



**THE STOIC
PHILOSOPHER**

Embracing discomfort as a Stoic way of life

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This essay analyses discomfort as mental and physical uneasiness and how traditional Stoic philosophy dealt with this part of life which we humans appear to be wired into avoiding by all costs. The austere and simple life without comforts is a matter that has been emphasised by many philosophies and religions throughout history, from Socrates and his simple cloak, Diogenes the Cynic living on the street, to hermits retreating to solitude in huts and caves. In traditional Stoicism this is no exception. As Hadot points out: “a short cloak and a hard bed were the symbols of Stoic philosophical life” (2022: 7). Discomfort is an important part of traditional Stoicism and a key aspect in the pursuit of living according to nature. The works of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Musonius Rufus and Epictetus educate us on how and why we should embrace discomfort voluntarily, in the quest of adhering to philosophy as a way of life.

The key purpose of this essay is to investigate which views traditional Stoicism has on voluntary discomfort, and what we can learn from it and adapt as a part of embracing Stoic philosophy as a way of life. The sources used in are secondary ones, both academic and others, as well as literary treasures from traditional Stoicism.

Understanding voluntary discomfort

The inclusion of voluntary discomfort in today’s life is arguably more important than ever before. We humans have survived and thrived by seeking comfort. We have an inherent ability, a survival instinct, to avoid discomfort. Without it, we would engage in dangerous situations, often ending with death. Until quite recent times, our ancestors dealt with discomfort on a daily basis, from hunting, gathering, and fetching water, to finding shelter. After the Industrial



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Revolution, however, life in the Western world has gradually transformed to the unrecognizable. Comfort has been a driving force in seeking a better life and a sign of modernity and success. It is central in the global capitalist system, a system entirely dependent on revenues from mass consumption. This has led to the building of societies profoundly addicted to material goods, a path steadily leading to the collapse of the very nature and air we depend on for our survival as a human race.

In earlier times, humans would die due to a lack of food and water, being moulded by predators, falling sick to unknown viruses and small infections, and so on. Now, on the other hand, the main causes of death in Western societies are lifestyle diseases, such as heart attack, obesity, and diabetes. The hard truth is that without discomfort, there is no improvement in life. As former US Navy SEALs, ultramarathon runner and author David Goggins says in a famous internet quote: “Our whole life is set up in the path of least resistance. We don't want to suffer. We don't want to feel discomfort. So, the whole time we're living our lives in a very comfortable area. There's no growth in that”. He warns us in his book that we “are in danger of living a life so comfortable and soft, that you will die without ever realizing your true potential” (2018: 4). Michael Easter, author of *The Comfort Crisis*, continues in a similar fashion, claiming that most of us do not move outside of our comfort zones, by observing that “we are living progressively sheltered, sterile, temperature-controlled, overfed, underchallenged, safety-netted lives”. He claims that “people are at their best – physically harder, mentally tougher, and spiritually sounder – after experiencing the same discomforts our early ancestors were exposed to every day.” He confirms in his book that “certain discomforts protect us from physical and psychological problems like obesity, heart disease, cancers, diabetes, depression, and anxiety, and even fundamental issues like feeling a lack of meaning and purpose” (2021: 5).

Voluntary discomfort is a strategy that can help us to alter our comfort-seeking behaviour. Voluntarily engaging in uncomfortable situations is understood in this context as intentionally putting yourself through a distressful, unpleasant situation for a determined and repeated period of time. Our comfortable lifestyles are clouding the fact that discomfort is a natural part of being human, it is a crucial survival mechanism. In situations of uncertainty, our brains have a natural impulse to deal with a threatening condition and create certainty. We are programmed to deal with such matters in the least resistant way possible (Black, 2020). In situations of great danger this is a life-saving instinct, which has been vital for human beings throughout history. However, this impulse has become a challenge in the over-comfortable lives we lead today since



our brains still possess and use this mechanism, while our lives are completely different to our ancestors. We turn to comfort in most situations, as today's lifestyle permits you to remain within your comfort zone without this becoming a threat to your life. This has become detrimental to our mental and physical well-being.

To improve, develop and thrive as individuals we need to step out of our comfort zones. In other words, for change to take place we need to accept the uncertain. This is where it becomes difficult. As Black explains, the main reason we avoid discomfort is first and foremost fear, and we find external excuses to explain our negative feelings. Whether it is fear, anxiety, unpleasantness, anger, or jealousy, we're inclined to blame the outside world. For us to 'de-install this programme' from our brains, we must become open to uncertainty, as Black shows (Ibid.). Here, Stoicism teaches us a lesson.

