

THE STOIC TEACHER



ANCIENT MIND
HACKS TO HELP
EDUCATORS
FOSTER RESILIENCY,
OPTIMISM, AND
INNER CALM



RYAN RACINE

ADVANCE PRAISE

Ryan Racine's short book deftly distills Stoic theory and practice for busy teachers so they can start applying it to their lives ASAP.

— Gregory Lopez, Author *A Handbook for New Stoics*

The Stoic Teacher goes beyond the usual books on pedagogy and instead shows us how to maintain our own sense of equanimity and true inner peace in an increasingly challenging classroom.

— Donna Quesada, author *Buddha in the Classroom*

The Stoic Teacher by Ryan Racine will not only inspire you to come to school with the strength to overcome obstacles, but it will also equip you with 'Mental hacks' that will get you through even the worst days.

— Robert Dunlop, Author *Strive for Happiness in Education*

Teaching is a tough job. The Stoic Teacher will give you the tools to overcome difficulties and thrive in the classroom.

— Steve Karafit, The Sunday Stoic

I cannot wait to use the tools and recommendations, and to put into practice everything from the journaling framework ... to the wise reflection on what could happen in the future!

— Ruth Pearce, CIO of ALLE, LLC, Coach, Speaker, Author

[this book] reveals how adopting Stoicism as his “life philosophy” changed his perspective on teaching. As a Stoic, one is not “looking for a job that brings you happiness all the time instead one that allows you to be your best self.”

— Ranjini George, MA, MFA, PhD, University of Toronto

This book is excellent. I enjoyed it immensely. Beginning teachers and seasoned veterans alike should read it,

— Robert J. Marzano, Chief Academic Officer, Marzano Resources, author *The New Art and Science of Teaching*

Ryan Racine’s The Stoic Teacher is a quick, value-packed read and is organized in a way that teachers will appreciate. Each chapter is on-point and relevant, and each contains actionable homework that will help transform Stoic concepts into daily practice.

— Jeff MacLoud, teacher, school director, and entrepreneur

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INTRODUCTION



STOICISM'S RELEVANCE TO TEACHING

One of my favourite things to do outside of teaching is run. The initial reason I got into running was to lose the weight that I put on in university. I started my running journey a couple of years ago by making it a routine to go to my local gym each morning with a friend who had the same goal of losing weight. Once we got to the gym, we would spend anywhere from ten to thirty minutes jogging on a treadmill. After a little while, though, this routine got a bit boring, and I switched to running outside. I am glad that I made this change because doing so helped spark my immense love for running. Running became not just a means to losing weight but something that I enjoyed doing for its own sake. I started exploring different paths in my city and signed up for a number of outdoor races, including a 10K, half-marathon, and eventually a full marathon.

I have only been running consistently for a small portion of my life, yet people always ask me to give them tips as if I am some sort of high-performance athlete (trust me, I am far from it). The two most common questions I am asked are:

1. What advice would I give a beginner trying to set up a training plan?
2. How does one stay motivated to continue running, especially in the winter months?

I find the second question a lot more philosophical to answer than the first. The reason is because in order to remain a consistent runner, I argue, that one has to imbue meaning in the very act of putting one foot in front of the other. While some may find losing weight a sufficient reason to continue running, there is a decent chance that this motive will not be sustainable. After all, if you lose the weight, then what? For me, I now view running as a way to practice discipline and patience. For example, convincing oneself to run that extra mile when it is pouring rain outside can help to cultivate inner strength that can also be used when faced with other obstacles in life.

Why Teach?

I started the chapter by talking about running because just as I argue it is important to develop a *why* for something like running, I believe the same must be said about teaching. In fact, my motivation for running and teaching are similar. Just as I do not run solely for health reasons, I certainly do not teach for perks like the summers off. Instead, one of the many reasons that I teach is because this profession provides me with a deep sense of fulfillment. In particular, being a teacher allows me the opportunity to make a difference in young people's lives. At the same time, I have learned in my short time teaching that my job is not always sunshine and rainbows. As I am writing this, my class is made up of students who have either been suspended or expelled from their designated high school. You can imagine, therefore,

some of the behavioural issues that I have to deal with on a daily basis. I have noticed that there is a high staff turnover rate in this specialized program, mainly because teachers get burnt out. I do not blame them! It is mentally exhausting to plan for and manage many of the students who are enrolled in our classrooms. When I get bogged down during a tough day at work, the thing that keeps me going is reminding myself of my why.

