesitate to email the course facilitator.