

**HOW TO BE A STOIC:
USING ANCIENT
PHILOSOPHY TO
LIVE A MODERN LIFE**
by Massimo Pigliucci

Summary & Worksheet

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The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

In this read, philosopher Massimo Pigliucci walks us through the main principles of Stoicism. From how Stoicism was formed down to sharing imaginary dialogues with Epictetus himself - the central figure in this book. Pigliucci transcribes the classic Stoic teachings in modern words. Making them easy to understand and ready to be implemented in the busy lives we're living now.

The Core Idea:

How ought we to live our lives? That's what the author strives to answer in this book. By observing the ancient principles of Stoicism, Massimo Pigliucci wants to help us find direction in our noisy world and embrace a happy sort of nihilism.

Highlights:

- *Allowing your emotions to control the words you say and the acts you do is not in accordance with reason.*
- *To champion your emotions and embed logic in your thinking, focus on mastering the following three: desire, action, and assent.*
- *Understanding the difference between what you can control and what you can't is the central idea of Stoicism.*

5 Key Lessons from How to Be a Stoic:

- *Lesson #1: Stoicism is About Figuring Out the Best Way to Live a Good Life*
- *Lesson #2: We Should Live According to Nature*
- *Lesson #3: There are Three Disciplines of Stoicism*
- *Lesson #4: Dealing with Anxiety and Insults Is Easier When You're a Stoic*
- *Lesson #5: Practice Daily The Principles Of Stoicism*

Lesson #1: Stoicism is About Figuring Out the Best Way to Live a Good Life

It all started with Zeno. A Phoenician merchant who became interested in philosophy after a shipwreck.

After the accident, he went to the local library in Athens and asked the bookseller where people like Socrates can be found. The story tells that the bookseller replied, "Follow yonder man." And Zeno started following Crates – the main philosopher at the time.

The men who later followed Zeno were called Zenonians but eventually referred to be "Stoics," because they met under the Stoa Poikile.

The discussions these men held were fierce and involving various topics. Yet, they were all trying to figure out one main thing – how to reach eudaimonic. Or in other words, how to best live a human life.

How can people flourish is a broad term and it can certainly require studying a lot of things. But Stoics boiled it down to the following three subjects: studying physics, logic, and ethics.

They studied physics to understand how the world works and what is our place in it. They observed logic to become more reasonable in their judgment. And lastly, they focused on ethics to figure out how the human mind works so they can alter it to better fit reason.

They strongly believed that, as Massimo Pigliucci writes, "If philosophy was not useful to human life, then it wasn't useful at all."

There's a lot to unpack about the above-mentioned. But if we can compress it down to one sentence, we should say that focusing on things that matter and disregarding everything else is the key objective for a happy life.

“In reality, Stoicism is not about suppressing or hiding emotion—rather, it is about acknowledging our emotions, reflecting on what causes them, and redirecting them for our own good. It is also about keeping in mind what is and what is not under our control.” Massimo Pigliucci

Lesson #2: We Should Live According to Nature

What distinguishes us from animals? Apart from having a thumb?

Our ability to think. To put things into perspective and to consider the past while making plans for the future.

Yet, we rarely put this ability into practice – at least not at full speed.

For Stoics, to live our lives “according to nature,” was a manner of approaching things with reason. And, more importantly, to treat other people with respect and common courtesy.

The key aspect of being a human is our ability to socialize, to help each other, and to treat everyone, even folks we don’t know or necessarily like, good. By treating others, “as if they really are our relatives,” as the author writes, we’re actually helping ourselves. Because, after all, we can’t survive the hardships of life all by ourselves.

In conclusion, it’s within your nature to treat others with respect and to learn from them. Also, it’s within your nature to be a reasonable person and to not behave like a sheep.

“...the point of life for human beings is to use reason to build the best society that it is humanly possible to build.” Massimo Pigliucci

Lesson #3: There are Three Disciplines of Stoicism

While there are a lot of different manuscripts from ancient philosophers, the author takes all of the wisdom that survived and describes in a very concise matter the main teachings of this practical philosophy. Hence, this book is centered around three Stoic disciplines.

Understanding them will give you a full picture of what needs to be done to live a better life – follow the path to eudaimonia – based on the reason-seeking ancients.

These disciplines are:

- Desire: What is and is not proper to want.
- Action: How to behave in the world.
- Assent: How to best react to situations.

Let's look at them one by one:

- The discipline of desire: We can control some things but we don't have the power to control others. True wisdom lies in understanding the difference between the two. And while you can't control the past, you can learn from it. You can't control your boss, but you can choose your job. In other words, we have the power to decide which things we can control.
- The discipline of action: The cardinal virtue for Stoics is wisdom. Socrates said, "it is the only human ability that is good under every and all circumstance." Being in good physical shape, having enough money in your bank account, and being well educated are all good things, but they are not enough. You need the wisdom to navigate in difficult conditions and get the most out of every situation. That's why wisdom is the "chief good" and your actions should be based on this cardinal rule.
- The discipline of assent: If you're afraid of dying you're living in ignorance. That's how Stoics viewed this human condition. Their logic-oriented way of living helped them overcome anger and anxiety. Moreover, it allowed them to view our greatest fear (dying) as something normal. So, when facing a difficult, potentially life-threatening situation, instead of quickly jumping to wrong conclusions, step aside, and re-think the situation. Acting casual will allow you to restructure your thoughts and handle problems way better.