A Stoic Approach to Teaching

How is Stoicism relevant to teachers? One way is that it can help to inform your why for teaching. Going back to my first year of teaching, there were times when I thought that I was working in the wrong field because I spent most of my day managing student behaviours rather than actually teaching the curriculum. Since we live in a world obsessed with instant gratification, I expected that unless I was feeling positive emotions every second of the day, I was missing out on something and wasting my life. My perspective on things changed when I took on Stoicism as my life philosophy. Taking on this Stoic approach means that you are not necessarily looking for a job that brings you happiness all of the time but instead one that allows you to be your best self. Just because you face significant challenges at work (such as dealing with uncooperative students or staff) does not mean you are in the wrong field! If you believe that teaching is your passion, you must expect hardships will come with the job. After all, the word “passion” come from the Latin, *pati*—which means “to suffer”.

Eudaimonia and the Four Stoic Virtues

The Stoics argued that life’s goal is to strive towards *eudaimonia*, which involves cultivating the best qualities within us. The Greek translation itself comes out to mean being good (*eu*) with your inner spirit (*daimon*).

To help us reach *eudaimonia*, the Stoics laid out four distinct virtues that we should follow in order to reach our best selves:

1. **Wisdom** is thought to be the most important Stoic virtue. It can allow us to make logical decisions, sound judgements, and help challenge past beliefs. Wisdom can also be practiced by the constant pursuit of knowledge so that we can expand our mind to different perspectives. Hopefully the Stoic practices that you will be learning about within this book can help to cultivate a sense of wisdom both inside and outside of the classroom. Of course, reading and learning about other non-Stoic topics can also help us to grow wise!
2. **Justice** means doing the right thing from an ethical perspective. It is about knowing how to act in order to contribute the best we can to the world. If we are bringing integrity to our job, the teaching profession itself can provide us with opportunities to practice justice. We can also practice justice by doing things like listening to and elevating the voices of the marginalized, especially those of our own students.
3. **Courage** helps us act against injustices and persist even in the midst of obstacles and setbacks. It does not include, however, the elimination of fear or anxiety. Agreeing to take on a difficult class when it is offered to you by your school principal is a great example of being courageous. Though you know it may cause future strife, the decision to say “yes” is a noble act and will make you a better teacher and person in the long run. The same thing can be said when undertaking tasks that push you past your comfort zone, like coaching a sport you have never actually played.

4. **Temperance**, or moderation, includes exercising self-discipline, control, and awareness to help control our impulses so that we focus on the long term over the short term. By practicing temperance, we turn away from excesses and focus on the essentials. Perhaps you switch school districts because doing so will allow for a quicker commute. You may have been closer to getting on permanently in the other district, but you know down the road this switch will significantly benefit your family situation. In addition, exercising temperance can involve responding to challenges from the classroom or from administration and not flying off the handle and getting angry right away. Temperance also involves tempering expectations for our students and ourselves and learning how to strike a balance in life.

Use the chart below to brainstorm the values that are most important to you (i.e. being a good co-worker, being compassionate

VALUES THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO ME	HOW THESE VALUES REINFORCE MY <i>WHY</i> FOR TEACHING

towards your students, etc.) If you want, you can reference and build off of the Stoic virtues discussed above. Clarifying your values can help to formulate strong why statements.

Conclusion

The Stoics believed that following a set of strong virtues has a great impact on living our best selves. We should start reflecting on what it means to be virtuous because doing so can help us to find our why for getting up in the morning and, in turn, flourish within our profession. Having a strong why can also make the practices that I will be getting into easier to implement.

End-of-Chapter Reflection Questions

- * Why is teaching meaningful to you? If it is not meaningful to you right now, reflect on the reasons why you got into the profession.
- * What does it mean to live your best self as a teacher?
- * Are you burnt out or has teaching ever left you feeling burnt out? What led you to feeling this way?
- * What do you want out of your teaching career?
- * What Stoic virtue(s) do you find yourself cultivating today?
- * What ones(s) do you wish to cultivate in the future?