Stoicism and voluntary discomfort

Voluntary discomfort in traditional Stoic philosophy is an important part of the Stoic way of life. The ancient Stoics emphasized the importance of engaging in voluntary discomfort on a regular basis. As Connery et al. (1968) point out, Musonius Rufus, for example, explained that voluntary acts of discomfort would strengthen our resilience for future misfortunes, as well as being a confidence booster in enduring major discomforts taking place in the future. Voluntary discomfort may therefore be understood as a key practice in gaining increased self-control and courage. In this sense, we can place undertaking acts of voluntary discomfort as an extension of practicing *premeditatio malorum* (pp. 980-981).

The roots of discomfort we can track to the Hellenistic period, and even before, to Socrates and his 'health of the soul', prioritizing reason and moral integrity in the quest for self-mastery, ahead of the demands of the body and material possessions. Socrates' teachings had a profound influence on the Hellenistic era, and later on Stoicism. During a time of great uncertainties, the appearance of philosophical schools preoccupied with the question of how to get a grip of one's life, reproduced many aspects of Socrates' teachings, and accentuated austere and frugal living in transforming one's life to that of a philosophical one. As Long (2006: 13) details, "emphasis on austerity and frugality is not simply a recommendation to prune one's diet and give up unnecessary luxuries, but an invitation to enter an alternative world and acquire a new self. The happy and virtuous self that the Hellenistic philosophers



seek to define is at its most distant from ordinary attitude and satisfaction in the area of needs and motivations.” In the case of Stoicism this is highly evident, and embodied in Zeno’s “profound satisfaction with what others would call asceticism.” (Ibid).

Evidence of discomfort in a philosophical way of life is plentiful in Stoic sources. Epictetus, for example, when he was still a slave, is known to have accepted his master mutilating his leg, and endured multiple misfortunes such as exile on several occasions during his life. When Epictetus resided in Rome, and led a philosophy school there, he lived in a house with only a mat and a mattress to sleep on, according to Neoplatonist Simplicius, as detailed by Hadot (2022: 60). This simplicity without added comforts was, and is, an important part of living a philosophical life.

Similar aspects are found in the first book of *Meditations*, where Marcus Aurelius shows how his mother taught him “simplicity of living, well clear of the habits of the rich”. He also says that from his tutor he learned “to tolerate pain and feel few needs”, while from Diognetus he was taught “to love the camp-bed, the hide blanket, and all else involved in the Greek training”. He then refers to Socrates and how he “could regulate abstinence and enjoyment where many people are too weak-willed to abstain or enjoy too indulgently” (2006: 3-7). Marcus’ tutor, Rusticus, emphasised simple living to his powerful student, an aspect the emperor had also picked up from Epictetus’s *Discourses*. Seneca also intentionally put himself in situations of discomfort during his life, and emphasised the importance of engaging in determined periods with the bare essentials, such as water, plain food and simple clothing. In *Letters from a Stoic*, he refers to this practice on several occasions. It is said that when Seneca took suicide by cutting his arms, his old and lean body from an austere life released the blood in such a slow way, that he also inserted the knife behind his knees and ankles to spur on the process (Seneca, 2004: 244).

Furthermore, Musonius Rufus explains the philosopher’s body needs to be physically fit, as it is used as an instrument by the virtues for the undertakings in life. He claims that “We will train both soul and body when we accustom ourselves to cold, heat, hunger, scarcity of food, hardness of bed, abstaining from pleasures, and enduring pains” (Rufus et al., 2011: 36-37). He teaches that through these discomforts “the body is strengthened, becomes inured to suffering, and strong and fit for every task; the soul is strengthened as it is trained for courage by enduring hardships and trained for self-control by abstaining from pleasures” (Ibid). Although there is no ‘field guide’ from the Stoics explaining methods of voluntary discomfort in a more practical sense, they do offer sufficient details for us to elaborate on this individually.



Implementing voluntary discomfort

The benefits from seeking discomfort on a voluntary basis are many and should be a part of rectifying one's life and gain self-control, Musonius Rufus explains. While broadening the discomfort zone naturally gives you more peace of mind, it also helps you to take charge of your life and develop a healthier mindset, which again creates space for personal growth and feeling more fulfilled, happier and content with your life. We are all natural parts of this universe, so by exposing yourself to the natural elements through uncomfortable situations, you will feel freshness of mind and be more satisfied afterwards. It helps you to be aware and in the moment. Exposure to mental and physical discomfort in an organised and controlled manner, will help you combat indulgence which looms at every corner. Which methods could we turn to and implement in the busy and modern lives we lead today? Six methods are discussed, based on their practicality.

