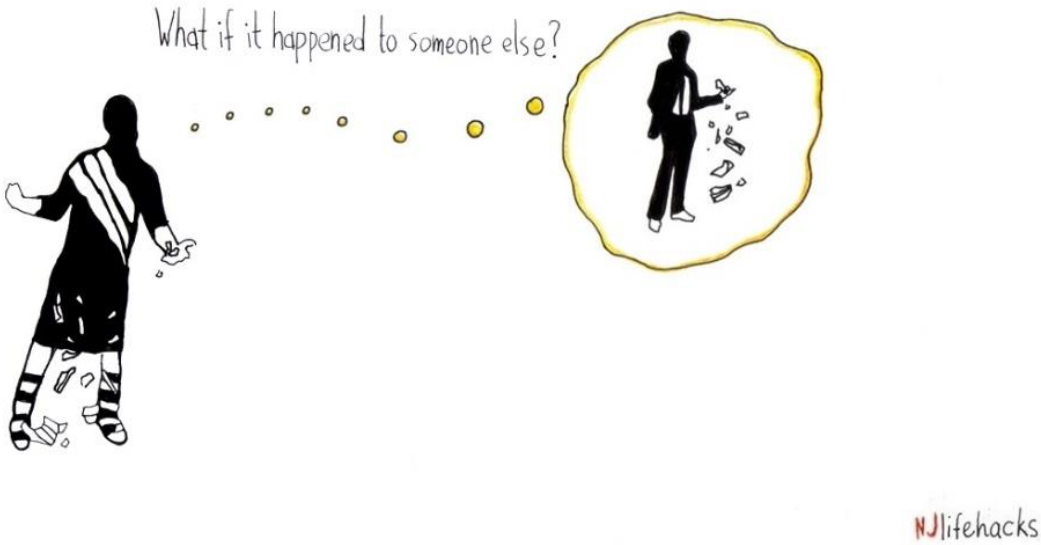
# 20 Stoic Exercises

## for

## Impressive Self-Improvement

NJlifehacks

# 1. Other-ize




Someone else's mother died → we say, "This is part of life." "Life goes on."

Our mother dies → we say, "Poor me, this is a catastrophe!" "Why did this happen to me?"

It is far easier to look at something objectively and to maintain equanimity when little inconveniences, or even disasters, happen to others rather than to ourselves.

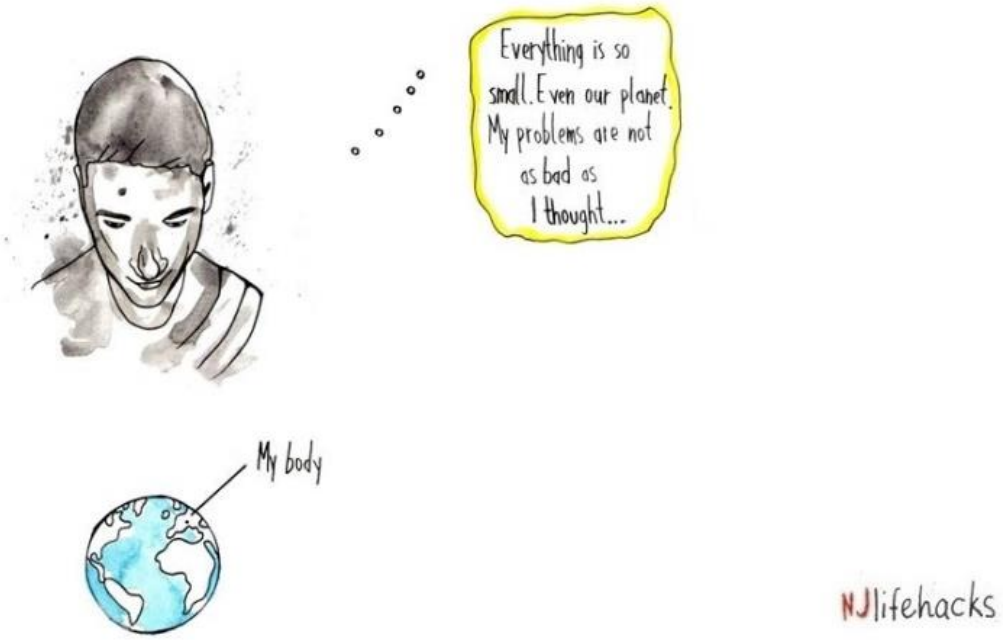
But why? What makes us think that we are the universe's special darling that is so much more important than others?

