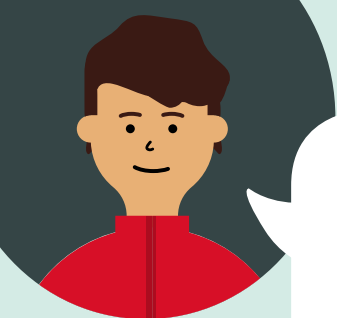


# Stoicism

*with Ben Aldridge*

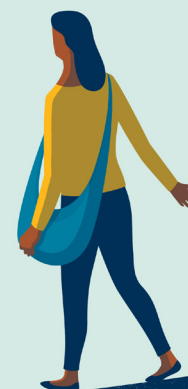
Stoicism is an Ancient Greek philosophy that has had a resurgence of popularity in recent years. Teacher and Author Ben Aldridge gives us an introduction to the philosophy, explains why it changed his life and shows us how we can use it to deal with adversity and challenges.





## What is Stoicism?

Stoicism is an Ancient Greek philosophy that focuses on self-control, developing a good character and living a life of virtue.



## Where did it come from?

Stoicism originated in Ancient Greece around 300 BC. Zeno of Citium started the movement after realising the importance of self-knowledge, self-improvement and self-discipline. He wanted a philosophy that was practical and could be used daily to deal with life's challenges. These ideas later spread to Rome where Stoicism became incredibly popular.

## What does it talk about?

Stoicism addresses many different things. Some of these include paying attention to what we can and can't control, contemplating our own mortality to provide a greater appreciation for life, how mindset and resilience training can help us to build mental strength and lots on self-reflection/journaling. It's all very practical and packed with great tips for leading a good life.

# Who are the key players/philosophers?

There are many Stoic philosophers and plenty of books to read on the subject. However, the three key players are Aurelius, Seneca and Epictetus. These guys are a great place to start and if you're interested in exploring the philosophy further, I highly recommend their work.

*'Difficulties strengthen the mind, as labour does the body.'*

Seneca

## **Seneca:**

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4BC – AD 65) produced several significant works contributing to Stoicism. The book *Letters from a Stoic* is a great introduction to Seneca's philosophy and offers advice that's relevant to our modern world. Seneca eventually became the imperial adviser to the Roman Emperor Nero. This all ended rather dramatically when Seneca was ordered to kill himself. He handled this like a true Stoic and accepted his fate without complaint.





**Aurelius:**

Marcus Aurelius (AD 121 – 180) was the Roman Emperor from AD 161 – 180. He became recognised in the Stoic community for his personal diary *Meditations* which was used as his way to self-evaluate his life in a Stoic light.

*‘Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking.’*

Aurelius

**Epictetus:**

Epictetus (AD 55 – 135) was born a slave but eventually gained his freedom. He later went on to set up a school for philosophy in Greece. Epictetus' main work to read is *The Enchiridion*. The book acts as a philosophical roadmap/handbook for how to live our lives and has a heavy focus on how we respond to situations.

*‘Don’t explain your philosophy. Embody it.’*

Epictetus



Who  
uses it?

Many iconic leaders have employed Stoic philosophy in their approach to life. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Nelson Mandela and Benjamin Franklin are three of the most famous advocates. These days you'll hear about sports teams, writers, musicians and entrepreneurs using Stoicism to guide their decisions. It's a philosophy for everyone and the ideas can be extremely helpful.

How did  
you discover  
this  
philosophy?

Several years ago, I was hit with severe and debilitating anxiety. I was in a very bad place and needed to dramatically change my life. After visiting the doctor and being told that I was experiencing panic attacks and acute anxiety, I committed to making a change in my life. To better understand what was happening to me, I started reading extensively on mental health, philosophy and psychology and this is where I discovered Stoicism. I loved how pragmatic the ideas were and instantly got hooked. I started exploring the philosophy in detail and began using it on a daily basis. My relationship with my anxiety completely changed, I stopped having panic attacks and I've never looked back since!

Who is  
Stoicism  
for?

Stoicism is for everyone! The ideas are very pragmatic and can easily be incorporated into our lives. It doesn't conflict with religious ideas so you'll often find people of faith alongside atheists using this philosophy. Stoicism is also accessible for all ages and something that can be extremely useful for younger minds.

How are you using Stoicism in your life?

I use a lot of the ideas within Stoicism on a daily basis and now see them as an integral part of my "personal operating system". The main idea that has really stuck with me is the concept of resilience training. The Stoics used to deliberately push themselves out of their comfort zones in order to build mental strength. They would do this in many different ways – cold and heat exposure; fasting from food and water; sleeping on the floor; wearing outrageous clothes and hard physical challenges. They would do all of this in order to practise the concepts of Stoicism in a controlled environment and build mental resilience. I fell in love with this idea and have been completing Stoic challenges inspired by this concept. According to the Stoics, the more we step outside of our comfort zones, the better we get at facing the chaos of life. I couldn't agree more and have certainly noticed a huge difference in my life since actively practising this idea.

What are some of the Stoic challenges you have completed?

There are so many challenges that I have completed in the name of self-improvement. In fact, my first book is all about this. Here are some examples: running marathons, taking cold showers and ice baths, learning Japanese, sleeping in unusual places, eating strange and disgusting things, climbing mountains, fasting, learning to solve the Rubik's cube in under a minute, completing obstacle course races and enduring long-distance walks. This is just scratching the surface... These Stoic inspired challenges have helped me to build resilience over time by stepping outside of my comfort zone in adventurous and varied ways. Working with frustrations, embracing discomfort, dealing with failure and cultivating patience are just some of the reasons that these challenges are so wide-ranging. Different things can challenge us in different ways. It's a fun concept and one that I continue to use in my life. Each challenge is essentially a platform for practicing the ideas within Stoicism.

