

THE BIG IDEAS

“Today’s the Day!”

Seneca says.

Been Exiled Lately?

It’s all in how we respond.

The Wise Person

Does WOOP.

Flexibility --> Tranquility

Vices: Fickleness + Obstinacy.

Our Minds Must Relax

Is yours?

Stoic Anti-Fragility

Gotta love it. Let’s build it.

“But if each of us could have the tally of his future years set before him, as we can of our past years, how alarmed would be those who saw only a few years ahead, and how carefully would they use them!”

~ Seneca

On the Shortness of Life

Life Is Long If You Know How to Use It

BY SENECA · PENGUIN BOOKS © 2005 · 105 PAGES

“It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death’s final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short, and we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it. Just as when ample and princely wealth falls to a bad owner it is squandered in a moment, but wealth however modest, if entrusted to a good custodian, increases with use, so our lifetime extends amply if you manage it properly.”

~ Seneca from *On the Shortness of Life*

This is our second Note featuring Seneca’s wisdom.

Check out our Notes on [Letters from a Stoic](#) for more. (And, while you’re at it, check out our growing collection of [Old School Classics](#) + [Stoic wisdom](#).)

Seneca was born around the time of Jesus in the ancient city of Cordoba which, at the time, was the most prominent city in ancient Spain. He was a Roman statesman and tutor of Nero who is one of history’s most prominent Stoic philosophers (along with [Marcus Aurelius](#) and [Epictetus](#)). He is credited as the originator of the essay and is an extraordinarily lucid, compelling writer—sharing timeless wisdom with remarkable power.

This book isn’t an easy read. It’s not a book you pick up when you’re feeling tired or looking for a refreshing break. It’s a book you read early in the morning when you’re feeling energized and ready to chat with one of the world’s master teachers. (At least that’s how I approached it.)

The book is composed of three long essays: “On the Shortness of Life,” Consolation to Helvia” (a remarkable letter Seneca wrote to his mother to console her regarding his exile), and “On Tranquility of Mind.” (Get a copy [here](#).)

Entire pages of my copy are underlined with “wow”s. I’m excited to share a few of my favorite Ideas we can apply to our lives today so let’s jump in!

SENECA SAYS: “TODAY’S THE DAY!!”

“Can anything be more idiotic than certain people who boast of their foresight? They keep themselves officiously preoccupied in order to improve their lives; they spend their lives in organizing their lives. They direct their purposes with an eye to a distant future. But putting things off is the biggest waste of life: it snatches away each day as it comes, and denies us the present by promising the future. The greatest obstacle to living is expectancy, which hangs upon tomorrow and loses today. You are arranging what lies in Fortune’s control, and abandoning what lies in yours. What are you looking at? To what goal are you straining? The whole future lies in uncertainty: live immediately. Listen to the cry of our greatest poet, who as though inspired with divine utterance sings salutary verses:

Life's finest day for wretched mortals here
Is always first to flee.

*"Often a very old man has no
other proof of his long life
than his age."*

~ Seneca

'Why do you linger?' he means. 'Why are you idle? If you don't grasp it first, it flees.' And even if you do grasp it, it will still flee. So you must match time's swiftness with your speed in using it, and you must drink quickly as though from a rapid stream that will not always flow. In chastising endless delay, too, the poet very elegantly speaks not of the 'finest age' but 'finest day.' However greedy you are, why are you so unconcerned and so sluggish (while time flies so fast), extending months and years in a long sequence ahead of you? The poet is telling you about the day — and about this very day that is escaping. So can it be doubted that for wretched mortals — that is, the preoccupied — the finest day is always the first to flee?"

That's from the essay from which the book got its title: "Life Is Short for Those Who Don't Know How to Use It."

If you're wasting your time getting ready to live or frittering your time away on useless preoccupations life will appear very short.

But not if you live with a sense of perspective on just how few days you have left.

