

Stoicism Assembly

We are beset by all sorts of external influences that, if we are not careful, can make us feel worse. One of the tragedies of our time is that we are given a seemingly overwhelming amount of information by a frenzied 24 hour news cycle, most of which we can do very little about. My own list of troubling matters would include: the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, Brexit, Climate Change, the quality of our national governance, the erosion of human rights around the world and the possibility of the re-election of Donald Trump. And those are just the ones that occurred to me in the moment. Doubtless there are others. And then there is the host of more immediate worries associated with my personal and professional circumstances. You will be the same as me. We all have our troubles, some of which we share with others, some of which we don't. How can we navigate a path through them all? Are there any rules that can guide us? Well, actually there are.

I want to recommend one of those ways to you this morning – and it has been around for a while. I recommend that you use the ancient Greek and Roman philosophy of Stoicism.

You might not have heard about it before, but it has an impressive history. Stoicism was a major philosophical force for over six hundred years - from 300BC to the third-century AD. It was a practical philosophy, designed to help you negotiate a path through a difficult and uncertain life. The problems of today are different to the problems of the ancient world, but both can be addressed by the same thought process. In recent years, it has been making something of a comeback, after having been suppressed for 1700 years.

Stoicism is a toolkit of problem-solving, but it also has something to tell you about how to live a happy and successful life; it can also make you feel less stressed.

The big idea at the heart of stoicism isn't something you have to believe in, it's a question

where that energy can have an effect. If you fret about things you can't control, you are wasting your effort and time and are making yourself suffer unnecessarily.

Since you are now focussed on becoming a rational being, managing your thoughts, speech and actions, you had better be sure that they are founded upon sound information. Stoicism tells us that our intelligence makes us special, but you cannot make good, intelligent decisions based on bad information. We need to make sure that we are acting on truthful sources and that we think rationally and carefully before reaching any judgement. Stoicism tells us to take our news from sources that are honest and unbiased. Prefer the BBC to something you have seen on TikTok. Don't rush to judgement. Base your thinking on your own conclusions rather than someone else's. It is within your control to make sure that you act and think rationally, based on strong understanding.

Because you should focus on your own emotions and thoughts, a Stoic would feel it is wise to avoid being knocked off course by the emotions of others, which you do not control. Epictetus wrote that other people's views and troubles can be contagious. Don't sabotage yourself by unwittingly adopting negative, unproductive attitudes through the influence of others.

In the ancient world the threat posed by others came from angry mobs prone to rioting. In our world that role is taken by Twitter storms and internet pile-ons. Steer well clear. There is no place for reason and rationality in that context and others' opinions are not your concern. So, avoid.

As a Stoic would feel it

Marcus Aurelius wrote,