

HAPPINESS



Ancient wisdom reveals 4 rituals that will make you happy

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Alright, you've probably read a zillion articles about happiness online and you're not a zillion times happier. What gives?

Reading ain't the same as doing. You wouldn't expect to read some martial arts books and then go kick ass like Bruce Lee, would you? All behavior, all changes, must be *trained*.

Happiness can come from many areas: life choices, overcoming hurdles, a new career path, and even some purchases. While material items, or money, can't buy happiness, the findings of a new study conducted at [The University of Texas](#) at [Austin](#) do say this: they've concluded that purchasing experiences over material goods almost always leads to [more feelings of happiness](#).

But material items and careers may not be the long-term answer for [achieving happiness](#).

The ancient [Stoics](#) knew this. They didn't write stuff just to be read. They created rituals — exercises — to be performed to train your mind to respond properly to life so you could live it well.

From [The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living](#):

That's why the philosophers warn us not to be satisfied with mere learning, but to add practice and then training. For as time passes we forget what we learned and end up doing the opposite, and hold opinions the opposite of what we should. — Epictetus, Discourses, 2.9.13-14

And what's fascinating is that modern [scientific research](#) agrees with a surprising amount of what these guys were talking about 2000 years ago.

Okay, kiddo, time to rummage through the Stoic toolbox and dig out some simple rituals you can use to be much happier.

So let's say life decides to suplex you and you're feeling 32 flavors of bad. What's the first thing in the Stoic bag of philosophical tricks to improve how you feel — and help you make better choices in the future?

Ask, "What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?"

Traffic is terrible. Your friend is driving. He leans on the horn, punches the steering wheel, and shouts at the other drivers. You're like, "Jeez, calm down. Why you getting so worked up? Chill."

The next day traffic is terrible but you're driving ... So, of course, you lean on the horn, punch the steering wheel, and shout at the other drivers.

See the problem here, Sherlock? We all do it. But there's a lesson to be learned that the Stoics knew a few millennia ago...

When something bad happens, ask yourself, "What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?" And then do that. You'll probably be more rational. And it's harder to ignore the advice — because it's your own.

From [A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy](#):

In his Handbook, Epictetus advocates this sort of "projective visualization." Suppose, he says, that our servant breaks a cup. We are likely to get angry and have our tranquility disrupted by the incident. One way to avert this anger is to think about how we would feel if the incident had happened to someone else instead. If we were at someone's house and his servant broke a cup, we would be unlikely to get angry; indeed, we might try to calm our host by saying "It's just a cup; these things happen." Engaging in projective visualization, Epictetus believes, will make us appreciate the relative insignificance of the bad things that happen to us and will therefore prevent them from disrupting our tranquility.

Slick advice. Does it work? When I spoke with Duke professor [Dan Ariely](#), author of the bestseller [Predictably Irrational](#), he said pretty much *the same thing*. He called it "taking the outside perspective." Here's Dan:

If I had to give advice across many aspects of life, I would ask people to take what's called "the outside perspective." And the outside perspective is easily thought about: "What would you do if you made the recommendation for another person?" And I find that often when we're recommending something to another person, we don't think about our current state and we don't think about our current emotions. We actually think a bit more distant from the decision and often make the better decision because of that.

The Golden Rule says "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In honor of the Stoics, I'm going to suggest that when something gets you worked up you should follow "The Toga Rule" and "Do unto yourself what you would recommend to others."

(To learn the 6 rituals that ancient wisdom says will make your life awesome, click [here](#).)

Alright, you're following "The Toga Rule" when life goes sideways. But some reactions are hard to squelch. You have bad habits. We all do. So what do the Stoics have on their Batman utility belt to deal with bad habits?

Turns out they were way ahead of their time on this one...

Use the "discipline of assent"

There's usually a moment — however brief — when you decide to give in to an impulse or resist it. You have a choice. But you agree to act out that script you've performed a 1000 times, even though it always has lousy consequences.

The Stoics were big on not getting carried away by thoughts and feelings. The "discipline of assent" is to feel that impulse, that desire to do something you know you shouldn't, and not give in. But, as you know, that is *really freakin' hard*. Find [what motivates you](#) to not give in.

