



# Manage Negative Emotions

Free 7 Day Course



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## Manage Negative Emotions

*This series teaches you the Stoic approach for managing negative emotions in 7 days.*

*Each day will share a key quote, meditation on Stoic theory, and end with a practical action you can do to become more Stoic.*

*To go deeper, read [The Stoa Letter](#), get daily guidance from the [Stoa app](#), or checkout [Stoa Conversations](#).*



# I. Take the Stoic Way

The unrestricted person, who has in hand what they will in all events, is free. But anyone who can be restricted, coerced, or pushed into something against what they will is a slave.

– Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1



## Theory

Negative emotions buffet us around and around.

Sometimes there are periods in life when they are overwhelming and out of control. Other times, their influence is more subtle and it's not until later in life that we realize that they were holding us back.

It's not just people that restrict us, but our own emotions.

The ancient Stoics emphasized the management of negative emotions to be free and live well.

Managing emotions is about more than feeling good. They influence our decisions and, ultimately, determine who we are.

The Stoics, and psychologists today, knew that our judgments determine our emotions.

**How we think shapes how we feel.**

The same event can affect people differently because those people make different judgments. What someone feels as useless pain, another experiences as healthy exercise. What someone experiences as a depressing obstacle, another sees as an exciting opportunity.

The good news is that through practice, **we can change how we think. And by changing how we think, we will transform who we are.**

The rest of this series will focus on Stoic theory and strategies to help you liberate yourself from negative emotions. Each day will contain a quote, lesson, and action.

## Action

Take some time to reflect on the idea that negative emotions are holding you back from the life you wish to lead.

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## II. Manage Anger

A man thinks himself injured, wishes to take vengeance, but dissuaded by some consideration immediately calms down. This I do not call anger, this prompting of the mind which is submissive to reason; anger is that which overleaps reason and sweeps it away.

– Seneca, *On Anger*

## Theory

Anger is the root of poor decisions.

In the ancient world, it brought about tragedy and stupidity. In the modern world, its consequences are the same. The outcomes range from relationships broken, opportunities squandered, and much worse.

The Stoic philosopher Seneca said **anger is the root of all evil**.

It may be true. Anger is like a set of tinted glasses. When we are angry we put on the glasses and see a distorted vision of the world.

With anger coloring our vision, other people become enemies that deserve to be punished.

Wrath makes our judgments feel objective and self-evident. But this is not guaranteed. As the slogan goes, "Don't believe everything you think."

How many times have we been angry, only to learn that our reasons for anger were misplaced? How many of us have spent hours in righteous fury – only to realize that we

were angry over nothing? Or realizing that the person who insulted us, lashed out because they were suffering themselves?

The Stoic insight is that this is nearly always the case when we're angry. **Anger is not grounded in reason and reflection.**

What matters in life is making excellent decisions and thinking well. Anger contributes to the exact opposite. Many people are too distracted by their rage to notice.

How can we defend against anger?

The Stoics mention many techniques. Here's one: **notice when anger is beginning.** Whether it's a sensation or a context. And nip it in the bud. Do not let it flower.

Consider Seneca:

A man thinks himself injured, wishes to take vengeance, but dissuaded by some consideration immediately calms down. This I do not call anger, this prompting of the mind which is submissive to reason; anger is that which overleaps reason and sweeps it away.

We need to distinguish between feeling and full-blown emotion. Before fully forming, anger begins as a feeling. If one isn't careful, that feeling will transform into wrath and passion.

Seneca notes that we can use reason to calm down. **It is much easier to do this before the emotion forms** – before we see the world through the distorted vision of anger.

In [Stoa](#), we practice this by improving our ability to notice sensations through meditation. Once the hint of negative emotion has arisen, we can return to our reason and remain calm. We practice using reason by understanding the lessons of Stoicism, engaging in philosophical inquiry, and visualizing acting correctly. You don't need to meditate to learn this though. You can start by paying attention to your internal state now. Record when you notice anger beginning to appear, but put it out before it gets out of control

 **Action**

Catch yourself at least once and think before becoming consumed by passion. Record your success in a notebook, journal, or app.

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### III. Escape Anxiety

There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality.

– Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius* 13



#### Theory

In his 13th Letter to Lucilius, Seneca wrote that “We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.”

