

Ancient Wisdom for Dealing with Modern Anxiety

Based on

Ancient Wisdom Reveals 6 Rituals That Will Make You Happy

By Eric Barker

People have enormous respect for ancient wisdom. They just don't read it. Funny thing is, we're more likely to live happier lives when we visit the classics section than the self-help aisle.

So how do we get the skinny on what one group of brilliant dead guys — The Stoics — had to say? Well, for that, I called my friend Ryan.

Ryan Holiday is the bestselling author of *The Obstacle is the Way* and *Ego is the Enemy*. His new book is *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living*.

So what can the guys who invented the toga party teach us about living well? Let's get to it...

Events Don't Upset You. Beliefs Do.

PERSPECTIVE 101

1. Something happens.
2. It means nothing.
3. We make up a story about what it means.
4. The story we make up creates our reality, it creates our world, it creates what's possible and not possible.

THINKGROWPROSPER • SELFINTHECITY

You get dumped by someone you're totally in love with. Feel sad? God, yes. The world is going to end.

Okay, same scenario, but afterwards you find out that person was actually a psychopath who killed their last three partners. Feel sad you got dumped? No, you're thrilled.

So clearly "getting dumped" isn't the important factor here. What changed? Nothing but your beliefs.

If you lose your job and believe it was a lousy position and believe it won't be hard for you to get a better job, you're unfazed. If you believe it was the greatest job ever and believe you'll never get another one that good — you're devastated. Emotions aren't random. They follow from beliefs. Here's Ryan:

“Thinking makes it so...”

The Stoics are saying there are no good or bad events, there's only perception. Shakespeare encapsulated it well when he said, “Nothing is either good nor bad but thinking makes it so.” Shakespeare and the Stoics are saying that the world around us is indifferent, it is objective.

The Stoics are saying, “This happened to me,” is not the same as, “This happened to me and that's bad.” They're saying if you stop at the first part, you will be much more resilient and much more able to make some good out of anything that happens.

Change Your Beliefs. Change Your Life.

Skeptical? Sound too simple? Guess what? You couldn't be more wrong...

This part of Stoic philosophy was adapted by famed psychologist Albert Ellis to form **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy** — which is now the dominant method for helping people overcome problems ranging from depression to anxiety to anger. Most of the bad feelings you have are caused by irrational beliefs.

Next time you're feeling negative emotions, don't focus on the event that you think "caused" them. Ask yourself what belief you hold about that event. And then ask yourself if it's rational:

"If my partner dumps me, I'll never get over it."

"If I lose my job, my life is over."

"If I don't finish reading this post, the writer will hate me forever."

Only the third one is true. (Smile.) The other two are irrational. And that's why you get anxious, angry or depressed. Revise your beliefs and you can change your feelings: "Even if they dump me, I can meet someone else. It's happened before and I got over it."

Control What You Can. Ignore the Rest.

So you're revising your beliefs to overcome sadness and anger. Awesome. But what about when you're unhappy because you're worried about the future?

You know the Serenity Prayer?