Wouldn't it be better if we could react similarly when something afflicts us? We are not special. What happened to us has happened to many people before and will happen to many in the future.

The universe doesn't treat us any differently than others, it is not after us. Things happen to us in the normal order of things. Knowing this can give us comfort.

**Action:** When something "bad" happens to you, think about it as it has happened to someone else → other-ize what happens.

# 2. Take the View From Above




If you are troubled about something, try this exercise.

We often get in unnecessary trouble because of our imagination. We screw up and forget that this is not such a big thing compared to our whole life. We focus on something and think this is really important, but it is never as important as it seems while we are thinking about it.

That's when perspective can be truly helpful. Take the view from above. Imagine you're up in the sky and see yourself as a tiny dot in a small house, in a small city, in a still small country compared to the whole planet. And the whole planet is tiny compared to the universe.

Your problems cannot be such a big thing in the grand theme of your life. From above things seem more trivial, which helps you to see it with indifference and that everything is fleeting. Look at what problems single people are concerned about.

John has a headache and is very much concerned about this. On the other end of the world people are run over by a Tsunami, and in yet another place people get into bomb explosions.

That headache looks like a joke from above. Like most other troubles we concern ourselves with.

**Action:** Imagine leaving your body and rising higher upwards the sky and looking down on yourself and the things around you. Go higher and higher and look at your city, your country, your continent, and finally our planet. Recall that your body lives down there…

# 3. Remind Yourself of the Impermanence of Things

We don't truly own things. Your car can be stolen. Your house can burn down. You can lose your hair, even your body.

Don't get attached to things, they do ultimately not matter. Your favorite t-shirt? A piece of wool…

The Stoics go a step further. They say, don't even get too attached to your loved ones. Epictetus said, "When giving your child or wife a kiss, repeat to yourself, 'I am kissing a mortal.'"

Life is ephemeral, and people we care about may be snatched from us suddenly and without warning. Also, you yourself are mortal. You could die tomorrow.

Remind yourself how precious life is here and now, and how precious your loved ones are, because they may soon be gone. Appreciate what you've got and remind yourself of the impermanence of things.

**Action:** Take a second to meditate on your own mortality. Life on earth is limited, it is only borrowed and you don't know when you have to return it. Make the best use of it and always remember, "You are mortal, your loved ones are mortal."

# 4. Think of Yourself As Dead

What!?!

This is from Marcus Aurelius: “Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what’s left and live it properly.”

This can be interpreted differently. It could be a negative visualization about the worst that could happen, which is death. It could mean to forget all that happened before and live only in the here and now. Don’t worry about the past and make the best of today. Today is all you have. Appreciate it and make the best of it.

I think it’s a great tool to not making any random choices and actions. It helps you focus on the truly important. So that you don’t waste time on trifles but only on essentials.

Make the best use of your time. And this is not in the #YOLO sense. Blackjack and hookers are not the best use of your time. You have a job. Your job is to be good person, to try your best, and to live a life of reason and virtue.

It does not matter what shit you have done before. Life is new now. You cannot undo what you have done, but you still have time to be the best person possible.

**Action:** You died last night and are now given a second chance on earth. Make two lists: 1. What are the most important things in your life? 2. What do you actually spend your time with? Compare the lists and choose one thing you will optimize in the next days.

# 5. Is This the Condition that I so Feared?

This is an exercise from Seneca.

That's the idea: You set aside a certain number of days when you go with little and cheap food, dress in shabby clothes, and ask yourself whether that's what you so feared.

Alternatively, spend a night sleeping on the floor, fast for 24 hours, take a cold shower.