The first method is exposure to cold water. Voluntary exposure to cold water is difficult and it takes time to implement it as part of your daily routine. There are plenty of strategies out there, so you should take your time and find the one that works the best for you. Wim Hof, the Dutch extreme athlete known as the 'Iceman' for his extreme ability to withstand low temperatures, lists the following benefits from cold showering: reduction of stress levels, higher level of alertness, more robust immune response, increased willpower, and weight loss (2020). Caution should be taken though, always consulting with your physician if you have some issues with your personal health.

The second method is physical exercise. Seneca talked about the importance of taking walks outside every day in *Letters from a Stoic*, while Musonius Rufus emphasized the importance of having a physically fit body. The physical benefits from exercise are common knowledge, and the positive mental effects should not be underestimated. There are countless training possibilities out there, from walking and running to more expensive and time-consuming ones. The important thing here is to take up a practice that challenges you physically, by pushing your limits. A 30-minute walk in the park might be too simplistic for many.

The third method is eating plain food. To avoid processed or ultra-processed food and beverages today is difficult, particularly for the ones living in urban areas and far away from farms and local produce. Many are addicted to comfort foods, and much of what we fill our stomachs with today, contain unhealthy salts and sugars for our addictive throats. Spending days, or even weeks, with the simplest and natural food and drink is



a great method for voluntary discomfort. Craving is a complicated matter, and many of us turn to eating when we're stressed, anxious, happy, sad, and so on. So, turning to plain foods helps in taking charge of the mind against the emotions. This is a beneficial exercise, and Roman Stoics, such as Marcus Aurelius, highlighted in *Meditations* the quality which is in your power to be content with your portion and simple food.

Another method related to the above, is to forego pleasure. Passing time without consuming alcohol, coffee, nicotine, junk food, snack or dessert is very challenging. Other strategies here are to cut out gaming, delete your social media profiles, avoid streaming services and only check your smartphone a couple of times each day. As Geoff Chen says in his blog *The Stoic Sage*, these are often distractions from daily problems. They take up more and more of your time and add nothing of value to your life. As he explains, "the quality of one's life ultimately depends on how often they're able to choose delayed gratification over instant gratification" (2020). There is also a social component to this aspect, as choosing to forego pleasures might negatively affect your social status and personal relationships. This is a good strategy to practice not being affected by the opinions and gestures of others, though.

The fifth method is sleeping on a hard bed. This is a well-known strategy undertaken by Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. They all refer to the importance of spending the night on a hard bed. It is definitely easier to have an early start from a hard camp bed, then from a comfortable and soft mattress, which turns your body into a soft entity with a poor back. The traditional Japanese futon mattress where you sleep on the ground is an interesting concept to explore. A technique to prepare your body in this way, is to go camping, or spend a few minutes each day lying directly on the floor and slowly increase the time each day. Then, after a while of adaptation, changing your mattress to a hard one, such as a futon, could be the next step.

Another method is to wear simple clothing in public. This is perhaps not something you would think of as an uncomfortable strategy. However, since Western societies are quite fashion-oriented with a massive fashion industry pushing us to constantly invest in clothes which are 'in', wearing old, 'out-of-date' simple clothing will expose you to uncomfortable looks and comments from others. This is a great way to provoke uncomfortable situations, in which you can practice not getting emotionally affected by others' behaviour.

The last method is fasting. Fasting is a well-known method in spiritual practices throughout the world, and has a health aspect to it as well. There is a popular



approach to this matter in recent times, which is intermittent fasting. There are a number of ways to implement this, and it is certainly uncomfortable, especially if you're used to eat quite often during the day. As in the case of cold-water exposure, intermittent fasting or other engagement with fasting, should be consulted with your physician in case of weak personal health. In any case, one approach to this is to let it pass eight hours between each meal, which could mean that you eat two meals a day, one at 10 am, and a second one at 6 pm. Intermittent fasting does not cover drinking water, coffee and tea, but calorie-dense beverages, such as cappuccino, soda or hot chocolate, should be avoided.

These methods of voluntary discomfort don't require spending money, only a solid portion of will and discipline. They are easy to implement and you can start immediately. If you choose to adopt one, or several, in your daily routine, remember to never back down from your plan. Whichever strategy you decide on, implementing it as a part of your own Stoic daily spiritual routine is key. As traditional Stoicism demonstrates, engaging in voluntary discomfort should be part of living a philosophical way of life, preparing yourself for future misfortunes and hardship.

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