CHAPTER ONE

PREPARING FOR THE SCHOOL DAY

“When you first rise in the morning tell yourself: I will encounter busybodies, ingrates, egomaniacs, liars, the jealous, and cranks. They are all stricken with these afflictions because they don’t know the difference between good and evil.”

— Marcus Aurelius

Teachers have a busy and stressful job. Between planning, marking, supervision duties, and extra-curriculars, our schedule can be action-packed. Therefore, it can be very difficult to find the opportunity to reflect and mentally prepare for the day. Knowing this, the Stoics believed that one of the best times to look inward, examine, and reflect is first thing in the morning. Implementing and following a well thought-out morning routine can enable us to get a head start on the day, as opposed to waking up with little time to spare before the craziness begins. It also allows us to attain a small victory before we leave our home, and this feeling can lead to a positive domino effect.

Before you continue reading the rest of this chapter, take a few moments to think about what your current morning routine

looks like and whether it needs to be changed. Do you find yourself rushing to get to school? Do you feel that this rushing ultimately influences your mindset in some sort of negative way (i.e., maybe you are less patient with students, less open-minded, etc.)? Right now, I try to follow the same morning routine every day. It consists of waking up at 6 am, reading nonfiction, occasionally exercising, meditating, and lastly showering. I have not always had this routine, and I am sure it will change at some point, but since I implemented it, I find that my workday goes a lot more smoothly.

The Power of Journaling

Many contemporary Stoic thinkers such as Ryan Holiday recommend journaling shortly after waking up to help get ourselves focused on the day's tasks. We can journal in a number of ways, such as typing in a computer document, talking into a voice recorder, or writing in a good old-fashioned book (I have done all three at some point or another, but now I use a book and a nice fountain pen to help make the process more enjoyable). When I journal, I address the following topics:

1. I list at least one thing that went well yesterday. This could be a lesson that resonated with my students, a heartfelt or honest conversation that I had with a fellow colleague, or a memorable moment that took place during an extra-curricular activity after school.
2. I list at least one thing that I wish I handled better from yesterday. This could be undeservedly yelling at a student, not being as prepared as I should have been to deliver a lesson, or talking badly about a fellow staff member to someone else.
3. I write down strategies that I could use to improve myself as

a teacher and prevent these above issues from reoccurring. I tend to resort to the Stoic strategies from this book or CBT-based ones, but feel free to use other ones as well.

4. I write at least one thing that I am grateful for. For me, this is the easiest prompt to answer, but one that I tend to neglect the most, especially when I am stressed. If, for some reason, I cannot think of anything, I give thanks for having the opportunity to work since some I know do not have a job or one that they find even remotely fulfilling.

Expect the Worst

According to the Stoics, the most important strategy to use while preparing for the day is what Seneca calls *premeditatio malorum*, which means to premeditate on future adversities. This practice involves imagining what you believe to be the worst-case scenario that could arise from a particular event and being willing to accept the outcome. For example, if you are rehearsing a lesson, consider the possibility that your students will not be receptive to your ideas and questions.

This kind of thinking may seem pessimistic, but it is far from it. In his *Letters*, Seneca outlines the benefits of premeditating on adversity. “The wise person gets used to future evils: what other people make bearable by long endurance, he makes bearable by long reflection,” Seneca writes. He goes on to say that “we sometimes hear the inexperienced say, ‘I didn’t know this was in store for me.’ The wise person knows that everything is in store for him. Whatever happens, he says, ‘I knew’ ” (76.34).

Premeditating on adversity is not about continually obsessing over what could seemingly go wrong but instead having, using the words of William Irvine, “a flickering thought” about it. Unlike

pessimistic thinking, you are not under the impression that bad things will inevitably happen but have an understanding that it is a possibility. The main psychological benefit of this mental exercise is to help soften the blow if something occurs that is not considered “good” in our eyes because we already expected it.

Below, you can find the two-step process I follow to practice premeditating on adversity in my journal:

1. I first predict what potential difficult events could arise throughout the school day. I ensure that these predictions are made based on previous evidence. For example, if a student misbehaved yesterday, I assume they might do it again today. If a fellow colleague ignored me in the hallway, I will expect the same behaviour in the future. I usually make a list of these events without going overboard (maybe two to three things per day).
2. I then write about how I could respond in the moment if these events were to occur. I rehearse these responses so that if they do take place, I have a script to fall back on. My reactions usually involve me staying calm and not resorting to outward anger. For example, if a colleague snubs me, I might write that I will nod my head and continue walking. I can always take time to process it later but in the moment, lashing out will not get me anywhere.

