

There Are Two Kinds of Happy People

Some of us strive for a virtuous life. Others strive for a pleasant one. We could all use a better balance.

By [Arthur C. Brooks](#) [The Atlantic](#) JANUARY 28, 2021

These days, we are offered a dizzying variety of secrets to happiness. Some are ways of life: [Give to others](#); [practice gratitude](#). Others are minor hacks: [Eat kale](#); [play a board game](#). [Some](#) are simply an effort to make a buck. I have found that most of the serious approaches to happiness can be mapped onto two ancient traditions, promoted by the Greek philosophers Epicurus and Epictetus. In a nutshell, they focus on enjoyment and virtue, respectively. Individuals typically gravitate toward one style or the other, and many major philosophies have followed one path or the other for about two millennia. Understanding where you sit between the two can tell you a lot about yourself—including your happiness weak points—and help you create strategies for a more balanced approach to life.

Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) led an eponymous school of thought—Epicureanism—that believed a happy life requires two things: *ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbance) and *aponia* (the absence of physical pain). His philosophy might be characterized as “If it is scary or painful, work to avoid it.” Epicureans see discomfort as generally negative, and thus the elimination of threats and problems as the key to a happier life. Don’t get the impression that I am saying they are lazy or unmotivated—quite the contrary, in many cases. But they don’t see enduring fear and pain as inherently necessary or beneficial, and they focus instead on enjoying life. Epictetus (c. 50–c. 135 A.D.) was one of the most prominent Stoic philosophers, who believed happiness comes from finding life’s purpose, accepting one’s fate, and behaving morally regardless of the personal cost. His philosophy could be summarized as, “Grow a spine and do your duty.” People who follow a Stoic style see happiness as something earned through a good deal of sacrifice. Not surprisingly, Stoics are generally hard workers who live for the future and are willing to incur substantial personal cost to meet their life’s purpose (as they see it) without much complaining. They see the key to happiness as working through pain and fear, not actively avoiding them.

Epicureans and Stoics can coexist, and even cohabitate (my wife and I have such a mixed marriage). But in my experience, Stoics and Epicureans tend to look down on one another and appear to have been doing so for about as long as both philosophies have existed. The 3rd-century biographer Diogenes Laërtius [wrote](#) that “Epictetus calls [Epicurus a] preacher of effeminacy and showers abuse on him.” While there’s no historical record of it, I can easily imagine Epicurus responding to Epictetus, “You totally need to chill out.” For roughly 2,000 years, philosophers have asked which approach leads to greater happiness and a better life. My purpose here is different. Both views have virtues and weaknesses. I want to know what each of us, given our natural tendency toward one of the approaches, can learn and adopt from the other.

For Epicurus, unhappiness came from negative thoughts, including needless guilt, fear of things we can’t control, and a focus on the inevitable unpleasant parts of life. The solution was to banish them from the mind. To this end, he proposed a [“four-part cure”](#): Don’t fear God; don’t worry about death; what is good is easy to get (by lowering our expectations for what we need to be happy); what is terrible is easy to endure (by concentrating on pleasant things even in the midst of suffering). This is made all the easier when we surround ourselves with friendly people in a peaceful environment.

Epicurus promoted [hedonia](#), from which we derive the word *hedonism*. However, he would not have recognized our current usage of the term. The secret to banishing negative thoughts, according to Epicurus, is not mindless debauchery—despite the [baseless rumors](#) that he led wild parties and orgies, he taught that thoughtlessly grabbing easy worldly pleasures is a mistake, because ultimately they don’t satisfy. Instead, reason was Epicurus’s best weapon against the blues. For example, here is the mantra he suggests we tell ourselves when the fear of death strikes: “Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.”

In contrast to hedonia, the Stoic approach is known as *eudaemonia*, which might be defined as a life devoted to our greatest potential in service of our highest ideals. Stoicism is characterized by the principles of naturalism and moralism—changing the things we can to make life better while also accepting the things we can't change. (The “[Serenity Prayer](#)” is very Stoic.) “Don't demand that things happen as you wish,” Epictetus wrote in [The Enchiridion](#), “but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well.”

Moralism is the principle that moral virtue is to be defined and followed for its own sake. “Tell yourself, first of all, what kind of man you want to be,” Epictetus wrote in his [Discourses](#), “and then go ahead with what you are doing.” In other words, create a code of virtuous conduct for yourself and live by it, with no loopholes for convenience.