Epictetus thought the key was that moment when you're deciding. Catch yourself when you're about to act and just *postpone*. You don't have to grit your teeth and be a willpower superhero yet. Just pause and think. In [Discourses and Selected Writings](#) Epictetus said:

Don't let the force of an impression when it first hits you knock you off your feet; just say to it, "Hold on a moment; let me see who you are and what you represent. Let me put you to the test."

And modern [research into breaking bad habits](#) says the same thing. First, catch yourself in the act, and then [postpone](#):

Those in the postponement condition actually ate significantly less than those in the self-denial condition ... The result suggests that telling yourself I can have this later operates in the mind a bit like having it now. It satisfies the craving to some degree — and can be even more effective at suppressing the appetite than actually eating the treat ... It takes willpower to turn down dessert, but apparently it's less stressful on the mind to say Later rather than Never.

In the long run, you end up wanting less and also consuming less.

Great, you resisted. But it's gonna happen again ... So how do you break bad habits? You don't.

You *replace* them. In [Discourses and Selected Writings](#) Epictetus said:

What aid can we find to combat habit? The opposed habit ... So if you like doing something, do it regularly; if you don't like doing something, make a habit of doing something different.

And recent science says the exact same thing. Don't try to eliminate; replace.

From [The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#):

We know that a habit cannot be eradicated — it must, instead, be replaced. And we know that habits are most malleable when the Golden Rule of habit change is applied: If we keep the same cue and the same reward, a new routine can be inserted.

Alright, clearing out the bad is good. But just taking out the negative doesn't necessarily increase the positive. Because you *want*. You *want* and *need* and *crave*. Enough is never really enough because we all eventually take things for granted and then find new, even shinier things to need...

How can you stop running on this treadmill of desire and finally just be happy with what you have? Stoics to the rescue...

Make it a treat

The Stoics understood just how miserable runaway desire can make you. In his book [Enchiridion](#), Epictetus wrote:

He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.

And, frankly, the Stoic response to this was pretty extreme. To make themselves appreciate the things they had, these guys would deliberately contemplate losing everything they loved. They'd think about death. A lot. They'd deprive themselves of every pleasure to force themselves to stop taking things for granted.

From [The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living](#):

Here's a lesson to test your mind's mettle: take part of a week in which you have only the most meager and cheap food, dress in shabby clothes, and ask yourself if this is really the worst that you feared. — Seneca, Moral Letters, 18.5-6

And research shows doing that [really works](#). But it ain't any kind of fun. Luckily, there is a less painful way to get similar results...

What's something you used to relish that you now take for granted? Did that first morning cup of coffee used to be a wonderful moment — and now it's just something you hastily gulp down? Well, skip it for three days.

This isn't merely something old dead guys recommend. When I spoke to Harvard professor [Mike Norton](#) he said this is how you can regain an appreciation for the things that you've taken for granted. Make them a treat. Here's Mike:

If you love, every day, having the same coffee, don't have it for a few days and then when you have it again, it's going to be way more amazing than all of the ones that you would have had in the meantime ... It's not "give it up forever." It's "give it up for short periods of time, and I promise you you're going to love it even more when you come back to it."

And then, once the three days are over, oh man, SAVOR that coffee — or whatever it is that you've denied yourself. Yes, the Stoics want you to deeply enjoy it. They weren't a bunch of joyless bores and they weren't like Spock from "Star Trek." They didn't believe in being unemotional; they just fought negative emotions.

The Stoics believed in living in the present moment so you could enjoy life more.

From [The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living](#):

It's ruinous for the soul to be anxious about the future and miserable in advance of misery, engulfed by anxiety that the things it desires might remain its own until the very end. For such a soul will never be at rest — by longing for things to come it will lose the ability to enjoy present things.
— Seneca, Moral Letters, 98.5b-6a

And, yes, [science](#) backs up Stoic savoring. When you're focused on the present and turn your attention to the pleasurable experience in front of you, you're happier.