Instead of seeing things as they are, we leap beyond what we see and know. We get caught up in our nervous imagination.

Cognitive-behavioral therapists have identified the thought patterns that lead to anxiety and other negative emotions, calling them cognitive distortions.

These cognitive distortions, like thinking in black and white, mind reading, and catastrophizing are often behind our anxiety. Thinking in black and white results in seeing something as a complete failure or success. Mindreading consists of us imagining that others think the worst of us. And catastrophizing involves immediately going to the worst case.

**Each of these mistakes involves thinking incorrectly.** When we think in black and white, we only consider two possibilities. But the world is much more complicated. When we mindread, we jump beyond the evidence we have and imagine thoughts in the other. Something similar happens when we catastrophize, we distort the evidence we have and immediately go to the worst case.

At the root of it then, **much of our anxiety is a result of incorrectly applying our reason.** Ancient and modern Stoics saw us as fundamentally rational creatures. Each of

us has the ability to think well. By thinking well, we avoid cognitive distortions, thereby managing anxiety and focusing on what matters.

**It's worth noting that anxiety is almost useful.** It's the opposite of oblivious recklessness. The person who is too anxious loses out on life because they never try. The person who is too reckless ends up hurting themselves. The prudent strikes the middle path – acting with wisdom instead of recklessness and caution instead of anxiety.

How can one be prudent? Start by seeing the world as it is through objective representation. This technique involves describing what's known in nonjudgemental terms. For instance, if you overhear coworkers talking and fear that it's about you, note that you heard coworkers talking. That's it. You do not need to add any unwarranted value judgments or stories. If you failed to get a job, note that you failed to get the job – that's it. Turn your attention to improving, creating new opportunities, and seizing the chances that arise.

**Instead of leaping into fantasies, simply describe the situation as you see it.** And then act prudently. You've done it before and can do it again.

## Action

Pause once in the day. Remind yourself to stay in the present and see things as they are. Reframe your experience, accept it, and then return to what matters.

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## IV. Face Stress

The more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce instead a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community.

– Richard Ryan, Veronika Huta, and Edward Deci, *The Exploration of Happiness*

## Theory

What is stress?

Some say stress kills.

Is that true? In her book, *The Upshot of Stress*, psychologist Kelly McGonigal argues the common notion that stress is unhealthy is overrated. It's not stress as such that is linked to negative health outcomes. But stress *and* the belief that stress is harmful. There is a class of people who feel stressed, do not believe that it is harmful, and do not suffer associated health risks.

This is what the ancient Stoics would have predicted. **Our beliefs about the world shape our experience of it.**

More importantly, **stress itself isn't bad**. It may be a shocking statement, but to the Stoics, it wasn't fundamentally what matters.

Instead, think about what stress is. It's an emotion that arises when you believe something important is at stake or threatened.

We feel stressed in traffic because we fear not getting to work on time. We become stressed at work when we worry we're not performing well. And we experience stress in relationships when neither we nor our partners are happy.

In each of these examples, there are two important matters at stake: performance at work and relationships.

**It is acting well that matters, not the stress.** Stress is a signal, a loud hint that something is not right – either with our thoughts or the world. Perhaps we're valuing the wrong thing – we believe something important is at stake, but are mistaken. Many people do this with their careers. Or perhaps something essential truly is threatened.

It's not the stress as such that needs to be addressed – it's our thoughts or decisions that should be.

One mistake many make is seeking to completely avoid stress. Remember what stress is: a sense that arises when something important is at stake. If you're completely avoiding stress, that's a sign that you're not doing anything important.

People can get away with this for years, but in the end, they will feel unsatisfied. Because they are not living in accord with their values.

So, instead of seeing stress as an evil, face it head-on. Treat it as information or motivation. And return to what matters.

## Action

Note one time when you feel like avoiding what matters, don't. Enthusiastically take it on.

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## V. See through Sadness

Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them.

– Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7.47

## Theory

The Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius was the last of the 5 good emperors. He was upright and dedicated to being an excellent ruler.

This, of course, was not easy. The Roman emperor was one of the most powerful positions, if not the most powerful, of the day. **It was an office that corrupted many Romans.** Like any powerful position, it demanded adeptly managing allies and enemies. Marcus Aurelius had to manage many difficult situations, from betrayal to war to plague.