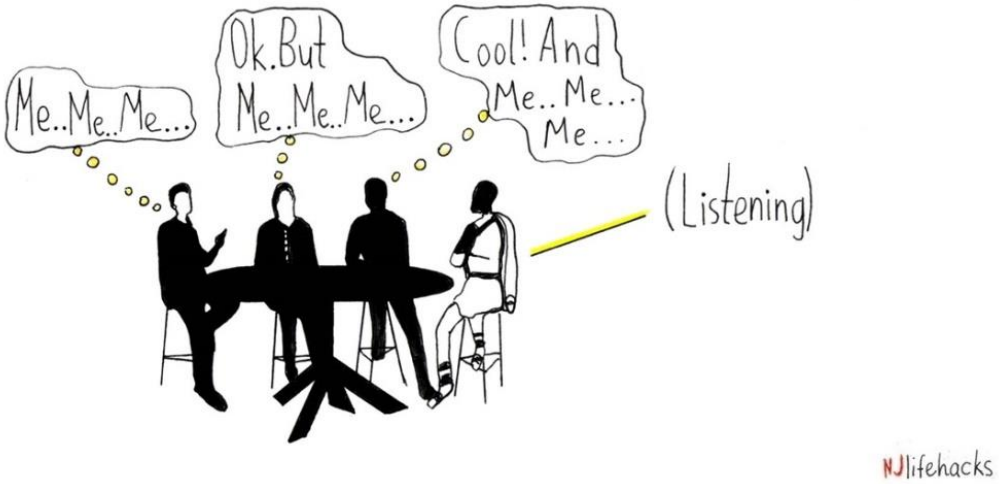
We take things for granted. A cozy bed. Enough food. Hot water. If you choose to go without those things just for a few days, you will appreciate them much more later. You will savor them.

The idea is threefold. 1. We should appreciate our life more and don't take everything for granted. 2. We should not be afraid of losing everything. It will still be okay. We can live with less, it's not that bad. 3. We should strive for moderation. Own less, be freer.

**Action:** Deprive yourself of something for a little while (e.g. 3 days without your morning coffee, 1 week without hot showers, 6 months without buying new clothes, get rid of half your clothes, etc.) and then savor the hell out of it when you do it again.

(Read more about it here.)

# 6. Speak Little, Speak Well, Don't Gossip, and Listen Instead




Silence is the Stoic's friend.

Epictetus said we should only speak if necessary and not about common-place stuff. "Above all don't gossip about people, praising, blaming or comparing them."

Look, indulging in gossip and judging people who are not even present is simply not a virtuous thing to do.

And don't talk too much about yourself. Everybody talks mainly about themselves, so you might better listen and be of help rather than talking about your night out.

Ask yourself, do you want to hear people going on and on about themselves? No. Except maybe if it's a comedian.

**Action:** Observe yourself and others in conversations. Do you see how everybody is trying to connect what's being said with themselves? Don't speak too much, try to listen and support others. Make them feel good.

# 7. Test Your Impressions (Think Before You Act)

How often have you reacted automatically to some situation just out of your first impression?

Just think about how often people get pissed off at other drivers when driving. People swear, show fingers, and get highly pissed off at other drivers. Just out of emotion. We have the impression that the other driver is a jerk and baam, decided.

But we don't know.

Maybe it was our right to drive, but maybe his son is dying on the passenger seat, maybe his car will get kidnapped instead of ours, maybe he did just not pay full attention. And maybe you have done something similar in the past.

Most of the time nothing really bad has happened.

So calm down, take a deep breath, and resist the impulse to react immediately. We do not want to respond impulsively to impressions, so take a moment and ask yourself, "I'm getting angry… Does this make sense? What exactly happened?"

Epictetus says we should ask whether it is up to us or not, and if not, then we should say, "Then it's none of my concern."

There's no reason in reacting emotionally to something we can't do anything about. It is not under our control, only our reaction is. So choose the best reaction possible and move on. In many cases the best reaction is *no* reaction.

