

SUMMARY

THE DAILY STOIC

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Summary of “The Daily Stoic” by Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman

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Life lessons from Stoic philosophy to help you meditate and grow.

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Introduction

What's the meaning of life? We've all wrestled with that question at one point or another and wished we could find a simple answer. Our search for meaning is sometimes complicated by the fact that we have too many contradictory answers available. For example, every religion has its own take on the meaning of life and so does every self-help book and psychologist. They rarely agree with each other either and that often leaves us feeling even more confused. So, what path should we really follow? Whose advice would be most beneficial? Philosophy might not be the first option that comes to mind; if you've ever watched the hit TV show *The Good Place*, you might think philosophy is only for boring nerds who never have fun and spend their lives in pursuit of fundamental truths about the universe. You might think, "Who needs to waste their time worrying about all that?" or feel like it's pointless to spend your life studying the words of dead guys.

But if you watched all four seasons of *The Good Place*, then hopefully you learned something else too: that philosophy can bring meaning, peace, and direction to our lives. And that's exactly what Holiday and Hanselman (along with all the authors referenced in this book) believe, especially when it comes to Stoicism. That's because Stoicism isn't just your average philosophy-- it's a specific school of thought designed to address the problems people face in everyday life. Stoicism was created to answer the question, "What's the best way to live my life?" And although this book can't provide you with 365 chapters containing a different Stoic insight (that would be a pretty long book!) it can boil down several key pieces of advice that you can carry you with you each day. So, over the course of this summary, we'll take a closer look at what Stoicism really is and how Stoic philosophy functions in practical application.



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The Importance of Self-Awareness

Nobody lives in a bubble. (No matter how much we sometimes want to!) Stoic philosophers recognized that. They also understood that philosophy doesn't do much good if you never put it in practice. After all, we all know that you can sit by yourself with a book all day long and read and internalize new concepts. At the end of the day, you might come away with a lot of new knowledge, and that's awesome. But that knowledge doesn't help anybody if you don't live by it in the real world. That's why they believed that if you wanted to be a Stoic, you had to practice what you preach. And according to the early philosophers of the second century CE, the first step to doing that was cultivating your self-awareness.

Self-awareness can be defined as the conscious awareness of your own personality, individuality, character, and motives. But of course, it goes beyond surface understanding. For example, knowing that you love vanilla-flavored everything and hate chocolate doesn't count as self-awareness. But knowing that you have a tendency to sabotage your relationships because you feel like you don't deserve to be happy is self-awareness at its finest. If you think that doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs, you're not alone. Self-awareness-- and, by extension, Stoicism-- requires conducting an honest evaluation of yourself and your weaknesses. And most of us really don't like doing that. It's easier to bury those things, after all, or focus on our good qualities; often, we're afraid or embarrassed of our flaws and that makes us hesitant to confront them. But if you want to improve as a person, cultivating your self-awareness is crucial.

One of the earliest Stoic philosophers, Epictetus, understood that. In his seminal text *Discourses*, he addressed this issue, positing that self-awareness is the first step to becoming a philosopher. The moment you start to ask, "Why do I do that? And what can I do to change?" is the moment you open yourself up to critical analysis, and therefore, to growth. It may not be pretty; we may find more than a few blemishes we'd like to cover up or ignore. We might be tempted to say, "Oh, it's not that bad!" or "Sure, I strugg-

le with that, but that guy's so much worse than me!" But of course, that's not the point. If we want to become better people, we have to conduct a brutally honest self-assessment and be willing to confront what we find. And we can't give in to the temptations of avoidance, blame, or self-deception.

Neither can we fall prey to the toxic assumption that we're already perfect. Most of us wouldn't phrase it exactly like that and we certainly wouldn't say it out loud, but sometimes, we think it anyway. This attitude creeps in in subtle ways like thinking, "I might have a few flaws, but all things considered, I'm a pretty good person; I don't really need to work on self-improvement." Or it might manifest as a tendency to draw attention away from our own flaws by pointing out everything that's wrong with someone else. So, if you ever catch yourself being overly critical or feeling like you don't really have room to improve, that's the first sign that you desperately need to work on your self-awareness!

