



MODERN STOICISM AND ITS USEFULNESS IN FOSTERING RESILIENCE

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Abstract: *The 21st Century has seen a rise in the popularity of Stoicism, particularly among those working in high-stress, high-performance professions. The success stories of investors, entrepreneurs, CEOs, and the like using Stoicism to better endure stress have permeated into the popular narrative of modern-day resilience. This paper summarizes some of these Modern Stoicism case studies, describes some of the principles of Stoicism that are particularly pertinent to resilience, and proposes the potential of Stoicism to be incorporated into primary mental health interventions for individuals at high risk for experiencing traumatic events.*

Keywords: *stoicism, resilience, stress,*

Introduction

The ancient philosophy of Stoicism has been resurrected, reexamined, and re-purposed many times since its inception in the 3rd century BC. From students in the ancient Roman Empire studying Stoicism to cultivate discipline and virtue, to renaissance philosophers contriving Neostoicism—a Christianity-infused version of the original ancient philosophy (Baltzly, 2019). The most recent iteration of Stoicism, though, does not blend any kind of religion with Stoicism so much as it blends Stoicism and self-help for people in the arena of life. Indeed, Modern Stoicism has caught on rapidly with high-achieving individuals in equally high-stress environments. This paper examines some of the success stories of using stoicism to create resilience and also discusses how Modern Stoicism could potentially be used to help certain populations at high risk for experiencing traumatic events.

In order to best understand why so many people have found Stoicism useful in stressful situations, one must have some foundational knowledge of its core

principles. The following are a few of tenets of Stoicism that are pertinent to resilience:

1. Happiness is obtained by living a virtuous life, not by pursuing material pleasure
2. Remembering what you can control and can't control is essential. Don't shift blame on to others for bad situations. Take ownership of your thoughts and actions but don't concern yourself with opinions or events outside of your control. We can't control outside events, but we can control our reactions to them.
3. Don't dwell in the past, future, or on negative emotions. Simply focus on getting done what you can in the present moment.
4. Focus on cooperation and doing good. Connection and helping others are two of the most important things in life.
5. Progressing into a better person is incredibly important and adversity presents an opportunity to do exactly that (Hanselman, 2020).

Examples of Stoicism Applied to Resilience

One of the most prominent modern examples of someone espousing these tenets in order to better endure suffering is doctor and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1946) details his experience in a Nazi concentration camp and gives personal insights into the mindset he had that allowed him to persist through such abject suffering. While he never explicitly credits Stoicism for informing his mindset in the concentration camp, Stoic principles can certainly be seen throughout the book. There have also been parallels drawn between Stoic philosophy and Frankl's own psychological theory of Logotherapy (Maddox, 2015). One of the book's most famous quotes, in fact, encapsulates the Stoic principle of controlling ourselves and our reactions rather than trying to control circumstances outside of our control: "when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl, 1946, p. 112). Frankl expands on this idea again in the book when he writes "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Frankl, 1946, p. 86).

Frankl's experiences certainly represent an extreme example, but nevertheless they do truly exemplify how powerful the simple notion of controlling thoughts and reactions can be in all circumstances. This principal also dovetails with findings from a study on coping mechanisms which surveyed police, firemen, and emergency medical workers following a traumatic event. The study found that the most frequently endorsed coping strategies involved understanding and appraising the event head on, rather than avoiding it. "Attempts to reach cognitive mastery over the event and to ascertain meaning" as well as "regaining mastery. . .

and philosophical self-contemplation," were the strategies found to be most useful (McCammonet et al., 1988). These strategies closely mirror what a Stoic might do in such a situation: find meaning in the adversity and focus on something he can control (i.e., regaining mastery in his profession).

The use of Stoicism goes beyond bearing suffering, though. There are also case studies of Stoicism providing strength and equanimity to leaders aspiring to lofty goals and facing challenging odds. One such example is George Washington, who was likely introduced to Stoicism in his teen years through a neighboring family (Montgomery, 1936). While it's difficult to determine exactly the extent to which Washington subscribed to Stoicism, it is known that he hosted a play for his troops about one of Ancient Stoicism's most famous contributors, Cato (Hardy, n.d.). What's more, he reportedly was prone to quoting certain Stoic aphorisms and philosophers (How to Be a Great Leader, 2020). Given all of this and Washington's legendary poise under pressure, it seems reasonable to assume he utilized some of the Stoics techniques for handling adversity.

Similar to Washington, James Mattis is a serviceman who practiced some of the Stoic teachings during his long and decorated career in the armed services. During his career in the military, Mattis was known for his voracious reading habits (Macias, 2018). No doubt, he was influenced by many of history's greatest philosophers and thinkers, but the one book he always carried with him throughout his deployment in the Marine Corps and the one book that he recommended every single American read is *Meditations* (Szoldra, 2018). *Meditations* is the personal ponderings of Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. The book is filled with Aurelius' messages and reminders to himself, many of which Mattis found to be

MODERN STOICISM AND ITS USEFULNESS IN FOSTERING RESILIENCE

incredibly valuable for handling the stress and anxiety of being in combat.

The wisdom expressed in books like *Meditations* isn't reserved exclusively for presidents or combat veterans. Many of Aurelius' incisive messages, such as "never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present" have been helping readers get more out of day-to-day life and understandably so; as the spreading popularity of Modern Stoicism attests, this ancient philosophy still has a lot to offer people in everyday life (Aurelius & Hays, 2003, pg. 128).