Can you share with us some practical concepts from Stoicism?

Absolutely! Here are my three favourite ideas within Stoicism. Hopefully these will whet your appetite and inspire you to further explore this truly timeless philosophy.

## Control

One of the most important ideas within Stoicism is the concept of control. The Stoics accepted that we have very little control over external events. The only thing that we have control over is how we respond to these events. Epictetus, one of the most famous Stoic philosophers, used to talk about this all the time! And for good reason – this is such a helpful piece of advice when you really think about it. There is so much in life that we can't control, but accepting this can be very powerful. When something goes wrong, we have a choice about how we deal with it. Our power is how we choose to respond. This is true for so many situations in life.

The perfect example is being stuck in traffic. We've all been there! It's so easy to make the situation worse by complaining and stressing about the big queue of cars in front of us. The Stoics would accept that they can't control the traffic and focus on their response to the situation. This way, the traffic jam becomes a test of character and a way to practise this philosophy in the real world.

It's all about how we frame a situation.

All you need now is a traffic jam!

*'It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters'*

Epictetus

Accepting that we can't control everything in life is the first step towards becoming able to face chaos and disruption. When we spend time and energy on things we can't change, we tire ourselves out physically and mentally. It's so much better if we focus on what we can actually do and put our attention there. A lot of things might be beyond our control in life, but there are still things we can control. We should focus on these things. This is how we can bring ancient Stoic wisdom back to life!



## Journaling

The Stoics were fans of journaling and would use self-reflection as an important part of their philosophy. Marcus Aurelius' Meditations is essentially a journal that was never meant to be published. This was his personal diary where he would reflect on external events and explore Stoicism. Interestingly, this book is now one of the key texts within Stoicism and is essential reading for anyone interested in the philosophy.

*'I examine my entire day  
and go back over what  
I've done and said, hiding  
nothing from myself,  
passing nothing by.'*

Seneca

Assigning time to reflect on our day and look at how we performed in different areas can be a great use of our time. Establishing a morning and evening routine for this can be very beneficial and help us to create structure amidst the chaos of life. The Stoics would encourage self-reflection as an important part of the day and something that can help us to check-in with ourselves.





## Stoic challenges

The concept of challenging ourselves to build resilience is something that I absolutely love. The Stoics would do this all the time and it's a very practical concept. If we expose ourselves to hardship in a controlled environment, we are better preparing ourselves for the hardships we might face in the future. Essentially this is training for life (the tough bits in particular). I think the following Dalai Lama quote sums up this training beautifully: *A tree with strong roots can withstand the most violent storm, but the tree can't grow roots just as the storm appears on the horizon.*



*'We will train both soul and body when we accustom ourselves to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, scarcity of food, hardness of bed, abstaining from pleasures, and enduring pains.'*

Musonius Rufus

We prepare for adversity by practicing adversity. The Stoics believed we could do this and I do too. So, in the spirit of resilience training, why not create some challenges that would push you outside of your comfort zone? Maybe a cold shower would be a good place to start...Or signing up for a physical challenge that will push both your body and mind. This is a great way to creatively bring Stoicism to life. The only limits with this are your imagination.

## How can we use these ideas?

Using the previously mentioned tips is actually very straightforward. Start by thinking how you could include them in your life. Look for pockets of space where you can reflect on your day and assess how things went. Did you accept that the majority of events were outside of your control? Did you consider your response to them? You can also start testing the water with some Stoic challenges. Whilst trying these out, pay close attention to what your mind is doing and how you respond to the difficulties encountered. This can be a fun activity to do with others, so think about how you can bring your family and friends into this type of self-development space.

## How can we further explore Stoicism?

There are so many great resources to deepen our understanding of Stoicism. I would suggest that reading some of the classic literature is a great place to start. Aurelius, Epictetus and Seneca will set you up with a strong understanding of the Stoic roots. There are also plenty of modern authors who write about Stoicism. Ryan Holiday is one of my favourites and his book *The Obstacle Is The Way* and *The Daily Stoic* have become modern classics.

There is also a growing online community of Stoics and social media accounts like @dailystoic are a great place to connect with these people.

What's  
your  
favourite  
Stoic  
quote?

*'You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength.'*

Aurelius

Any final  
thoughts?

Stoic philosophy has had a huge influence on my life. I credit it as being the main philosophy that helped me to turn my life around after experiencing debilitating anxiety. The ideas and concepts within Stoicism have inspired me to write a book, create online content and complete countless challenges. My life has improved exponentially after putting in place a system of thought that allows me to deal with adversity. I truly believe that these ideas can be incredibly transformative for anyone who uses them and I hope that they resonate with you as much as they did with me.

## About the Author

Ben Aldridge writes about practical philosophy, comfort zones, mental health and adventure. His first book *How to Be Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable: 43 Weird & Wonderful Ways to Build a Strong Resilient Mindset* is an exploration of unique ways to leave our comfort zones, face our fears and overcome our anxieties. Heavily influenced by Stoicism, Buddhism, Popular Psychology and cognitive behavioural therapy, Ben's challenges encourage us to get uncomfortable and experience the personal growth that we can only gain from pushing ourselves to the limit.

Discover more at Ben's website and on social media:  
[www.benaldridge.com](http://www.benaldridge.com)  
Instagram: @dothingsthatchallengeyou