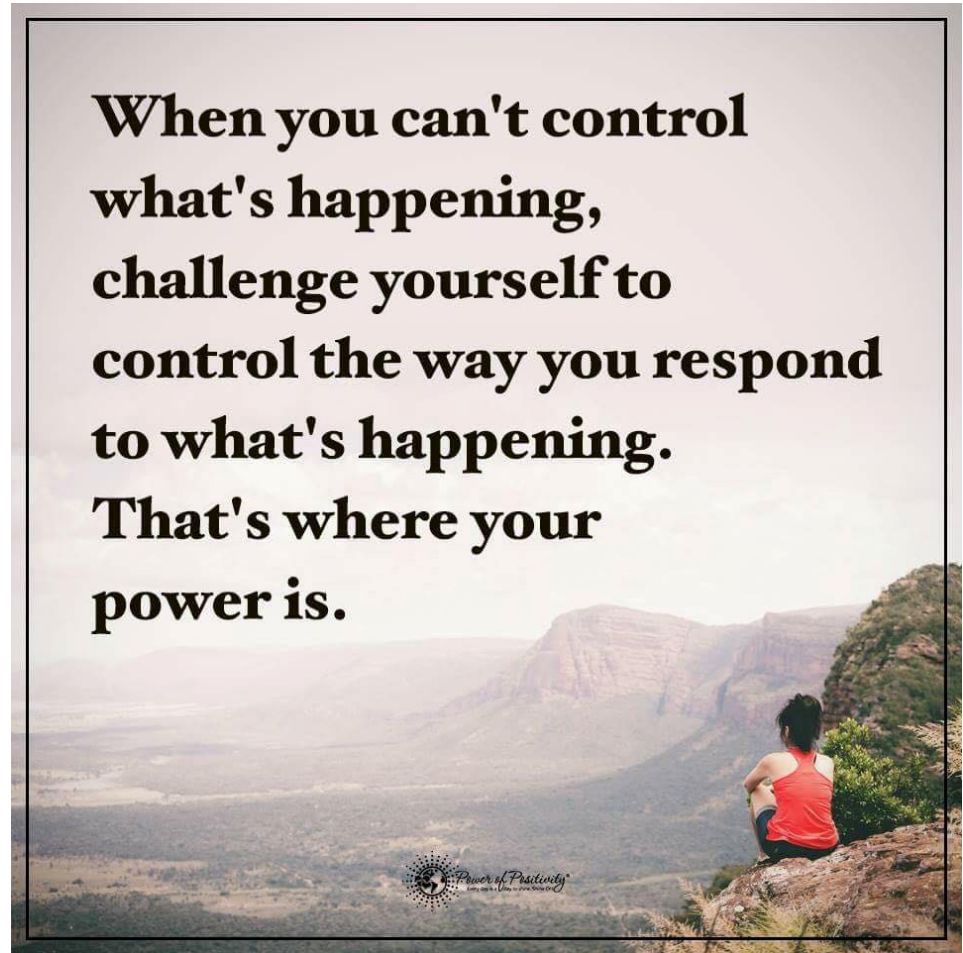
"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
and Wisdom to know the difference."

Reinhold Nieburh came up with it around 1934. The Stoics were preaching that basic idea, oh, about 2000 years earlier.

The Stoics were really big on control. But they were not control freaks at all. A key part of Stoicism is just asking yourself, "***Can I do anything about this?***"

If you can, do it. If you can't... then you can't. But worrying achieves nothing but stress.

When you can't control what's happening, challenge yourself to control the way you respond to what's happening. That's where your power is.



Here's Ryan...

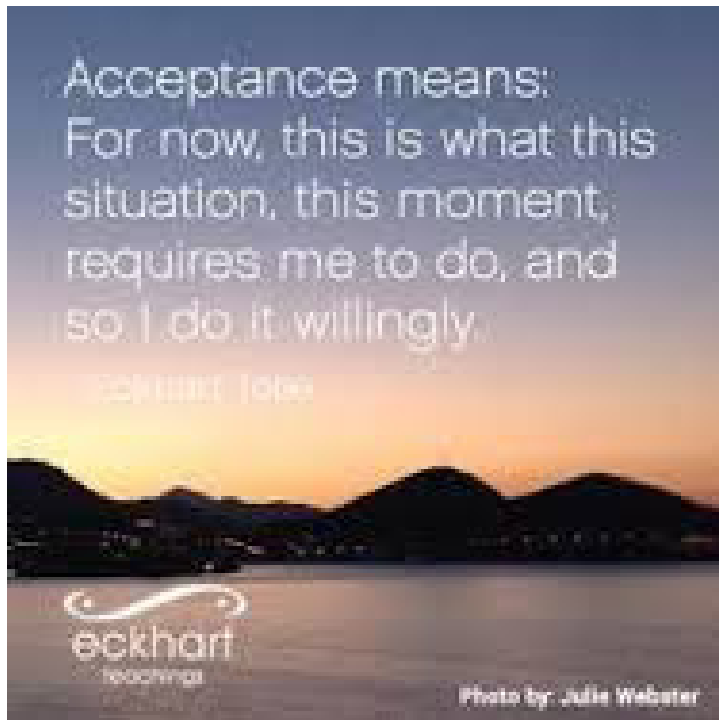
What the Stoics are saying is so much of what worries us are things that we have no control over. If I'm doing something tomorrow and I'm worried about it raining and ruining it, no amount of me stressing about it is going to change whether it rains or not. The Stoics are saying, "Not only are you going to be happier if you can make the distinction between what you can change and can't change but if you focus your energy exclusively on what you can change, you're going to be a lot more productive and effective as well."