However, with that said, it's important to remember that some people struggle with the exact opposite. Where some people think more highly of themselves than they ought, there are others who struggle to see anything good about themselves at all. These people might feel as though they're nothing but failures or that they're absolutely worthless. But that's not a healthy perspective either! For every person who feels like they're perfect, there's at least one flaw. (But usually a lot more!) And for every person who feels like a failure, there's always something they've done well. A healthy and balanced view of yourself falls somewhere in the middle. It doesn't lean too far towards either extreme; instead, it acknowledges that you have a few flaws and a few strengths but you want to work on becoming the best person you can be.

But it's important to remember that self-awareness isn't a one-time skill you learn like tying your shoes. Instead, it's a skill you must continually develop throughout your life. But the job isn't over once you improve your self-awareness! That's because self-awareness is part of a very important duo that's made up of intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. Intrapersonal

sonal awareness is just another term for self-awareness; it's when you have a strong grasp on who you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what's happening within yourself. Interpersonal awareness means applying that knowledge to your interactions with other people. This is uniquely beneficial because self-awareness helps you to develop your empathy and communication skills. As you increase your understanding of your own emotions and how they impact your behavior, you'll be better at understanding and empathizing with other people's emotions. This in turn will make you a better communicator, a better partner, and a better friend. And as an added bonus, these communication skills can help you in pretty much every field of work!

But once you've developed these skills, Epictetus cautions you to maintain them by being selective about the company you keep. We've all been told to choose our friends wisely at one point or another, but you've probably never received that advice from a Stoic viewpoint before. You see, Epictetus' theory was that it's vital to surround yourself with people who motivate you to improve. Even though second century philosophers lacked the wealth of psychological studies and resources we have today, Epictetus still understood that your friends rub off on you, for better or worse. After all, who hasn't caught themselves saying a phrase that's a big part of your best friend's vocabulary? You probably didn't mean to pick up on their speech patterns, but it just happened because that's how it works when you spend a lot of time with someone! So, if you want to be sure that you're growing in the right direction, make sure you're surrounded by good influences.

For example, if your self-awareness inventory has shown you that you struggle with being overly judgmental and critical of others, you don't want to spend a lot of time around your perennially dissatisfied pal. Instead, you'll want to make friends with someone who always sees the best in others and motivates you to do the same. According to Seneca, another early Stoic philosopher, a good rule of thumb is to surround yourself with people you respect. Even if it's just one person, you need someone in your life whose opinion you respect and who you wouldn't want to disappoint. Fol-

lowing their example will motivate you to improve and so will time spent in their company.

You can also use their opinion as a filter. While it's certainly true that we should think for ourselves and refuse to be defined by the opinions of others, it's also helpful to have a strong sounding board. You can rely on the opinions of these people when you're facing difficult choices and use their standards and feedback to help you make decisions. For example, if you're tempted to do something that sounds iffy, you can ask yourself if that choice would cause your mentor to be disappointed in you. If you're doing something that would be against their core values or your own or that goes directly against the loving advice they've offered you, there's a pretty good chance that you shouldn't do that thing.

So, if you wanted to boil this chapter down to one key takeaway that you could put on your calendar, it might be: **work on improving your self-awareness so you can strengthen your character and your relationships with others. Remember to keep honing that self-awareness and surround yourself with positive influences so you can continue to grow.**



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Cultivate Clarity

We live in an age of digital distraction. Whether it's the constant onslaught of new messages pinging into your inbox, 5,000 Facebook notifications, or a bombardment of new work emails, we are constantly besieged by distractions. As a result, it's hardly surprising that we struggle to cut through the noise. These distractions can also impair our sense of clarity, interfere with our budding self-awareness, and make it tough for us to concentrate long enough to cultivate self-improvement. The philosophers of second century Rome couldn't have imagined the distractions future generations would face, but their advice remains scathingly relevant today.

That's because they knew how important it was to resist two of life's major pitfalls: temptation and distraction. So, how do we do that? How can we cultivate clarity? To answer this question, we can turn to the writings of Marcus Aurelius, a famous Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher. Marcus Aurelius had a unique solution for solving the problem of distraction: he suggested that we really try to live each day as if it was our last. That might sound overly simplistic or a bit cliché, but if you really think about it, that logic would orchestrate a massive shift in our perspective, wouldn't it? After all, what do we say when we think about trying to make the most out of life? We ask, "What would you do if you only had 24 hours left to live?" The prospect of losing all our time forever motivates us to jump into hyper-speed as we're suddenly consumed with the desire to make the most out of every second.