It all comes down to your ability to focus on the things that are under our control and being ignorant about the rest.

"Why are we so anxious about all sorts of things? When I see a man in a state of anxiety, I say, 'What can this man want? If he did not want something which is not in his power, how could he still be anxious?'" Epictetus

Lesson #4: Dealing with Anxiety and Insults Is Easier When You're a Stoic

In *How to Be a Stoic*, Massimo Pigliucci wrote that the first thing Zeno learned when he followed Crates was to practice, "not being ashamed of things of which there is nothing to be ashamed."

This, seemingly simple exercise, allowed him to later deal with all kinds of difficult situations. And more notably, to deal with anxiety and insults.

While Stoicism and the people who practiced this way of living might seem powerful and well-respected to us nowadays. They certainly received a lot of criticism from their peers in their time.

Thanks to logic and reason though, they were able to handle tough situations and did not allow disturbances in the environment to interrupt their inner peace.

Can we achieve such Jedi-like self-control?

Yes, we certainly can. Undoubtedly though, it will require a lot of work.

Here are some interesting tactics that will help you handle anxiety and insults better:

- First, you need to understand how the world works. But in order to do this, you must first realize that it is very different from what you imagine. Good things take time. People are not interested in you. Everything in the world requires maintenance to properly function, and so on. Once you get that the world doesn't revolve around you, it will be a lot easier to avoid getting angry if your wife forgets to pack your lunch today.
- Don't respond immediately when someone attacks you by saying something provocative. Slow down, pause for a moment, understand why he might be saying this, what are his reasons, and then respond. Probably you offended the person and that's why he's acting so fiercely, or, he is simply in a bad mood. Whatever it is, his reaction is outside of your control, but you have full control over your response.
- Prepare for the worst-case scenario. Presenting a talk in front of a crowd can be a daunting task – especially if you're an introvert. But if you take the time, prepare yourself, consider all the possible (bad) scenarios and come up with a plan, you will have no reason to be anxious.

“But the only way to avoid such failures is to do what I have already done: prepare myself to the best of my abilities. Nothing else can be done, so there is no cause for (additional) concern, much less for anxiety over the outcome.” Massimo Pigliucci

Lesson #5: Practice Daily The Principles Of Stoicism

Simply talking about good deeds and about being a noble human being won't cut it. Especially now, in our consumerism-obsessed culture where the default state is laziness.

"We can do better," probably said the author because he added twelve exercises that can help us master the Stoic principles and equip us with the tools we need to practice this philosophy.

I'm presenting, the short version of the exercises mentioned in the book which are actually extracted from the book *Enchiridion* by Epictetus:

1. Examine your emotions: When facing a difficult situation or you are being verbally attacked by someone, stop and ask yourself, "Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?" If there's nothing you can do, move along with your day and state that this thing should no longer be your concern.
2. Remind yourself of the impermanence of things: Everything around us will, at some point, perish. Yep, it's a harsh and brutal realization but that's life. By adopting this ruthless mindset you will better-handle misfortunes when they arrive – as they surely will.
3. The reserve clause: Things probably won't go as planned. This should be your default thought when starting a business, going out in the woods, or trying to reason with your spouse. After all, there are a lot of things outside your control. Resisting this simple fact will lead to a life full of frustration and pain.
4. Use virtue in everyday situations: Every setback life throws at us allows us to improve. It surely doesn't feel good to get our ass kicked but this experience gives us a unique chance to learn from it and to adapt. You cannot control a lot of things, but you can manage them – by using the inner tools you have and by attuning your mental attitude.
5. Pause when provoked: We do a lot of stupid things not because we're ignorant, but because we let our emotions control us. Stoicism is not about suppressing your emotions, it's about understanding them and reflecting on what caused them. So, when provoked, pause. Take a deep breath and act reasonably, not emotionally.
6. Prepare for the problems other people go through: It's natural to calm a friend if he recently lost a loved one. "That's part of life," we say. Yet, we act like the world is about to end when the same thing happens to us. We're not special and disasters can happen to us, too. The best we can do is to prepare for the worst-case scenario.
7. Say only the essentials: Being brief in your speeches is not a sign of illiteracy, it's actually the opposite. Your ability to sift through