**Action:** Test your first impressions. If they are unhelpful, then choose a smarter response. Maybe you don't need to react at all. Oftentimes we react to trifles. This is not necessary and we can cut it out.

# 8. How Can I Use Virtue Here and Now?

Here's one of the best Stoic writings I have encountered so far. By Epictetus:

"For every challenge, remember the resources you have within you to cope with it. Provoked by the sight of a handsome man or a beautiful woman, you will discover within you the contrary power of self-restraint. Faced with pain, you will discover the power of endurance. If you are insulted, you will discover patience. In time, you will grow to be confident that there is not a single impression that you will not have the moral means to tolerate."

Brilliant!

You can use any situation, every challenge, as a way to exercise virtue and to become a better person. You just need to constantly apply virtue and reason.

The idea is so simple (not easy though). With everything that happens, you can exercise virtue. That's the least you can do. That's an easy way to accept everything that happens graciously, because you can take at least something good from it, namely the practice of virtue.

You can go a step further than accepting everything that happens by loving everything that happens. That's called 'amor fati'. Everything happens specifically for you. And you get to enjoy it.

**Action:** When you face a difficult situation, ask yourself, "What is my best response here?" "How can I apply reason and virtue here and now?"

# 9. Have a Role Model in Mind

The Stoics used the Stoic Sage as a role model.

The Sage is a hypothetical ideal, he is the perfectly good and wise human being.

Now, don't worry, you will never be perfect in that sense. And you don't need to be. However, it's been proven to be beneficial to have a person in mind we want to impress or imitate. It's not about the imitation, because you are unique and should not try to be like another person. But we can learn from other people.

In difficult situations, ask yourself:

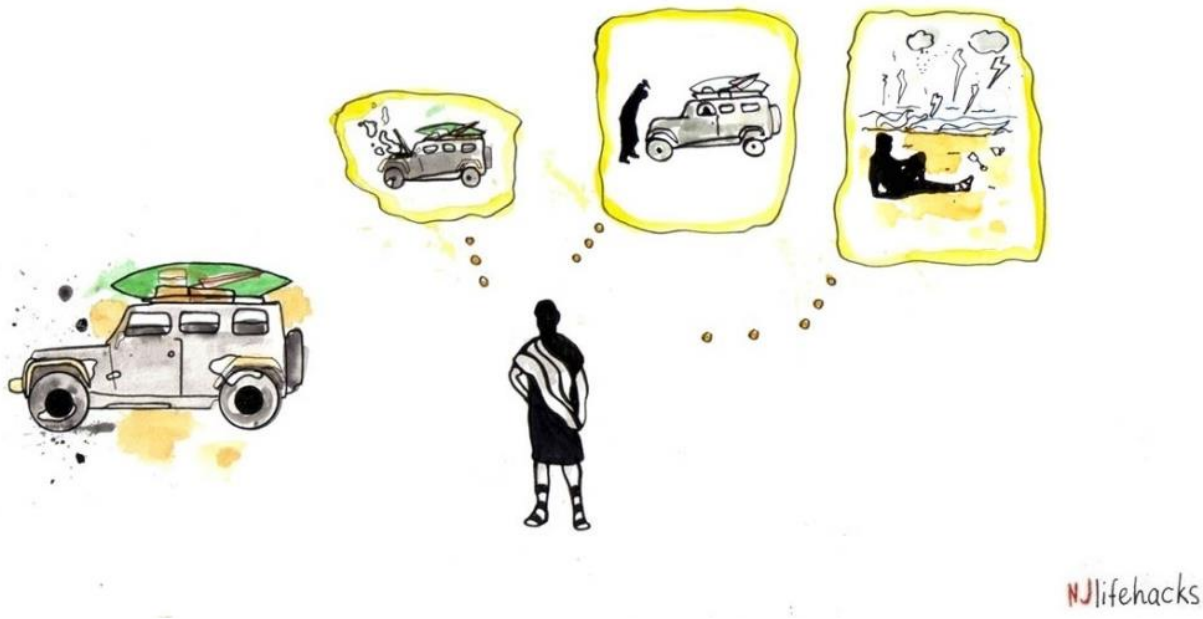
- *"What would the Sage do?"*
- *"What would the perfect daddy do?"*
- *"What would LeBron James do?"*
- *"What would Batman do?"*

If you have some role model in mind, great! Imagine that he is watching and observing you and you want to be as good as possible. This role model game is not really about the role models but about bringing awareness into the situation. Because deep within yourself you know what's the best thing to do.