"You must match time's swiftness with your speed in using it, and you must drink quickly as though from a rapid stream that will not always flow."

In other words, you must live with a sense of (grounded) URGENCY!!

As we discuss in [Masterpiece Days 101](#), TODAY IS THE DAY.

It's our finest day and always the first to flee.

Let's drink swiftly and make today amazing.

BEEN EXILED LATELY?

"Whatever is best for a human being lies outside human control: it can be neither given nor taken away. The world you see, nature's greatest and most glorious creation, and the human mind which gazes and wonders at it, there are our own everlasting possessions and will remain with us as long as we ourselves remain. So, eager and upright, let us hasten with bold steps wherever circumstances take us, and let us journey through any countries whatever: there can be no place of exile within the world since nothing within the world is alien to men."

That's from the essay called "Consolation to Helvia"—Seneca's truly remarkable letter to his mother after being exiled from Rome by Nero.

The letter captures the essence of the Stoic philosophy: *"whatever is best for a human being lies outside human control: it can neither be given nor taken away."*

In other words, we possess WITHIN OURSELVES the greatest treasure: our ability to CHOOSE OUR RESPONSE to any situation.

This is how Seneca consoles his grieving mother. By telling her, in essence, *"Don't worry. I'm good. Yah, I'm no longer in Rome and I miss you, too, but know that they can't take away my power to appreciate life and I've never been happier."*

Seriously. He ends the letter with *"So this is how you must think of me—happy and cheerful as if in the best of circumstances. For they are best, since my mind, without any preoccupation, is free of its own tasks, now delighting in more trivial studies, now in its eagerness for the truth rising up to ponder its own nature and that of the universe."*

These days we'd call that some really powerful cognitive reframing—which is at the heart of cognitive behavioral therapy. We need to be able to accept our current circumstances as they are and then see how we can reinterpret them in a more empowering way. Seneca is a BOSS at this.

"If a man stirs himself to face the worst of disasters and defeats the evils which overwhelm others, then he wears those very sorrows like a sacred badge. For we are naturally disposed to admire more than anything else the man who shows fortitude in adversity."

~ Seneca

How about *you*?

Were you a leading statesman, on the top of your game working with the most powerful people in the world and then get exiled? (Eek.)

Or, perhaps you experienced your own minor (or major) setback recently that's still burning.

Think about it.

And think about how you can see the GOOD in whatever happened.

How has your life improved as a direct result of that challenge? How has it made you stronger? How are you anti-fragile?

Developing the capacity to re-appraise whatever happens to us is one of the most powerful aids to our growth. It's a REALLY wise skill to build. (It's also the essence of Ryan Holiday's Stoic-based book [The Obstacle Is the Way](#). Those Notes might be worth a re-read!)

P.S. Seneca begins the letter to his mother by telling her that he doesn't want to *distract* her from her grief but help her CONQUER her grief.

After eloquently prefacing his wisdom, he goes on to remind her of all the pain she has experienced in her life up to this point (from losing her mother in her own birth to a number of other tragic experiences). He does this not to bring more pain to her life but to remind her that she is an extraordinarily strong woman who has gained strength with every difficulty she has risen beyond.

Same with you and me. We've been through a lot in our lives. Those things that have not killed us can, if we choose to let them (important distinction) make us stronger. Let's appreciate our strength and use it for our current and future challenges!

P.P.S. Jocko Willink, Navy SEAL author of *Extreme Ownership* ([see Notes](#)), has a one word response to EVERYTHING (!) that ever happens to him: "Good."

Imagine that. Whatever happens. You say to yourself, "Good." I loved that so much I wrote it on my whiteboard and it's become something of a mantra to me.

—> "Good."

NOTHING HAPPENS TO THE WISE AGAINST THEIR EXPECTATION

"He who fears death will never do anything worthy of a living man."