Let’s Practice!

Take time now to practice journaling! I have created a sample template on the next page with some of the prompts. You can write directly in the book or use it as a guide for your own approach to journaling. I also include a section on premeditating on adversity.

DATE	WHAT IS ONE THING YOU ARE GRATEFUL FOR?	
LIST AT LEAST ONE THING THAT WENT WELL YESTERDAY IN THE CLASSROOM:		
LIST AT LEAST ONE THING THAT YOU COULD HAVE HANDLED BETTER:		
WHAT STRATEGIES CAN YOU USE TO IMPROVE AS A TEACHER AND AVOID THESE ABOVE ISSUES?		
PREMEDITATING ON ADVERSITY		
POTENTIAL ADVERSITIES		HOW I WILL RESPOND

Focus on the Things Within Your Control

Epictetus said that undesirable emotions are often caused by a failure to obtain something external. He argued that we should not want things to be in our power which are not in our power but instead concern ourselves with matters that we have direct influence over. This idea, known as the dichotomy of control, is central to Stoicism

The dichotomy of control is all about making the best use of what is in our power and taking the rest as it happens. In particular, we should focus on doing the work in whatever endeavour we are pursuing instead of being preoccupied with the fruits of our labour. According to the Stoics, we must take any intended or unintended outcomes with equanimity because they are beyond our control. This principle is easier said than done, but it can help simplify our life. Here are some examples of things that are within and outside of your control, according to the Stoics.

COMPLETE CONTROL	INCOMPLETE CONTROL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * how we think about a situation * how we respond to a situation * our intentions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * our health * our possessions * how others perceive us * our working conditions

The dichotomy of control truly helped me to take a step forward towards alleviating the stress that comes with being a teacher, especially stress related to budget cuts, class sizes, and criticism from parents, co-workers, and students. I recommend reading *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control—52 Week-by-Week Lessons* by Massimo Pigliucci and

Gregory Lopez to learn about some practical and easy to follow exercises that help to illustrate this principle. One of the exercises they recommend is to make a T-chart before leaving home for the day. You can then document different occurrences that are expected to take place and sort which ones are under your control and which ones are not. For example, if you have a staff meeting to attend at school for 8 am, intending to show up on time is under your control but actually showing up on time is not (since factors like heavy traffic can stop this from happening). By writing these events out and making this separation, you can internalize what is under your control and what is not, which in turn “give[s] you a clearer picture of what exactly you should focus your desires and aversions on to achieve peace of mind” (Pigliucci & Lopez, 19).

When I started applying to different teaching jobs, I employed a similar writing tactic in my journal. For example, I categorized preparing for each interview as something I should focus on while worrying about whether I would get the job or not as something I should avoid doing. I found that by considering the dichotomy of control, the preparation process became easier. I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders due to not worrying about the outcome of the interview. As a result, the interviews themselves became more enjoyable experiences because I remained more present throughout them and did not get hung up on whether I said the right or wrong things. By switching my mindset on the things that I could control, I soon became more grateful for the opportunity to even be able to apply to a posting rather than complaining about the lack of teaching jobs.

Each morning, take time to separate what may be in your control that day from what is not. You can again use your journal or even write this exercise out on the chalkboard (I have done the latter a number of times when no one is in the classroom except myself). Here is an example:

EVENT	WHAT ARE THE THINGS WITHIN MY CONTROL?	WHAT ARE THE THINGS OUTSIDE OF MY CONTROL?

As Stoic teachers, it is imperative to use our mental energy to focus on what is under our complete control. It is not that we stop caring about things that we can't control, but rather that we come to a deep understanding that our happiness is not dependent on them. Try to make giving it your best shot the goal and do not get attached to the external outcome. That way, you can maintain your tranquility while also giving yourself the best possible chance to succeed.