**Action:** Bring awareness into everyday situations and ask what your role model would do. Or ask what the perfect dad, mum, brother, friend, husband, lover, sports man would do.

(Read more about it here.)

# 10. What Is the Worst that Could Happen?




When you set out to do something, ask yourself, “What is the worst that could happen?”

That’s classic for Stoicism and it’s one of its main ideas: To prepare for shit to happen and still be able to take it with calm and choose the smartest possible response.

Many people have some sort of plan and when something happens that is not according to that plan, they have a good old emotional freak out. Now, this is not very helpful and can be prevented.

Just prepare for bad stuff to happen. Visualize that your car will break done on your way to the important job interview. And if it happens, you’ll be able to take it much better. It will still suck, but you won’t freak out.

We don’t want the worst to happen, but we want to be prepared if it happens. If you have imagined an inconvenient situation before it happens, you’ll be able to take it much better and stay calmer and thus be able to make the best of it.

You only get devastated if you have not seen that coming…

**Action:** What are you planning to do in the next days? Visualize what could go wrong and decide on a smart response. What if… then I will…

(Read more about it here.)

# 11. Voluntary Discomfort – Lay on the Floor in Starbucks

"Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: "Is this the condition that I feared?" It is precisely in times of immunity from care that the soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of greater stress, and it is while Fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence… If you would not have a man flinch when the crisis comes, train him before it comes." – Seneca

Voluntary discomfort: Train for uncomfortable situations so you won't flinch when they come.

This is about getting uncomfortable to grow your comfort zone. Let's say you're uncomfortable when you can't eat for half a day. Now when you practice 48 hour fasts once a month, after some months you won't be uncomfortable anymore when you can't eat for half a day.

**Action:** Purposefully get yourself in an uncomfortable situation (regularly). Tim Ferriss advises to lay down on the floor in public. There are many more options:

- Sleep a night on the floor.
- Ask for a 10% discount when you order a coffee.
- Go a week without coffee.

(Read more about it here.)

# 12. Add the 'Reserve Clause' to Your Actions

We only control our own thoughts and actions. Everything else is not under our direct control.

This is the reason why the Stoics often added a reserve clause to their actions.

The idea: You have a goal in mind and do your best to achieve this goal. But all is not under your control, therefore you add a reserve clause such as "God willing," "fate permitting," "if nothing prevents me" to the action.

Seneca described it as follows, "I want to do such and such, as long as nothing happens which may present an obstacle to my decision."

This gives you peace over whatever the outcome will be. Because you know it's not entirely under your control. A wise person does not confuse his aspirations with how the universe will go.