~ Seneca

"Thus: 'I shall sail unless something happens'; and 'I shall become praetor unless something prevents me'; and 'My business will be successful unless something interferes.' That is why we say that nothing happens to the wise man against his expectation. We remove him not from the chances that befall mankind but from their mistakes, nor do all things turn out for him as he wished but as he reckoned—and above all he reckoned that something could block his plans. But inevitably the mind can cope more easily with the distress arising from disappointed longings if you have not promised it certain success."

Nothing happens to the wise person against her expectation.

Why?

She's anticipated that things may go wrong and, because of that, not only is she better prepared to handle the inevitable setbacks, she's much more likely to actually get what she wants.

Gabriele Oettingen tells us that's not just beautiful ancient wisdom, it's a modern scientific fact.

As she tells us in *Rethinking Positive Thinking* ([see Notes](#)): "Based on two decades of research findings, replicated across a variety of research participants, contexts, and methods, you would be ill-advised to indulge in dreams about achieving your goals and then assume you're well on your path to success. Life just doesn't work that way."

We've got to remember to WOOP.

Get clear on what you want (Wish) and get fired up about the benefits you will experience (Outcome).

THEN...

Consider what might get in the way (Obstacles) and figure out what you'll do to get around them when/if they arise (Plan).

Seneca would've been a critic of the self-help culture's obsession with pure fantasy positive thinking. I'm certain he would have been a fan of WOOP.

Are you?

P.S. Practically-speaking: What's your #1 goal these days? What do you want? Why? What might get in the way? What will you do to navigate those obstacles? Awesome. :)

FLEXIBILITY IS THE KEY TO TRANQUILITY

"So let all your activity be directed to some object, let it have some end in view."

~ Seneca

"We should also make ourselves flexible, so that we do not pin our hopes too much on our set plans, and can move over to those things to which chance has brought us, without dreading a change in either our purpose or our condition, provided that fickleness, that fault most inimical to tranquillity, does not get hold of us. For obstinacy, from which Fortune often extorts something, is bound to bring wretchedness and anxiety, and much more serious is the fickleness that nowhere restrains itself. Both are hostile to tranquility, and find change impossible and endurance impossible."

That's from the essay on Tranquility. (As is the prior passage.)

Know this: Tranquility comes from flexibility.

We need to have a clear sense of what we want and be willing to push through obstacles. If we go from thing to thing to thing we're not being virtuously flexible, we're being what he calls "fickle." That's a vice of not enough commitment.

And... If we just grind away in the same exact way, ignoring all the feedback that we might want to adapt a bit, we're not being virtuous either. That's a vice of excess commitment he calls "obstinacy."

Flexibility is right in the middle. Our virtuous mean. We're committed AND willing to adapt.

How are you fickle?

How are you obstinate?

How can you be more flexible?

Remember that flexibility is a key to tranquility.

OUR MINDS MUST RELAX

"The mind should not be kept continuously at the same pitch of concentration, but given amusing diversions. ..."

Our minds must relax: they will rise better and keener after a rest. Just as you must not force fertile farmland, as uninterrupted productivity will soon exhaust it, so constant effort will sap our mental vigour, while a short period of rest and relaxation will restore our powers. Unremitting effort leads to a kind of mental dullness and lethargy."

Personally, although I'm pretty good at shutting down at the end of the day and on weekends, this is one of my top weaknesses—thinking (or at least wishing) I can go hard all the time. :)

"Mark off, I tell you, and review the days of your life: you will see that very few the useless remnants have been left to you."

~ Seneca

Alas, it doesn't work that way. Our minds must relax.

"Just as you must not force fertile farmland, as uninterrupted productivity will soon exhaust it, so constant effort will sap our mental vigour, while a short period of rest and relaxation will restore our powers."

(Note: If your weakness lies on the other side of effort, remember: *"There is a big difference between slackening your hold on something and severing the link."*

In other words, you've gotta be willing to work hard, just bake in waves of good recovery. There's no virtue in either the vice of excess hard work or the vice of deficiency of hard work. :)

So, how do we best relax?

