

# STOIC

## THERAPY TOOLKIT

Donald J. Robertson



[learn.donaldrobertson.name](http://learn.donaldrobertson.name)

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 Design by Rocio de Torres.



# STOIC THERAPY TOOLKIT

---

## DAILY SELF-IMPROVEMENT REGIME

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

I put this toolkit together for you because people kept asking me to create a download with a convenient outline of some key Stoic practices. I'd like to thank all the individuals who gave feedback on the initial draft, to help improve the content for others. You can find more detailed information about these and other psychological techniques in my books on Stoicism: *The Philosophy of CBT* (2010), *Build your Resilience* (2012) and *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* (2013). I've given a very simplified framework for practicing Stoicism below, based on my own daily routine, and the approach Modern Stoicism has used with tens thousands of participants around the world for Stoic Week and the Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience (SMRT) training. Our research showed that it benefited them and so I'm confident you'll find it helpful to follow as well.



# THE GOAL

---

## OF VIRTUE

The goal of life was expressed by Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, as living in agreement with Nature. Wisdom and virtue consist in living harmoniously with Nature, say the Stoics, and in this way our lives will go smoothly and we'll achieve fulfillment (*eudaimonia*). Chrysippus distinguished two aspects to this: living in accord with our own internal nature as reasoning beings by trying to act wisely, and living in accord with the external Nature of the universe by dispassionately accepting the events that befall us. Epictetus later explained that the key to doing this is continual mindfulness of the distinction between things that are “up to us” and things that are not, by which he meant our own voluntary actions versus things that happen to us. Every other technique of Stoicism is understood in relation to the fundamental goal of living in accord with Nature, and this “dichotomy of control”.

The Stoics distinguished between three levels of living in accord with Nature, and four virtues, which are believed to correlate with the topics of philosophy as follows:

1. Living in accord with our own true nature as rational beings, through the virtue of wisdom, and study in the field of Stoic Logic.
2. Living in concord with society and other people, through the virtue of justice, and study in the field of Stoic Ethics.
3. Living in acceptance of Fate, at one with the cosmos as a whole, through the virtues of courage and moderation, and study in the field of Stoic Physics.

Virtue (or “excellence” of character; *arete*) is the only true good for Stoics, and vice the only true evil; although other things have value (*axia*) they're not part of our supreme good or the goal of life.



# DAILY ROUTINE

---

## MORNING.

After you awaken, sit somewhere quiet, close your eyes and begin by contemplating, in your mind's eye, the rising sun and stars at daybreak, thinking of the whole of space and time and your place within things. Rehearse the sovereign precept of Epictetus' Stoicism: "Some things are under our control and others are not", or choose another relevant Stoic maxim. Prepare yourself for the day ahead by imagining the things that could go wrong, viewing them with Stoic indifference, and preparing in advance to respond with wisdom and equanimity.

## THROUGHOUT THE DAY.

Continually practice mindfulness (*prosoche*) of your thoughts and actions, and in particular the distinction between what's up to you and what is not. Avoid making value judgements about external events being good or bad, helpful or harmful, etc., or complaining about things to yourself or others. When such thoughts occur just take a step back and withhold your assent from them by saying to them: "It's not events that upset us but our judgements about them". Try to live wisely, and in accord with the virtues you genuinely admire most in other people. If it helps, take time out of your day to sit in Stoic meditation, maybe five minutes twice a day. See the *Four Stoic Meditations* below.

## EVENING.

Before going to sleep, take time to mentally review your day once, or even three times. Talk to yourself gently and with kindness, like a friend, but evaluate your actions carefully, using questions like these:

1. What did you do well?
2. What did you do badly?
3. What could you do better next time?

Did you miss any opportunities to exercise virtue or strength of character? Reflecting on your experience in this way is a learning cycle. The insights you gain in the evening will help you prepare for the day ahead once again the following morning.



# FOUR STOIC

---

## MEDITATIONS

These are four of the most important Stoic techniques:

### **PREMEDITATION OF ADVERSITY (*PRAEMEDITATIO MALORUM*).**

Practice imagining different “catastrophes” that could befall you, as if they’re happening now, while maintaining Stoic objectivity and indifference toward them, focusing on the distinction between what is up to you and what is not, and allowing sufficient time for your initial feelings to abate naturally. Consider how a Stoic sage would respond to the same events.

### **CONTEMPLATION OF DEATH.**

Periodically reflect on your own mortality, viewing it dispassionately, and as both natural and inevitable. Each morning remind yourself that the day ahead could be your last; each evening imagine viewing the day behind you as if it were your last. Try to live grounded in the present moment, appreciating the gift of life as if you’re a guest at a festival or banquet, which you know will only last for a short while.

### **CONTEMPLATION OF THE WHOLE.**

Imagine the whole world as if seen from high above, like the gods looking down from Mount Olympus. Alternatively, try to imagine the whole of space and time, and your place within things. Consider also the transience of all material things, and the small span of time that human life lasts.

### **CONTEMPLATION OF THE SAGE.**

Imagine the example of the ideal Stoic wise man or woman, and how they would cope with different challenges in life. Try to put their attitudes into words, which you can memorize as short sayings or maxims. Likewise consider examples such as Socrates, Zeno, Epictetus, or Marcus Aurelius or other specific role models from history, fiction, or your own life.



# THE THERAPY OF

---

## THE PASSIONS

This is a summary of Stoic advice for coping with emotional disturbances, such as feelings of anger, fear, and sadness, or unhealthy cravings and bad habits:

1. Look out for the early-warning signs of unhealthy desires and emotions (“passions”).
2. Say to the impression: “You are just an appearance and not at all the thing you claim to represent” (cognitive distancing).
3. Remind yourself that nothing lasts forever and that everything changes over time; think of the event that’s troubling you as transient, having a beginning, middle and end.
4. Postpone responding to it until your feelings have naturally abated, maybe later the same evening.
5. Think about it calmly and rationally, bearing in mind the distinction between what’s up to us and what is not. Describe the events to yourself simply and objectively, without any value judgements or emotive language. Ask yourself what a role model like Socrates, Zeno, or Epictetus would do in the same situation. Ask yourself what virtues Nature has given you to help you cope.

I hope you found that useful. If you’re looking for more information on Stoicism, you may be interested in the other courses and downloads on my e-learning site:

**[learn.donaldrobertson.name](http://learn.donaldrobertson.name)**