Next time you're worrying, pause and ask yourself, "***Do I have control over this?***" If you do, stop worrying and get to work.

If you don't have control, worrying won't make it better. And going back to the first point, it might be a good idea to ask yourself what your belief is that's causing all this worry... Yeah, it's probably irrational.

So sadness, anger and worrying are irrational responses and they're not the right way to react when things happen. So what is the right way to react to stuff that doesn't meet your expectations?

Accept Everything. But Don't Be Passive.



This is the one everybody has trouble with. Nobody likes the word “accept.” We think it means “give up.” It doesn’t.

Let’s look at it this way: What’s the opposite of accept? Deny. As in “denial.” And nobody ever recommends denial.

Albert Ellis told people they’d be much happier if they removed the word “should” from their vocabulary. “Should” is denial. You’re saying your expectations deserve to override reality:

“My kids shouldn’t be misbehaving!”

(News flash: they are.)

“Traffic shouldn’t be this bad!”

(Um, but it is.)

“It shouldn’t be raining!”

(Say it louder. Complaining might work this time.)

Denial is irrational, and as we just learned, irrational beliefs are where negative emotions come from. So the first step is to accept reality. But that doesn’t mean you have to be passive. You accept the rain. It’s here. Denial and shoulds won’t change anything... but that doesn’t mean you can’t grab an umbrella.

Acceptance is...

Here's Ryan...

Acceptance to us means resignation but to the Stoics it meant accepting the facts as they are and then deciding what you're going to do about them. The problem is that because we have expectations about how we want things to be, we feel like acceptance is settling, when in reality we have no idea what could have happened instead. This awful thing might have saved us from something much worse. Or maybe this is going to open us up to some new amazing opportunity that we can't yet conceive. The Stoics are saying, "Let's not waste any energy fighting things that are outside our control, let's accept them, let's embrace them and then let's move on and see what we can do with it."

Next time things don't go your way, don't deny reality. Accept it. It's here. Then ask if you have control over it. If you do, do something. If you don't, ask if your beliefs are rational.

That's how you go from: "It shouldn't be raining! We can't go to the park! The day is ruined!" to "Yeah, it's raining. No park today. Let's see an awesome movie."

Alright, we've covered a lot of Stoic methods for beating bad feelings. That covers defense. Let's talk offense. How do you improve your life?

Choose Whose Child You Will Be.

I know, I know — that doesn't make any sense at all. Hold your horses, I'll explain...

Everything we've talked about so far happens in your head. And, as we learned, that's where the problems usually start. But if life's gonna get better we need to learn from other people.

You're not alone in this world. You have so much to learn from others. Role models. Mentors. And Seneca, one of the big cheeses of Stoicism, got the point across with this beautiful quote that I love:

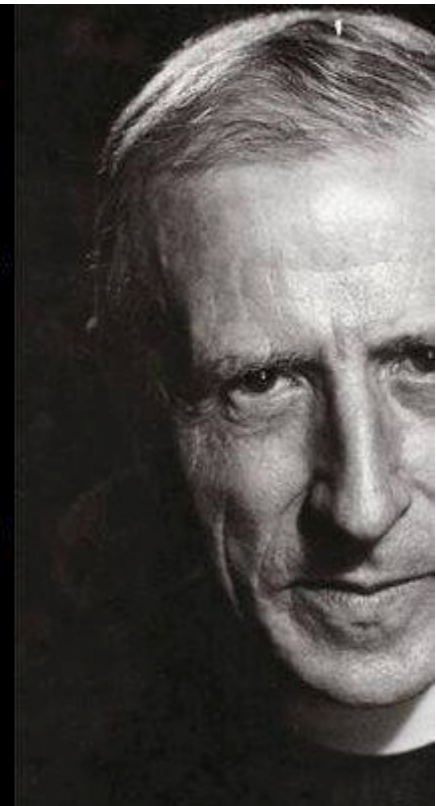
“We like to say that we don't get to choose our parents, that they were given by chance – yet, we can truly choose whose children we wish to be.”