If we think we only have 24 hours to live, we suddenly start working faster, more efficiently, giving our best to the tasks ahead. We put more of ourselves into our relationships. We remind people that they're important to us and show loved ones how much we care. We think differently about our impact on the world and the legacy we'll leave behind. Now, what if we started applying that energy to our daily lives? How much of a difference would that make? Would we continue to waste time scrolling through Facebook when we should be finishing a report? Would we allow ourselves to be dis-

tracted by every little thing throughout the day? Or would we find ourselves thinking, “Every second is precious, I can’t let myself get distracted!” If we did, we might find that the task of time management suddenly becomes easier!

But that strategy might not work for you. So, if you think you might struggle to sustain that illusion for a prolonged period of time or it simply might not give you the boost you need, there are some other tips that you can try. Marcus Aurelius also advised creating your own personal mantra-- something you can repeat to yourself to help yourself stay on track. For example, you could say something like, “I have control over my own thoughts. I do not have to be ruled by distraction.” But that’s just an example; you can adapt your personal mantra to say anything that best suits you. If it helps keep you on task, it’s doing the trick! But if neither of these options work for you, relinquishing control can also be another helpful strategy.

I will be the first to admit that we often succumb to worry because we think it will help. We worry because we’re afraid of the outcome and because we feel helpless if we don’t turn the scenario over and over in our minds, preparing for all the possible worst outcomes. But unfortunately, you’ve probably noticed that worry never helps. In fact, not only is it never helpful, it just serves to keep us distressed and distracted. And in doing so, it steals our time, our energy, and our joy. But if we can make peace with the fact that we simply can’t control some things, we can free ourselves from the shackles of worry. This in turn will help us to focus!

If this seems like a lot of focus on the powers of the mind, you’re right! The mind was incredibly important to the Stoics because this school of philosophy believed that the mind was the only thing we could control. We can’t control our souls or our eternal destiny, we can’t control our appearance, and there’s only so much we can do to control our physical health, but we can control our minds and the development of our moral character. So, if we turn our attention to the things we can control-- our thoughts-- the Stoics believed that we could become better and healthier people. We can also

learn to discover peace through logic because if we find purpose in pursuing truth and cultivating clarity, we can relinquish needless stress.

Marcus Aurelius even believed that we could use this pursuit of truth to cultivate a healthy daily routine. For example, many of us begin our days by worrying about things we can't control: the traffic during our morning commute, the outcome of a business meeting, or someone else's actions. But if we implement Stoicism in our daily routines, we can start each day by reminding ourselves what we are and are not in control of. And the truth is that we can only really control our actions and reactions. Accepting this can feel empowering and it can help us to start the day with renewed vigor and peace. And, following Marcus Aurelius' advice, remind yourself of this three times a day! You can start first thing in the morning when you wake up, again at lunch to give yourself a midday refresher, and at night before you fall asleep. By doing so, you can fall asleep confident in the knowledge that you've done your best with what you can control and that the rest isn't up to you anyway!

Over time, this can also help you to improve your mental health. That's because the techniques employed by Marcus Aurelius are actually the same techniques that are implemented in a therapeutic practice called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (or CBT). CBT operates on the premise that we need to look inward, analyze our thoughts, and develop our self-awareness in relation to the effect these thoughts have on us. This in turn enables us to recognize toxic thought patterns and restructure them so we can eliminate them in favor of more productive coping mechanisms. So, if you follow the teachings of Stoicism, you're actually getting a little bit of free therapy! (Even if the early Stoics didn't realize their teachings would one day become common practice in the field of mental health!) So, even though we've covered a lot in this chapter, the key takeaway would be: **cultivate mental and emotional clarity. Use your pursuit of truth to identify what you can and cannot control and develop the powers of your mind to control your thoughts and live free from distractions.**



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Final Summary

We might think of philosophy as being a set of boring and prescriptive rules that only nerds want to follow. But Stoicism is different. Rather than asking us to ponder meaningless questions, Stoicism is practical first and foremost because it was designed to help humans answer the questions they encounter in everyday life. Based on the principles of logic and truth, Stoicism invites its practitioners to pursue truth and wisdom, develop their self-awareness, and cultivate mental and emotional clarity. If you put these values into practice in your daily life, Stoic philosophers believe that you can live a life of confidence, self-driven motivation, and wisdom



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