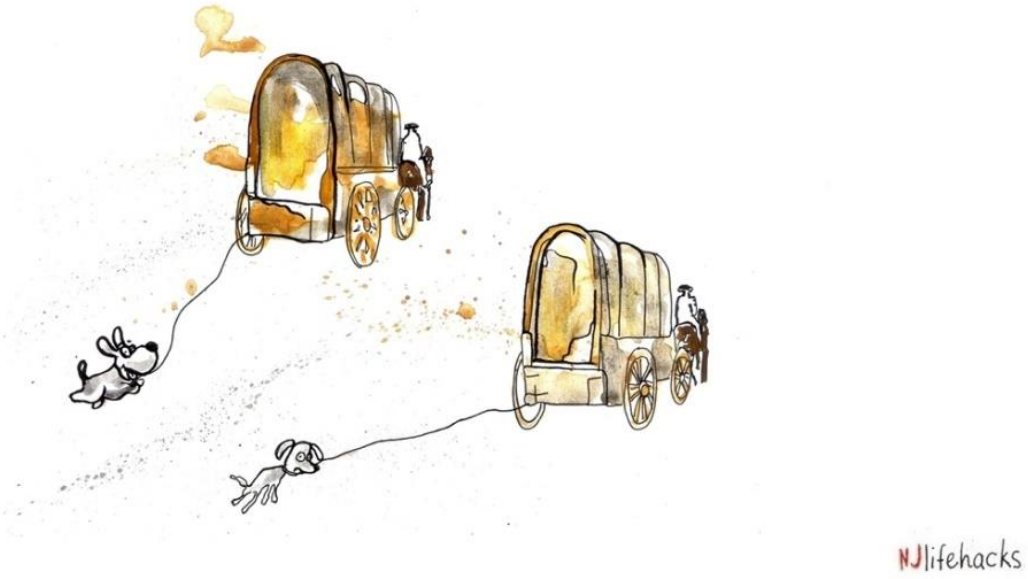
- "I will sail across the ocean, if nothing prevents me."
- "Tomorrow, I will go to the beach, fate permitting."
- "You should receive my letter by Thursday, God willing."

This requires that you give your best for all that's under your control, and then accept whatever happens that's not under your control. You know that the ultimate outcome is beyond your control.

**Action:** What is something you plan to do but the outcome is not entirely up to you? Use the reserve clause. For example when you leave the house, tell your mother, "See you later, fate permitting." She won't be happy with that, but it's good training for you.

(Read more about it here.)

# 13. Amor Fati – Love Your Fate




"Fate leads the willing, and drags along the reluctant." – Seneca

The Stoics tried to focus on what they can control. And fate wasn't one of them.

So they advised to *not* wish for reality to be any different and rather accept and love it as it is. They often used the "dog leashed to a moving cart" metaphor:

The wise man is like a dog leashed to a moving cart, running joyfully alongside and smoothly keeping pace with it, whereas a foolish man is like a dog that grumbly struggles against the leash but finds himself dragged alongside the cart anyway.

We can't change what happens to us in life. So the smartest thing is to accept rather than fight every little thing that happens to us. We're like that dog leashed to a cart: we're only as free as the length of the leash. Therefore we rather enjoy the journey than getting dragged along.

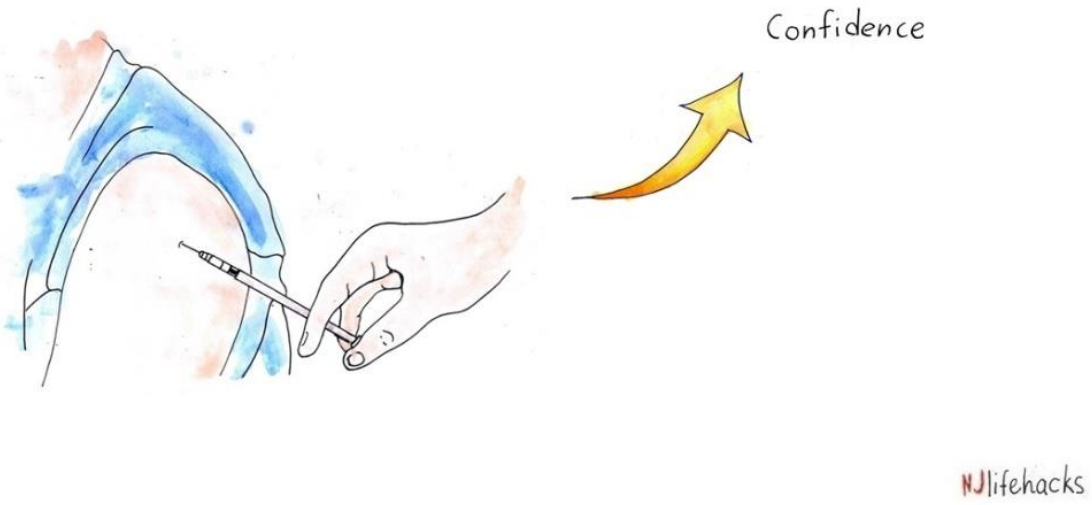
To resent what happens is to wrongly assume you have a choice in that matter.