**Yet perhaps his most difficult struggles were personal.** Marcus lost many children – 9 of them never made it to adulthood. That's a weight of tragedy that would have been difficult to comprehend.

Marcus Aurelius did not let these losses destroy him. Instead, he continued to rule well, finding solace in the philosophy of Stoicism.

He wrote down many of his Stoic thoughts in his diary, *The Meditations*. He applied Stoic philosophy as a healing balm. Whatever you are facing, you can do the same.

Stoicism reminds us how our lives fit into the bigger picture and encourages us to see the world with clear eyes.

Through training in Stoic philosophy, Marcus Aurelius focused on what matters.

The Stoic attitude is sometimes considered cold. But the philosopher Seneca's words capture the Stoic attitude much better:

We may weep, but we must not wail.

There's a time for grief. We're social creatures and loss of any kind is naturally painful. Ancient philosophy is not a panacea.

Yet it can help. It made a difference to Marcus Aurelius and the million of Stoics that followed him.

Stoicism reminds us to see ourselves from the bigger picture. Life is a temporary affair, full of joy and tragedy. **This view from above renders grief less surprising and more manageable.** It can help free you to return to what matters, the beautiful and the good.

## Action

Pause and take time to appreciate the beautiful and good today. Do not just go through the motions, know that we live in a beautiful, good, and finite world.

## VI. Get Perspective

And all the ones you know yourself, one after another. One who laid out another for burial, and was buried himself, and then the man who buried him - all in the same short space of time.

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.48

## Theory

A common way we misjudge events is to blow them out of proportion. **We magnify small things into big things and turn mishaps into catastrophes.**

To prevent that, it helps to shift our perspective to something larger than ourselves. It's useful to view our lives from above, from a third-person perspective.

The philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius reminds us that:

The universe is transformation; life is opinion.

Today, practice Stoic mindfulness by taking the view from above. Instead of inhabiting your narrow focus in space and time, **bring to mind the vast scale of nature.**

Stoicism is about using our rational capacity to see things as they are and not immediately assent to our impressions of the world.

In the French philosopher Pierre Hadot's words, the goal of the view from above is to have the whole constantly in mind and act within a cosmic perspective. We are one animal among trillions. **Often what we feel has cosmic significance, does not.**

As you go throughout your day, take this third-person perspective now and again.

You will find it helps clarify what is important and what is not.

## Action

Pause and take the view from above at least once today. Imagine yourself looking down on your life from space. Let what is trivial fade away from your mind and leave what truly matters.

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## VII. Virtue is the Point

What does virtue achieve for us? Serenity.

## Theory

Stoicism is not only about reducing negative emotion. Instead, **it's about acting virtuously**.

**The purpose of life isn't to eliminate negative feelings.** Negative feelings will come and go even when negative emotions are gone. That's a fact of life.

Instead, for Stoics the purpose of life is to act according to our nature. As rational and social beings. This involves pursuing the true and the good. Less abstractly, it means thinking well and making excellent decisions. This is called being virtuous.

Ultimately, Stoics focus on making correct judgments. Because negative emotions are grounded in incorrect thoughts and beliefs, the Stoic removes negative emotions as well.

Through virtue, negative experiences will dissipate. By focusing on acting courageously, becoming self-disciplined, treating others with justice, and acting with wisdom, we can live well.

As Epictetus said:

What is the goal of virtue, after all, except a life that flows smoothly?

But, and this is the crucial point here, one can focus too much on reducing negative emotions.

Negative feelings have a way of resisting our attempts to eliminate them.

For example, when we seek to remove negative emotions because they make us feel bad, that judgment gives emotions too much power. By admitting that we cannot bear bad feelings, we've already lost. Within reason, we can accept negative feelings and sensations – in the same way, we observe and accept other feelings and sensations in a mindfulness exercise.

**Happiness is better stumbled into than pursued.** As three psychologists and scholars put it in the Exploration of Happiness:

The more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce instead a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community.

Negative emotions are just incorrect judgments – **focus on living well**. That is how one manages negative emotions.

### **Action**

Do one virtuous act. Be ambitious, but realistic.

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