



The Stoic Anesthesiologist

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Pillars are a significant symbol in various cultures, religions, and spiritual teachings around the world. They symbolize support, strength, and stability. In medicine, we have pillars that form our firm foundation: autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. These set a certain expectation of our performance as physicians in all circumstances, but especially when things get difficult. Whether with our patients, a colleague, or in our personal lives, bad things happen. And while our careers may give us some pillars to overcome the situations we face, we can often find ourselves needing more support.

It may surprise you to learn the authors for this article independently arrived at a 2,000-year-old philosophy called Stoicism to guide us in our pursuit of a life well-lived. Stoicism flourished in antiquity as a dominant philosophy that gained significant popularity in the Roman empire. Its principles guided the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. For Marcus, the Stoic pillars of courage, justice, wisdom, and discipline stabilized him throughout many tragedies, wars, and plagues. His personal writings as he navigated such adversity are compiled in his book "Meditations." Even as emperor of Rome, Marcus struggled to get out of bed some days; something we can all relate to. But as a Stoic philosopher, he reminded himself that he had work to do. He questioned if staying warm under the blankets was what we were created for as human beings, or did we have a purpose to start our day with intention? Two millennia later, your authors regularly turn to Stoic teachings to help us through our lives as physicians, parents, and all other roles we navigate.

Let us continue by defining Stoicism. It is often misrepresented as a habitual reaction of impassiveness, stereotyped as suppressing emotions. Rather, Stoicism advocates for the recognition of emotions, how they affect us, and how we respond to them. Stoicism encourages rational reflection and contemplating

what is actually in our control. For example, we can try to control things in life that we have no influence over, such as traffic, the economy, and the passage of time. But we *do* have control over the route we take, how we invest, and where we prioritize our minutes. Or let's



A collection of historical and contemporary texts on stoic philosophy.

say you are playing in an important tennis match – do you set an external goal to win the match? Or do you set an internal goal to play to the best of your ability? Only for the latter do we have complete control. Another Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, is famously quoted as saying, "Make the best use of what is in your power and take the rest as it happens." For Stoics, this was the path to inner tranquility. Stoicism argues

that everything we face in life is an opportunity to respond with such virtue; happiness, love, success, and reputation will follow. These insights are timeless and have experienced a resurgence in popularity through names such as Ryan Holiday, Derren Brown, Pat McGeehan, and Michael Lombardi.

How is such a dated belief system relevant to the modern anesthesiologist? Consider your typical day in the OR, a pain clinic, a children's hospital, the ICU, or on labor and delivery. We often rely on a core set of morals that keeps us grounded when we face unique challenges that risk psychological distress. We manage surgical complications, equipment failures, intraoperative emergencies, appointment delays, traumas, changing schedules, and the prospect of death daily. It is incredibly easy to become frustrated, resentful, and disappointed in these situations when the unexpected happens. However, Stoicism calls on one to remove our expectations, sense of entitlement, and feelings of having been wronged in favor of *owning what we have control over* – *knowing our patient, knowing the procedure, checking all equipment, planning for emergencies, and being flexible.*

Some of the key Stoic concepts that we can see in our everyday practice revolve around our emotional struggles: how we process it for ourselves and for our patients. Hardships, grief, troubles, and annoyances are all opportunities to show our outer virtue and acknowledge our inner ideals. Struggling is part of existing, but we can persevere using core values from Stoicism and by thinking about the choices we make every day. Every experience, in theory, can be framed as an opportunity to learn. The next time you are on call, don't grudgingly proceed to your care of a seriously complex patient or case – be thankful you are the one to manage this situation and you are the one that will grow from the opportunity. "Amor fati," as Stoics say – "love your fate."



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The four pillars of Stoicism are a great foundation to build habitual actions when it comes to working through tough situations in our profession. We can exhibit courage by speaking out against maltreatment, becoming involved in political advocacy, or even having the courage to listen to something we may not want to hear. We can exude justice by our commitment to do the right thing no matter how difficult it is, seeking truth in our words and actions above all else. We can express wisdom by practicing self-awareness and mindfulness. We can emanate discipline by showing up on time, adhering to work requirements, and pursuing a work-life balance.

Easy, right? Everything always sounds that way when talking in theory. To keep these pillars upright in our lives is a struggle, but it is a struggle worth pursuing. A Stoic finds a way to focus on a positive perspective in any situation. For the Stoic, there are no such things as distress or affliction, but only chances to grow and prove oneself. Marcus Aurelius claimed the obstacle is the way – "the impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way."

So, what is standing in the way of your ability to overcome the difficulties you have experienced or are experiencing? Grow through the struggle. Whether it be Stoicism or another philosophy, find the pillars that will hold you up or at least be a place for you to lean on. Struggles in our days will continue, but our reactions to them can change. ■

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