

Technique 4: Stoicism

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A Stoic Trick for a Tranquil Mind

On our quest to be more resilient, we now move onto the Stoics. The ancient Stoics had a life philosophy that may seem alien to our modern sentiments, but nevertheless holds some interesting perspectives on how to deal with stress today.

Let's take a quick look at a way to approach life's problems, as the Stoics thought people should. You may even see the commonalities between this ancient approach and modern CBT methods, one of which you've already encountered.



The banner features the Explorable logo (a flask icon) and the text "EXPLORABLE Quiz Time!". Below the logo are three quiz cards: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" (with a roller skates image), "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" (with a colored pencils image), and "Quiz: Flags in Europe" (with a Ferris wheel image). A "See all quizzes =>" link is located at the bottom right.

How to Begin

Take a moment to think of a life problem, a worry or a thing that gives you anxiety at the moment. Now, according to the Stoics, life problems like these fall into only one of three categories, and the category it falls into determines how you can deal with it. Keeping your problem in mind, consider categories.

Category One

Things that you have full control over – these include your response to a situation, what you do or say and your thoughts about an event.

Example: whether you tell a colleague that you won't lie to management about their behavior is a choice entirely up to you and 100% within your control.

Category Two

Things you have only partial control over – these include grey areas and situations that you can sway or influence, but not completely.

For example, you could make amends and apologize to a friend you've insulted, but whether they forgive you or not is not in your control – it's in theirs.

Category Three

Things you have no control over – these include things like the weather; if you'll have a car accident or not; the country you happened to be born in, etc.

For example, whether you are born male or female is 100% out of your control.

Your Problems

Now, go back to the list of problems you initially created, and think about which category each of them fall under. For each problem choose only one category.

Category One Problems

Super! You have complete control over your problem. So, turn whatever stress you have on the issue into the best possible action, given your circumstances. Here, worry and anxiety can be used as essential motivation to act wisely. Think carefully about your goals and options, weight them up, and act. Here, worry is entirely unnecessary. Merely act congruently and adjust.

Category Two Problems

Great! Your problem is partly under your control. Your challenge now is deciding what aspects you can influence and what aspects you can't. In our example, your stress and anxiety are best channeled into apologizing and making sure you don't offend your friend in that way again. But what about those aspects you don't have control over? Well, then those aspects belong to category three.

Category Three Problems

Congratulations! There's not a thing you can do about your problem. This may seem glib, but when you think about it, it is incredibly freeing, as well. If a problem cannot be controlled by you, it doesn't matter what you do, it will continue to be whatever it is. In this case, you might as well let it go and free yourself to pursue things that you actually do have control over. Your stressing adds nothing. The weather is terrible? That's too bad. But instead of complaining and stressing about it, turn your mind to those aspects of your world you have realistic control over. Do you need to buy a better raincoat?

Is the Method Applicable?

Every problem in life, no matter how big or small, can be classed in one of these three categories. For the Stoics, stressing about things that were outside your realm of influence was illogical and only disturbed your state of mind. Instead, use what mental energy you have to carefully consider what you can change for the better, and how.

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