- volumes of information and present only the gist will improve your thinking and allow you to present your views to others more easily.
8. Choose your surroundings well: “If a companion is dirty, his friends cannot help but get a little dirty too, no matter how clear they started,” says Epictetus. The simple idea here is actually pretty famous even today – we should join communities full of people who are better than us. This will allow us to learn from them and improve.
 9. Respond to insults with humor: Defending yourself if someone is offending you is a sign of emotional weakness. Instead, respond with self-mockery. Say that you’re actually worse if they say that your publications, music, or whatever is bad. After all, what people say about you is not in your control.
 10. Speak less about you: No one really wants to hear about your latest vacation or how awesome your life is. People mostly care about themselves. So, speak less about you and seek to understand others. Being deeply involved in other people will help you master your ego.
 11. Speak without judging: Judging others is not in accordance with reason. After all, we don’t know the full picture. Yes, they can act restlessly. Drink a lot, spent unwisely, and listen to music we can’t stand. But how will judging help? It won’t. It will make things worse. Instead, you can try to understand the other person. Figure out the motives behind their acts and be a bit more compassionate.
 12. Reflect on your day: Before going to bed, sit down and take a moment to consider your deeds. What was done today? What wasn’t? How are you better? What habit you were able to practice? What evil consumed your mind? After all, living a life that is closer to nature can only happen when we observe the bad in us and make adjustments.

“What bad habit of yours have you cured to-day? What vice have you checked? In what respect are you better?” Seneca

Actionable Notes:

- Develop a life plan: Figuring out what is important to us and what is within our control can feel daunting. But not if you take the time to create your own life plan. How to do it? Start by taking a broad look at your entire life to this day. Take a moment to consider all of the things that are important to you and figure out what is the best way to achieve these things – do more of them. But don’t stop there. Continuously revise your plan. After all, circumstances change all the time.
- Friendship of the good: Stoics concluded that there are three types of friendships: friendship of utility, friendship of pleasure, and friendship of the good. The first type is basically your relation-

ship with the barber, or someone working in the closes shop. The friendship of pleasure is the connection you have with someone based on a mutual hobby. The third, the friendship of the good, is the most important one. This type of affair does not require external factors to exist – transactions or a hobby. In this state, the two people simply enjoy their company.

- Practice mindful repetition: How can eudemonia be achieved? It feels like a lot of work, no doubt. But it only looks like that. Stoic did feel, probably, well most of the time by doing this simple act: Cultivating joyful emotions and rejecting the bad ones. In contrast, depressed people nowadays do the opposite – they cling too tightly to past failures without ever considering what good they did. So, shift your thinking. Think about what you have and start appreciating more what's already available to you. By doing so, you will easily re-frame your mind and attune it to good vibes.
- What's within your power: This is something that is constantly repeated in the book: figure out what is within your control and what is not. That's the key aspect of Stoicism. Once you know what you can do, what's within your power, focus on this particular thing. Disregard everything else or simply find what you can control. For example, death is outside of your control, but how you think about death is surely something you can control. Take a moment and note down what is within your control.
- Know thyself: This is a commonly used maxim by Greek philosophers. According to the old robe-wearing thinkers, the only way to master your emotions and to live a life according to reason, 24/7, is to figure out your physical and psychological abilities and limits. And it makes a lot of sense. After all, if we don't know what is within our reach, we'll be ignorant. And ignorance contradicts directly with logic.

Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

I was expecting a how-to guide on becoming a Stoic and I wasn't disappointed. How to Be a Stoic by Massimo Pigliucci, is just that: well-written, reinforced with facts and a lot of references from various sources read, that gives you the gist of becoming a calm citizen of the world.

Yet, there's something that I didn't like at all: the political talk. At some point, the author decided to compare how politicians nowadays act according to this ancient philosophy. Probably some folks might find this comparison interesting but I'm certainly not one of them.

Nonetheless, the book offers a lot of interesting ideas, practices, backed by a lot of examples and personal stories, that will help the reader in his quest for a happy and meaningful life.

The key takeaway for me is this:

Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us. We should understand the difference, focus on the things we can control and take the rest as it happens.

Notable Quotes:

“People don’t do “evil” on purpose, they do it out of “ignorance.”
Socrates

“Better to endure pain in an honorable manner than to seek joy in a shameful one.” Massimo Pigliucci

“But if there truly is nothing more to be done about a given situation, then we should no longer “concern” ourselves with it—we should stop trying to do something about the situation—precisely because it is outside of our control.” Massimo Pigliucci

What to read next:

- [The Obstacle Is the Way](#) by Ryan Holiday [Summary]
- [Skin in the Game](#) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb [Summary]
- [Stillness Is the Key](#) by Ryan Holiday [Summary]

INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:

- 1. Develop a life plan by understanding what is important to you:*
- 2. Think about your relationships. Do you have enough "friendship of the good" type?*
- 3. Schedule time in your day to think about, and appreciate, what you already have:*
- 4. Take a moment and note down what is within your control and what is not:*
- 5. To know thyself, find your physical and psychological abilities and limits:*

Don't forget to save your changes.