**Action:** When something happens to you, ask yourself whether you can do something about it or not. If not, if it's not under your but under fate's control, then accept it as it is. There's no sense in fighting with reality, it'll only make you miserable.

- Nonresistance: Don't wish for reality to be any different than it is.
- Nonjudgment: Don't judge events, simply accept them as they are. (Watch the Maybe Story.)
- Nonattachment: Things come and go, don't get too attached to what you like.

(Read more about it here.)

# 14. Pain and Sickness – Opportunities for Virtue




"Disease is an impediment to the body, but not to the will, unless the will itself chooses. Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to the will. And add this reflection on the occasion of everything that happens; for you will find it an impediment to something else, but not to yourself." – Epictetus

Stoic teacher Epictetus was lame. He chose this was an impediment to the leg, not to the mind.

The same is true for physical pain and sickness. The pain is to the body, not the mind. We can choose what we do with the pain. Either we can take a headache bravely or we can whine and complain about it. The choice is up to us.

This exercise is about not being taken over by weakness and self-pity when we suffer pain. Such self-indulgent responses will only make things worse.

**Action:** Next time you feel some sort of pain try to train your virtue and hang in there. Remember, the pain is to the body, not the mind.

- Headache? It's an opportunity to train strength.
- Fever? Give your body some rest, no reason to complain.
- Choose not to be affected by pain, preserve your tranquility.

(Read more about it here.)

# 15. Imagine Everything as Borrowed from Fortune

"We have no grounds for self-admiration, as though we were surrounded by our own possessions; they have been loaned to us. We may use and enjoy them, but the one who allotted his gift decides how long we are to be tenants; our duty is to keep ready the gifts we have been given for an indefinite time and to return them when called upon, making no complaint: it is a sorry debtor who abuses his creditor." – Seneca

All we truly own is our mind. Everything else can be taken away at a snap.

Your possessions, your body, your family, your friends, everything could be taken away in a second.

According to the Stoics we should enjoy these things as long as we have them, but not get too attached because they could be gone quickly. Think of everything as borrowed – from nature, fortune, God, or whatever you want – and you can only use it temporarily. It can be taken away at a snap. Whoops and gone. Without prior notice. Without asking.

Seneca wondered, how can we see so much misfortune happening in the world and not imagine it happening with us? It's ignorance.

**Action:** Remind yourself that everything you think to possess is not truly yours. Even if you paid for it. If it can be taken away at a snap, it's not truly yours.

- Be aware that everything you hold dearly can be taken away without prior notice.
- What's your favorite object you "possess?" Remember, it could be gone by tomorrow.
- Next time you kiss your loved ones good bye, imagine it's the last time.

(Read more about it here.)

# 16. Count Your Blessings

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"Don't set your mind on things you don't possess as if they were yours, but count the blessings you actually possess and think how much you would desire them if they weren't already yours. But watch yourself, that you don't value these things to the point of being troubled if you should lose them." – Marcus Aurelius

The Stoics were minimalists.

They preferred to value what they had instead of longing for what they didn't have. They were grateful for what they had in life. They tried to *want* whatever they already had instead of desiring things they didn't have.

Basically, (1) they tried to fight their urge to gather and horde stuff. They (2) were grateful for what they already had without (3) getting too attached to those things. (Remember, they can be taken away at a snap.)

**Action:** How much would you want the things you have if you didn't have them? Like with other exercises, you can write things down. For example, write down three things you're grateful for.

- Don't buy stuff you don't need.
- Appreciate the things you already have.
- Don't get too attached to these things you're grateful for.

(Read more about it here.)

# 17. Forgive the Wrongs of Others

"When a man assents, then, to what is false, know that he had no wish to assent to the false: 'for no soul is robbed of the truth with its own consent,' as Plato says, but the false seemed to him true." – Epictetus

The Stoics believed that everybody tries to do what he thinks is right. Even if it's obviously not.