As it happens, I was just working on a [Willpower 101](#) class I'm prepping for and reviewing my Notes on [The Willpower Instinct](#).

Kelly McGonigal makes a really important point about effective and not-so-effective ways to let our minds relax.

She tells us: *"While many of the most popular stress-relief strategies fail to make us feel better, some strategies really work. According to the American Psychological Association, the most effective stress-relief strategies are exercising or playing sports, praying or attending a religious service, reading, listening to music, spending time with friends or family, getting a massage, going outside for a walk, meditating or doing yoga, and spending time with a creative hobby. (The least effective strategies are gambling, shopping, smoking, drinking, eating, playing video games, surfing the Internet, and watching TV or movies for more than two hours.)"*

Why is that? *"The main difference between the strategies that work and the strategies that don't? Rather than releasing dopamine and relying on the promise of reward, the real stress relievers boost mood-enhancing brain chemicals like serotonin and GABA, as well as the feel-good hormone oxytocin. They also help shut down the brain's stress response, reduce stress hormones in the body, and induce the healing relaxation response. Because they aren't exciting like the dopamine releasers, we tend to underestimate how good they will make us feel. And so we forget about these strategies not because they don't work, but because when we're stressed, our brains persistently mis-predict what will make us happy. This means that we'll often talk ourselves out of doing the very thing that will actually make us feel better."*

In other words: Quit jacking yourself up with more stimulation.

More dopamine-releasing internet surfing, video games, etc. isn't going to do the trick.

Go for a walk, meditate, get a massage, play with your kids, go play your favorite sport—have a list of what truly renews your mind and soul and go do that.

KNOWING a) you need it and b) you'll come back feeling better than ever!

STOIC ANTI-FRAGILITY

"In any case the mind must be recalled from external objects into itself: it must trust in itself, rejoice in itself, admire its own things; it must withdraw as much as possible from the affairs of others and devote its attention to itself; it must not feel losses and should take a kindly view even of misfortunes. When a shipwreck was reported and he heard that all his possessions had sunk, our founder Zeno said, 'Fortune bid me a less encumbered philosopher.' When a tyrant threatened to kill the philosopher Theodorus, and indeed to leave him unburied, he replied, 'You can please yourself, and my half-pint of blood is in your power; but as to burial, you are a fool if you think it matters to me whether I rot above or below ground.' Julius Canus, an outstandingly fine man, whom we can admire even though he was born in our age, had a long dispute with

"So there you have, my dear Serenus, the means of preserving your tranquility, the means of restoring it, and the means of resisting the faults that creep up on you unawares. But be sure of this, that none of them is strong enough for those who want to preserve such a fragile thing, unless the wavering mind is surrounded by attentive and unceasing care."

~ Seneca

Gaius; and as he was going away that Phalaris said to him, 'In case you are deluding yourself with foolish hopes, I have ordered you to be led off to execution.' His reply was, 'I thank you, noble emperor.'"

How about that for some more examples of Stoic anti-fragility?

Imagine losing *EVERYTHING* (in a shipwreck no less) and responding with this: "*Fortune bids me a less encumbered philosopher.*" (HAH!)

Or being ordered to be executed by a tyrant and replying, "*I thank you, noble emperor.*" (Um, yah.)

James Stockdale captured his version of this Stoic wisdom in his extraordinary book *Courage Under Fire* ([see Notes](#)) where he chose to play the role assigned to him as well as he could. That role? Ranking officer in a prisoner of war camp.

Viktor Frankl, of course, played his role in a concentration camp remarkably well and wrote about it in *Man's Search for Meaning* ([see Notes](#)).

Back to you again. How're you replying to life's challenges?

Remember to practice with the TINY things to build strength for the big ones.

Here's to the strength of mind and character that allows us to live with tranquility in the midst of life's challenges!

B

Brian Johnson,
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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.