William B. Irvine is one of the academics who has contributed to the 21st century reemergence of Stoicism, but his focus has been making the ancient wisdom accessible and useful for everyone (Wright State University, n.d.). He's written many books on the topic, each one aiming to distill the massive amount of information available on Stoicism into simple practices that can be implemented into daily life. Aside from the simplicity of Irvine's stoic recommendations, what makes them even more appealing is that many of them are now science-backed ways of improving well-being.

Of course, the Ancient Greeks did not have functional magnetic resonance imaging at their disposal to test the biological effects of reframing their interpretation of situations. Now, though, we have the capability to do just that, and the findings are striking. A widely cited 2006 study in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* found that cognitively reframing adverse events resulted in reduced activity in the amygdala and other emotion processing parts of the brain. This suggests that cognitive reframing does confer some ability to regulate emotions, and the results of this reframing can be demonstrated even at the neurological level (Ochsner et al., 2006).

These findings align well with three of Irvine's common reframing techniques for developing a stoic mindset. The first of these techniques is using the story telling frame. This technique is used when you find yourself in some sort of problem, and you then take the perspective of your future self telling the story of how you endured your current situation. This creates space between you and the stress you might be feeling and allows for some freedom to think creatively about how to resolve the problem. Instead of just repeatedly going through the same possible solutions and possible impasses, think: how would a clever protagonist solve this situation? Furthermore, by taking the perspective of your future self, this technique serves as a reminder that life will continue on despite whatever problem you're facing. (Irvine, 2009).

The second reframing technique is one that has already been alluded to: reframing problems as challenges and opportunities for improvement. A proper practitioner of this technique would not feel drained by a problem or setback. Rather, s/he would feel invigorated by one. A setback is just another opportunity to build strength, exercise ingenuity in problem solving, and strengthen your plans (Irvine, 2009). Some people might have a natural propensity for this line of thinking, while others might find this technique to be easier said than done. One example of a modern stoic who naturally defaults into this line of thinking is author and former Navy SEAL, Jocko Willink. Willink explained his unfaltering ability to find opportunity and silver lining in adversity in a viral podcast monologue that's been dubbed "Jocko's Good Speech" due to the fact that Willink responds "good" to every setback he encounters (Willink, 2015).

The third technique is another one that might come with varying levels of ease to different people, and that is using comedy to lighten your perspective on difficult

MODERN STOICISM AND ITS USEFULNESS IN FOSTERING RESILIENCE

situations. Everyone at some point has experienced a joke or even just a humorous change in perspective that reduced stress. This technique aims to increase the frequency of those experiences by cultivating one's ability to find humor in stressful situations. As it happens, research also supports this technique with studies that show an association of greater levels of humor and better responses to negative life events (Martin et al., 1993).

Another interesting use of Stoicism in resilience is using it to build mental fortitude in children through story telling. This idea is explored in a 2019 paper, *Fairytales: A Novel Way of Educating Children About Psychological Health* (Everly, 2019). In the paper, Everly notes that fairytales have been an engaging and age-old technique for teaching positive behaviors to kids. She also posits that the utility of fairytales extends beyond creating positive behavior changes and can also create positive mental habits. The story used to exemplify this idea is The Brothers' Grimm.

The Grimms' fairytales teach one of the most important lessons of Stoicism in a way that is much more palatable to children than reading Seneca or Cato to them. The Grimms' fairytales, by way of story, explains how we control our reactions to situations. More specifically, it explores how fear is simply our interpretation of certain situations, and we have the ability to control our interpretation of situations. By understanding this, a character in the story "repeatedly finds himself in frightening situations, yet never once experiences fear" (Everly, 2019, pg. 183). Perhaps stories like the Grimms' fairytales and other classic tales that smack of Stoicism can be used to create stronger mental habits and more resilient youth.

Conclusion

Stoicism is currently undergoing a sort of rebranding that's transforming it from

abstruse ancient philosophy to an edifying tool for high achievers. For evidence, one need not look further than Stoicisms marked rise in popularity in Silicon Valley (Pigliucci, 2019). Entrepreneurs and executives are taking to some of Stoicisms principles in order to build the requisite mental toughness for their jobs.

Along with the general perception of who a stoic is, the sources of information on Stoicism are also quickly changing. Instead of being confined to history or philosophy textbooks and couched in dated language, the messages of Aurelius, Zeno, Cato, and the like can be found on blogs, social media sites, and in self-help books articulated in ways that anyone can understand (Ferriss, 2009). Perhaps this rise in modern Stoicism creates an analogous opportunity to the one discussed by Everly. Instead of teaching children about resilience through stories, though, maybe there is an opportunity to teach those working in professions at high risk for trauma about resilience through these more modern applications of an ancient philosophy now that it has become less esoteric and more widespread.

There is a reason that ancient wisdom—be it Buddhism, Taoism, Stoicism, etc.—continually resurfaces throughout history, and that's because it more often than not contains perennial truths about human nature and how to improve the human experience. Stoicism appears to be unique among these philosophies in its popularity and utility among those enduring high-stress scenarios. This lends evidence to the idea that a primary mental health intervention (which is an intervention that aims to prevent development of poor mental health and promote the development of good mental health) aiming to instill stoic principles could benefit those in high-stress jobs. What's more, the tenets of Stoicism don't just allow people to better endure suffering, they also have guided centuries of thinkers to happier, more

MODERN STOICISM AND ITS USEFULNESS IN FOSTERING RESILIENCE

equanimous lives. This means a Stoicism-based primary mental health intervention has the potential to, at once, help those who go on to endure trauma as well as those who simply need help more skillfully navigating the stresses of everyday life.

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MODERN STOICISM AND ITS USEFULNESS IN FOSTERING RESILIENCE

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