Epicureans and Stoics are encouraged to focus their attention on different aspects of life—and death. Epicurus's philosophy suggested that we should think intently about happiness, while for Stoics, the paradox of happiness is that to attain it, we must forget about it; with luck, happiness will come as we pursue life's purpose. Meanwhile, Epicurus encourages us to disregard death while we are alive, and Epictetus insists that we confront it and ponder it regularly, much like the [maranasati meditation](#) in Buddhism, in which monks contemplate their own deaths and stages of decay.

No research to date asks why some people are naturally more Epicurean and others more Stoic. No doubt there is a genetic component, given the [large percentage of personality](#) that sits encoded somewhere in our DNA. But nurture likely also plays a role: In one study, a scholar [found](#) that parents who modeled and endorsed eudaimonia had kids who engaged in eudaimonic pursuits. Meanwhile, parents who role-modeled hedonia had kids who grew up to derive pleasure primarily from this model. The implication is pretty clear: If you want children who principally pursue duty and honor, do so yourself. If instead you strive to achieve happiness by minimizing pain, your kids probably will too.

People have argued for centuries about which approach is better for happiness, but they largely talk past one another. In truth, each pursues different *aspects* of happiness: Epicurus's style brings pleasure and enjoyment; Epictetus's method delivers meaning and purpose. **As happiness scholars [note](#), a good blend of these things is likeliest to deliver a truly happy life. Too much of one—a life of trivial enjoyment or one of grim determination—will not produce a life well lived, as most of us see it.** The big question is, therefore, how people can manufacture a good blend in their lives between the two approaches. Here are three ideas.

1. Know thyself.

This expression is one of the Delphic maxims, carved into the pronaos of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece. It acknowledges the fundamental truth that we can't make forward progress in life if we don't know where we are situated right now. Answering the question thus starts with an informal but honest answer to this question: When my mood is low, do I naturally look to increase my level of pleasure and enjoyment, or do I focus on meaning and purpose in my life? The former is a sign that you tend toward being an Epicurean, the latter that you are more of a Stoic.

More scientifically, several research-based tools to judge Epicurean or Stoic tendencies have been developed. For example, scholars [fielded](#) a survey in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that helps uncover hedonistic tendencies. The “Meaning in Life Questionnaire” from the University of Pennsylvania's [Authentic Happiness Questionnaire Center](#) arguably measures eudaimonic tendencies quite well. (On this test, I learned that I am near the top of the population in my efforts to search for meaning in life but below average in having found it.)

2. Beef up the other side.

The key to blending enjoyment and meaning is not to suppress what you have but to bolster what you lack. Once you have situated yourself on the spectrum, you can formulate a strategy to strengthen the discipline you are missing (assuming that you're not in the middle already). At the end of each day, you might examine the events you experienced and ask yourself harmonizing questions. For example:

- Did this event bring me enjoyment? Did it also bring me meaning?
- Did this make me feel afraid? Did I learn something from this fear that will lead to less fear in the future?
- Did this serve my interests? Did it serve the interest of others?

Make resolutions that attempt to achieve yes-yes combinations to these questions.

You can also engage in concrete exercises that remediate your weakness. Stoics, for example, might program regular weekends away with friends, leaving all work at home. Meanwhile, Epicureans might do something difficult and strenuous like training for a marathon. Stoics should read [this column about happiness](#) and discuss it during their weekends away. Epicureans should spend their running time pondering the reality and meaning of death.

3. Build a happiness portfolio that uses both approaches.

Finally, it is important to pursue life goals in which each happiness approach reinforces the other. That portfolio is simple, and I have [written](#) about it before: Make sure your life includes faith, family, friendship, and work in which you earn your success and serve others. Each of these elements flexes both the Stoic and the Epicurean muscles: All four require that we be fully present in an Epicurean sense and that we also work hard and adhere to strong commitments in a Stoic sense.

The deeper point in all this is an ancient one: *A balanced approach to happiness in life is best*. In his essay “The Natural History of Intellect,” Ralph Waldo Emerson [put it](#) concisely: “Characters and talents are complementary and suppletory. The world stands by balanced antagonisms.”

That’s easier said than done, of course. Whether Epicurean or Stoic, we always want to double down on what comes naturally to us. But that is the road to excess, which ultimately leads us away from well-being. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” goes the old proverb. In 1825, the novelist Maria Edgeworth [added](#) a second line: “All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.” Just so.

So to all you Stoics: Take the night off. And to all you Epicureans: Time to get back to work.