Via [Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth](#):

The key component to effective savoring is focused attention. By taking the time and spending the effort to appreciate the positive, people are able to experience more well-being.

Deprive yourself a bit — then savor the hell out of it. This is how you can stop wanting and start enjoying what you have.

(To learn the 4 Stoic secrets to becoming mentally strong, click [here](#).)

Now it's time for the big one: how can you make sure your life keeps getting better? Or, put another way: how can you make sure you're getting better at life? Not making the same mistakes, always learning and improving so that every day is better than the one before? Toga-truth to the rescue...

Do an evening review

Annual reviews at work don't do much for happiness. But the Stoics were big fans of reviewing your day so that you can improve your life.

From [The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living](#):

I will keep constant watch over myself and — most usefully — will put each day up for review. For this is what makes us evil — that none of us looks back upon our own lives. We reflect upon only that which we are about to do. And yet our plans for the future descend from the past. — Seneca, Moral Letters, 83.2

But does reflecting on your actions really make a difference?

Yup. When bestselling author [David Epstein](#) looked at what makes great athletes great he found that the magic word was “reflection.” They think about what they’ve done and ask themselves if it’s working. Here’s [David](#):

When they do something, whether it’s good or bad, they take time for reflection. They asked themselves “Was it difficult enough? Was it too easy? Did it make me better? Did it not?”

It sounds simple and sounds facile, but I think we don’t do it.

An [evening ritual](#) where you reflect on what you did that day is critical. Seneca, one of the heavy hitters of Stoicism said [this](#):

When the light has been removed and my wife has fallen silent, aware of this habit that’s now mine, I examine my entire day and go back over what I’ve done and said, hiding nothing from myself, passing nothing by. For why should I fear any consequence from my mistakes, when I’m able to say, “See that you don’t do it again, but now I forgive you.”

Ask yourself what you did wrong today. Ask yourself what you should have done that you didn’t do. Now you know how you can improve tomorrow. But don’t beat yourself up. Be like Seneca and forgive yourself. Have some [self-compassion](#).

Did you procrastinate today? Research shows that it’s [forgiving yourself](#) — not beating yourself up — that prevents you from continuing to put things off. If you don’t know how to get started doing this, use the [10-minute timer](#) trick to kick off your nightly reflections.

And don’t just be critical of yourself. Think about what you did well so you can repeat it tomorrow. Be grateful for the good that happened today. Yes, Stoicism gives the thumbs up to gratitude. Marcus Aurelius believed in “counting your blessings.”

From [The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living](#):

Don’t set your mind on things you don’t possess as if they were yours, but count the blessings you actually possess and think how much you would desire them if they weren’t already yours.

— Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7.27

And [writing those blessings down](#) before you go to bed is one of the most scientifically proven methods for boosting happiness.

(To learn more happiness tips from ancient philosophy, click [here](#).)

Okay, you’ve earned your toga. Time to round up everything you now have in your Stoic bag o’ tricks and learn the ancient technique for getting along with other people so we can all be happy...

Sum up

Here’s what Stoicism says will make you happier:

- **Ask, “What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?”:** Take my advice by taking your own advice.
- **Use the “discipline of assent”:** Don’t resist; postpone. Then evaluate. And break bad habits by replacing them.
- **Make it a treat:** Deprive and then savor. When you can’t find a bathroom and then you finally do, that’s happiness.
- **Do an evening review:** Reflect. Forgive. Count your blessings. Show gratitude. (Yes, you can even be grateful for bloggers who read lots of books so you don’t have to.)

If you want to be happy, relationships are key. But all too often we focus on what *others* should be doing for *us*. That's a prescription for frustration.

One of the most fundamental principles in Stoicism is that you need to focus on what you can control. And you can't control other people. (Okay, maybe you can but those methods result in significant jail time.)

The Stoics knew that you can control what you do. And very often, that will affect how others treat you. [Seneca](#) put it very simply:

If you would be loved, love.

Yes, [science](#) backs that up. *But reading ain't the same as doing...*

So show someone you love them today. It's the Stoic thing to do.

This [column](#) first appeared at [Barking Up the Wrong Tree](#).

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