When I spoke to Anders Ericsson, the professor who came up with the “10,000 hours” theory of expertise, he said the first step in being better at anything (and that includes life) is to find a mentor. Here's Anders:

There is almost a sensual longing for communion with others who have a large vision. The immense fulfillment of the friendship between those engaged in furthering the evolution of consciousness has a quality impossible to describe.

— Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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Who's Your Hero?

“They need to talk to somebody that they really admire, a person that is doing something in a way that they would like to eventually be able to do. Have this person help you identify what it is that you might need to change in order to be able to do what that other person is doing.

Interview that person about how they were able to do it, and then have that person help you identify what is it that you can't do right now and what are the steps towards reaching that desired level of performance.”

Next time you face a challenge, think of someone you admire. Research shows asking yourself “What would _____ do?” can have powerful positive effects on your behavior.

Role models and mentors are great for helping you be your best. But how do you make sure you're actually improving? How do you know you're making progress toward being the best you?

Morning and Evening Rituals Are Essential

Finish each day and
be done with it.
You have done what you
could. Some blunders
and absurdities no doubt
crept in; forget them
as soon as you can.
Tomorrow is a new day.
You shall begin it
serenely and with too high
a spirit to be encumbered
with your old nonsense.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Plenty of research shows that rituals can really improve your life. What type did the Stoics recommend? Morning rituals and evening rituals. One to get you ready for the day, the other to reflect on how things went and figure out what to improve. Here's Ryan:

The Stoics thought you should start the day with a ritual of reminding yourself of what you're going to face. Marcus Aurelius said, "Today, the people that you face will be..." and then he proceeds to list basically every negative trait you could possibly encounter in the course of a day. That's not pessimistic, he's saying, "Now that you know this, don't take any of it personally and try to understand why people might act this way and forgive and love them for that." The Stoics believe you start the day with a meditation of what's to come and then you should end the day reflecting on what has transpired and what can be improved.

The Stoics didn't believe in perfection. They felt we were all a work-in-progress. You can always be getting better. As Seneca said:

As long as you live, keep learning how to live.

Sum Up.

Here's how ancient wisdom from the Stoics can help you be happier:

Events Don't Upset You. Beliefs Do:
Only the end of the world is the end of the world.

Control What You Can. Ignore The Rest:
Worrying never fixed anything.

Accept Everything. But Don't Be Passive:
Nobody recommends denial. Accept. And then do something.

Choose Whose Child You Will Be:
"What would Batman do in this situation?"

Morning And Evening Rituals Are Essential:
Plan for the day, then reflect on the day.

Counting Our Blessings.

Okay, we've learned a lot of ancient wisdom. Let's round it up and get the final tip that science agrees is one of the most powerful happiness boosters... *gratitude*.

Marcus Aurelius' classic book *Meditations* starts out kinda weird. He mentions all the people who he feels indebted to for having helped him. It's basically **a *gratitude list***.

The Stoics were big on gratitude. In fact, in *Meditations* he wrote:

"Don't set your mind on things you don't possess as if they were yours, but count the blessings you actually possess and think how much you would desire them if they weren't already yours."

A few thousand years later research would catch up with him on that one. Studies show mentally subtracting cherished moments from your life makes you appreciate them more, makes you grateful and makes you happier.

"What if I never met my partner?

What if my child was never born?

Wow, I am so lucky to have them in my life."

You don't need that shiny new thing in order to smile.

Take a second to appreciate all the shiny things you already have that aren't so new. New is overrated. Sometimes ideas from thousands of years ago are all we need to be happy.

Barking Up the Wrong Tree

For more blogs by Eric Barker, check out Barking Up the Wrong Tree.

For the original blog this presentation was based on, go to:

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