Goal Setting and the Stoic Reverse Clause

While we are preparing for the day, it is always a good idea to set goals. Of course, from a Stoic perspective, we should be trying our best to set goals that are within our control. Take a moment to reflect upon the type of goals that you set for yourself each day as a teacher. Are they within your control? If not, you risk setting

yourself up for frustration when things do not go according to plan. I know that early in my career, I would always try to set a goal that my students would behave in class. When a student misbehaved, I automatically blamed myself and felt like a failure. If I simply phrased the goal as “I will reinforce expected behaviours with my class and implement my new management strategy with my students,” I would have set myself up for a higher percentage of success because the goal was completely up to me.

Try completing the exercise below. It involves getting you to practice reframing goals so that they are under your control.

INITIAL GOAL	REFRAMED GOAL
I will become the new program chair of my department.	I will complete the program chair application document to the best of my abilities.
I will get my students to behave appropriately during our second period assembly.	
My class will score high on the standardized test next week.	

Obviously, not all of the goals that we set for ourselves will be within our control. We may have one or two lofty goals that we wish to attain one day, and that's okay. I know I would love to teach high school music full-time in the future. There are things within my control to get there, such as accepting part-time teaching sections of music whenever they are offered to me in order to gain more experience as well as practicing as often as I can on instruments that are less familiar to me so that I can become an all-around better musician, but ultimately this goal is contingent on many external factors. For these types of goals, the Stoics advise us to use a reverse clause, which is to add a disclaimer like "fate permitting" or "God willing" to your goal. While it may seem silly, doing so will help us realize that if things do not go according to plan, it is not entirely our fault. Try adding a reverse clause to the goals you craft for yourself that in some way rely on external factors.

Start the Day in Discomfort

Epictetus said that "we must endure a winter training and can't be dashing into situations for which we aren't yet prepared" (*Discourses*,10). In this short quote, Epictetus is referring to the Stoic practice of voluntary discomfort. Adding discomfort to your morning routine may sound rather counterintuitive but hear me out. This practice involves undertaking a particular activity that we are not fond of in order to cultivate resiliency. That can help to prepare us for even larger stresses throughout the day. This does not entail, however, doing something that will push us to our absolute limit. A cold shower (even for ten seconds), exercising in some way before work, or getting up a little bit earlier than we usually do bring about small but manageable stressors. Pushing through one or more of these self-made obstacles will provide a small victory in the morning and can have a significant ripple

effect for the rest of the day. We can tell ourselves that “I persevered through _____; therefore, I can deal with this situation in the classroom.”

To help decide upon a discomfort for the morning, fill out the below prompts:

List of discomforts you can manage undertaking each morning:

Choose one of the discomforts above. What action plan would you put in place to implement it (i.e., when will you undergo the discomfort)?

What will you tell yourself to help you persevere? You might want to think about why you are going to pursue this kind of voluntary discomfort.

Conclusion

If there is anything I would like you to take away from this chapter, it is to not go about showing up to school on autopilot. The Stoics advise us to try to add a bit more awareness to your mornings, even if it is a matter of finding a quiet place to reflect and mentally rehearse the day and possible obstacles that you may face for a couple minutes before your students enter the door.

End-of-Chapter Reflection Questions

- * How can having a strong morning routine help increase the probability that you can be your best self at school?
- * What does your morning routine look like?
- * Do you feel you should make changes to your morning routine? If so, what one practice from this chapter do you believe you can implement as early as this week?
- * How can you keep yourself accountable?
- * Do you find yourself struggling with worrying about things outside of your control? If yes, why do you think this happens?

ENJOYING THIS SAMPLE UNIT?



Check out the full book, *The Stoic Teacher: Ancient Mind Hacks to Help Educators Foster Resiliency, Optimism, and Inner Calm*, for sale on Amazon, Bookshop.org, BookDepository.com, or wherever books are sold. Your university bookstore or indie bookshop can order it from Ingram. Contact us for discounts for bulk orders or distributors.



Practical and accessible, this self-help book for educators shows us how Stoicism can help you deal with day-to-day stresses, manage classroom behavior better, and strive to become better teachers by:

- focusing on what you can control and letting go of what you can't
- preparing for problems without anxiety
- creating realistic and achievable goals
- fostering an attitude of gratitude for what went well even on a bad day.

The Stoic Teacher intertwines discussion of ancient philosophy with practical activities to help you apply Stoicism to your life. Discussion questions, and a chapter of reflections from teachers using Stoicism can inspire you to find a way to use what you've learned!



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