People don't do wrong on purpose, they act as they think is right. And we should pity rather than blame them.

How can we be angry at somebody when we know he didn't know any better? Right, we want to be tolerant and kind instead. We want to forgive the wrongs of others, as Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

**Action:** Before you get angry at someone, tell yourself that she didn't know any better. But you do, and therefore you can be kind and forgiving.

- Don't seek revenge when somebody wrongs you – mean comes from weakness. Choose to be tolerant and kind instead.
- Pity rather than blame wrongdoers – they are blinded in their most powerful tool: their mind.
- If someone is mean to you, then try to see it as training. We're all learning and trying to get better, scratches happen. So shake it off and move on, it's happened only in training.

(Read more about it here.)

# 18. Buy Tranquility Instead

"Starting with things of little value – a bit of spilled oil, a little stolen wine – repeat to yourself: 'For such a small price I buy tranquility and peace of mind.'" – Epictetus

This is mere genius.

One of the main goals of the Stoics was to be able to stay calm even in the face of adversity. Whatever a Stoic faces, he wants to stay calm and reasonable.

"I buy tranquility instead." This sentence has saved me from a lot of wasted energy and emotions. Often when something happens I don't like and which arouses this inner anger and excitement, I tell myself, "I buy tranquility instead." And move on calmly. Even with a smile.

This quote alone was worth all the books I read on Stoicism. I highly encourage you to try to incorporate these words into your Stoic lifestyle. Trust me, it'll be worth it.

The only caveat: It requires enough awareness to step in between the stimulus and response. If you work on that, you'll quickly benefit greatly from these words.

**Action:** Bring awareness into your life and whenever something is arousing anger and discontentment within you, tell yourself, "I buy tranquility instead."

- When you spill some wine over your clothes – buy tranquility instead.
- When your roomie (or brother) doesn't do the dishes – buy tranquility instead.
- When your favorite sports team concedes a late equalizer – buy tranquility instead.

(Read more about it here.)

# 19. Reflect Your Day

This is simple yet very effective.

You might call it journaling. The idea is to reflect yourself.

- *What good did you do today?*
- *What could you do better?*
- *And how could you be the best version of yourself?*

That's a version I read about lately. The good, better, best reflection. This is great because you need to go over the things you already did good. This is motivating and strengthening your *being good* muscles.

The most effective is probably to write things down. But it's not a necessity. Personally, I write down my goals and implementation intentions (If… then… sentences) for the next day. That's a small habit that's easy to keep up with. Therefore I do not write down my reflections of the day at the moment.

I go quickly through my day almost every night. Just in my head. And its effects are immense. I am more aware throughout the day and I detect very soon when I don't act like I think was best. This is basically an awareness tool.

**Action:** Commit to the good, better, best reflection for one work week. Take 5 minutes each night before you go to bed and ask yourself these 3 simple questions (see above). This exercise alone can do you a massive favor in terms of personal development.

(Read more about it here.)

# 20. Don't Be Satisfied with Learning – Practice!

"That's why the philosophers warn us not to be satisfied with mere learning, but to add practice and then training. For as time passes we forget what we learned and end up doing the opposite, and hold opinions the opposite of what we should." – Epictetus

Practice at practicing these exercises.

Don't be satisfied now just because you skimmed over the exercises. You must choose at least one exercise and get started immediately.

As Epictetus asked well, "If you didn't learn these things in order to demonstrate them in practice, what did you learn them for?"

By the way, YES, THIS IS HERCULES on the image above.

Get started now. The easiest are the thought exercises 2,3,4,10,13,15,16, and 19.

Look, I don't need to tell you again how to do these exercises – you just need to get started.

**"Waste no more time arguing about what a good [person] should be.**
**Be one."**
**– Marcus Aurelius**

# THANKS FOR READING

Hope you enjoyed it.

Now it's about time to try some of those exercises.

Or head back to the blog → www.njlifehacks.com/blog

Or flick me an email → jonas@njlifehacks.com