

Stoics argued, is by turning towards negative emotions and experiences—not shunning them, but examining them closely instead.

When it comes to beliefs about the future, the evangelists of optimism argue that you should cultivate as many positive expectations about the future as you can. But this is not the good idea that it may at first appear to be. For a start, as Gabriele Oettingen's experiments demonstrate, focusing on the outcome you desire may actually sabotage your efforts to achieve it. More generally, a Stoic would point out, it just isn't a particularly good technique for feeling happier. Ceaseless optimism about the future only makes for a greater shock when things go wrong; by fighting to maintain only positive beliefs about the future, the positive thinker ends up being *less* prepared, and *more* acutely distressed, when things eventually happen that he can't persuade himself to believe are good. (And such things will happen.) This is a problem underlying all approaches to happiness that set too great a store by optimism. Trying to see things in an exclusively positive light is an attitude that requires constant, effortful replenishment. Should your efforts falter or prove insufficient when confronted by some unexpected shock, you'll sink back down into—possibly deeper—gloom.

The Stoics propose a more elegant, sustainable, and calming way to deal with the possibility of things going wrong: Rather than struggling to avoid all thought of these worst-case scenarios, they counsel actively dwelling on them, staring them in the face. The first benefit of dwelling on how bad things might get is a straightforward one. Psychologists have long agreed that one of the greatest enemies of human happiness is "hedonic adaptation"—the predictable and frustrating way in which any new source of pleasure we obtain, whether it's as minor as a new piece of electronic gadgetry or as major as a marriage, swiftly gets relegated to the backdrop of our lives. We grow accustomed to it, and so it ceases to deliver so much joy. It follows, then, that regularly reminding yourself that you might lose any of the things you currently enjoy—indeed, that you will definitely lose them all, in the end, when death catches up with you—would reverse the adaptation effect. Thinking about the possibility of losing something you value shifts it from the backdrop of your life back to center stage, where it can deliver pleasure once more. The second subtler and arguably even more powerful benefit of the premeditation of evils is as an antidote to anxiety. Consider how we normally seek to assuage worries about the future: We seek reassurance, looking to persuade ourselves that everything will be all right. But reassurance is a double-edged sword. In the short term, it can be wonderful, but like all forms of optimism, it requires constant maintenance: If you offer reassurance to a friend who is in the grip of anxiety, you'll often find that a few days later, he'll be back for more. Worse, reassurance can actually exacerbate anxiety. When you reassure your friend that the worst-case scenario he fears probably won't occur, you inadvertently reinforce his belief that it would be catastrophic if it did. You are tightening the coil of his anxiety, not loosening it.

All too often, the Stoics point out, things will not turn out for the best. But it is also true that, when they do go wrong, they'll almost certainly go less wrong than you were fearing. Losing your job won't condemn you to starvation and death; losing a boyfriend or girlfriend won't condemn you to a life of unrelenting misery. Those fears are based on irrational judgments about the future. The premeditation of evils is the way to replace