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A Stoic Approach to Anxiety



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I have generalized anxiety. That statement is just a fact, not written in sadness or contentment, but simply expressed. It's something I live with, but as a student, it does create barriers. Having anxiety and being in college isn't the most favorable combination. I trek UT's campus anxiously, eyes centered on the ground, worried every person I cross will stare. If I'm hungry but it's quiet where I am, I don't eat in fear that someone will hear me and ridicule my eating habits. When I'm in public, I try to make myself as small as possible, desperate to escape anyone's notice. I'm usually 30 minutes early to my classes so no one can watch me walk into the classroom, and if I'm late, the fear of walking in as my peers look on keeps me from going.

Most days I wake up with a stone-like feeling in my stomach and adrenaline pumping through my veins, my heart beating rapidly as waves of nausea take over, too anxious to calm myself down. Sometimes, my anxiety strikes in the middle of the night, my brain wired with worry for hours, exhausted but restless as I watch the sun break over the horizon. Anxiety is a constant struggle in my life, either in the form of a quiet whisper in the back of my head or the deafening roar of my heartbeat hammering in my eardrums. It's an uncontrollable feeling with irrational demands and urges I can't ignore.

However, I'm not completely at the mercy of its tide.

As a philosophy major, I've found that there is one particular school of thought that has helped me manage my anxiety: Stoicism. It's a philosophy that's thousands of years old, and perhaps best known due to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121 CE- 180 CE) and his work *The Meditations*. To put stoicism in its most simplified

form, it's the philosophy that emotions, which are irrational, should not rule rational thought. That is, emotions should not be allowed to influence judgments, beliefs, and reasoning, because they do not stem from rationality. In order to live virtuously, stoicism requires the practice of self-control and the rejection of any and all emotions, whether they be good or bad. It's not a sweeping, abstract philosophy that is too complex for the uninitiated. Instead, it's meant to be applied to daily life. It's a guide to a virtuous life, fairly straightforward and to the point: Don't let your emotions control you.

This application of stoicism to my daily life is helpful because my anxiety causes periods of irrational thoughts and panicked behavior. I may not be able to control those feelings, but I can try to calm myself down by denying their legitimacy and attempt to work through the panic with reasoning. Anxiety is overwhelming, almost impossible to ignore as it takes hold and ensnares rationality, but self-exercising stoicism lulls the beast into a quieter state. Sometimes the stoic approach works and other times it doesn't, but the philosophy of stoicism does give me one technique to overcome the madness. As long as I can remember that my anxiety is a byproduct of the irrational part of my brain and creates doubts and fears that aren't truly real, it's easier to manage. The fear and adrenaline don't have as tight a grip on me as they used to. Sure, my mind isn't at perfect peace. It isn't a blissful utopia of endless positivity and self-love, but with stoicism, maybe I'll get there someday.

Stoicism isn't a perfect philosophy, but it has helped me discover my own rationality among those irrational thoughts masquerading as such. It's a school of thought that doesn't come completely naturally, either, but it's a doctrine of self-exercise and self-betterment that becomes second nature after continuous practice. Its aim is admirable, to live in accordance with rationality without the confusion and ambiguity that emotion brings to life. I'm not an advocate for practicing stoicism in every aspect of life due to the fact that emotions are natural for human nature and entirely appropriate to experience, but in dealing with anxiety, I find that it's a beneficial instrument to possess. I'm able to remember that my anxiety isn't inescapable, and I

have some power in keeping it at bay. It's an intimidating beast, one that looks impossible to defeat, but stoicism gives me the strength necessary to weaken its grasp.



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