

Practical Stoic Principles **—drawn from Epictetus—**

(from *How to Be a Stoic*, Massimo Pigliucci)

1) Examine your impressions

“So make a practice at once of saying to every strong impression:
‘An impression is all you are, not the source of the impression.’
Then test and assess it with your criteria, but one primarily:
Ask, ‘Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?’
And if it’s not one of the things that you control,
be ready with the reaction,
‘Then it’s none of my concern.’”

2) Remind yourself of the impermanence of things

“In the case of particular things that delight you, or benefit you,
or to which you have grown attached, remind yourself of what they are.
Start with things of little value (like a piece of china) ...
Then you won’t be broken up if it breaks.
Also, with your spouse or child, tell yourself:
‘This person is going to die someday.’
Then you won’t be torn up if they are taken from you.”

3) Reserve clause [pause judgment]

“Whenever planning an action, [no matter what happens], say:
‘I want to keep my will aligned with nature.’
Do it with every act. . .
Then you won’t fall apart whenever anything bad
[or unexpected] happens.”

4) How can I use virtue here and now?

“For every challenge, remember the resources you have within you
to cope with it ...
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.”

(“Epictetus, the former slave, lame because of a once-broken leg, tells us to use every occasion, every challenge, as a way to exercise our virtue, to become a better human being by constant application.”)

5) Pause and take a deep breath

“Remember, it is not enough to be hit or insulted to be harmed,
you must believe that you are being harmed.
If someone succeeds in provoking you,
realize that your mind is complicit in the provocation.
Which is why it is essential that we not respond
impulsively to impressions;
take a moment before reacting,
and you will find it is easier to maintain control.”

6) Other-ize [Be empathetic]

“We can familiarize ourselves with the will of nature
by calling to mind our common experiences ...
When someone’s family member dies, we say,
‘Well, that’s part of life.’
But if one of our own family dies, we say,
‘Poor me!’
We would do better to remember how we react
when a similar loss afflicts others.”

7) Speak little and speak well

“Let silence be your goal for the most part; say only what is necessary, and be brief about it. When you’re called upon to speak, never speak about trivial things or gossip.”

8) Choose your company carefully

“Avoid palming around with people who are not philosophers.
If you do, be careful not to sink to their level ...
If a companion is dirty, you could get dirty too.”

(“Epictetus doesn’t mean professional philosophers, but rather people who are interested in following virtue and cultivating their character.”
We might become “unclean” mingling with unwise persons)

9) Respond to insults with humor

“If you learn that someone is speaking ill of you, don’t try to defend yourself against the rumors; respond instead with,
‘Yes, and they don’t know the half of it,
because they could have said more.’

10) Don’t speak too much about yourself

“In your conversation, don’t dwell at excessive length on your own deeds or adventures. Just because you enjoy recounting your experiences doesn’t mean that others derive the same pleasure from hearing about them.”

11) Speak without judging

“Until you know their reasons, how do you know that a person’s actions are bad?
This will save you from perceiving one thing clearly,
but then assenting to something different.”

12) Reflect on your day

“Don’t go to sleep before checking each decision and deed of the day—
How have I made mistakes, what did I do, what did I leave undone?
Review your acts, scold yourself for the bad things,
and be glad for the good.”



“From the ancient perspective, which we would do well to make our own, everyone ought to strive to be a philosopher ... that is, to apply reason to improve our own and our community’s life and well-being.”

~Massimo Pigliucci