

Mental Discipline

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It is not events that disturb people, it is their judgments concerning them.

— Epictetus, *Enchiridion*

One of the most useful things to learn in life is mental discipline: *not* allowing something in your mind.¹ Mental discipline is much more important than physical discipline — you would be better off if you're mentally disciplined even though physically indulgent than the opposite.² No wise people can afford not to have it.

Mental discipline is hard. You can observe your own physical activities easily, but it's much harder to observe what's happening in your mind and therefore control it. It's an old topic; every civilization has some teachings about it.³

The core of mental discipline is emotional discipline because what disturbs the human mind the most is emotion. If you can control your emotions well — even if you can't think correctly all the time — you'll be far less likely to make big mistakes, meaning you're already ahead of most people. It's far, far more beneficial to avoid letting your emotions drive you into big troubles than to try to think "smart." In addition, emotional discipline is the foundation of correct thinking — you can't think well without a peaceful mind.

When is the most important time to keep your emotions under control? When unpleasant things, e.g. troubles, happen because that's when your emotions do the most damage. Which emotion do you need to discipline the most? Counterproductive emotions, i.e. emotions that *don't* help you. What're the typical counterproductive emotions?

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Self-pity/Complaining. When trouble comes, it's tempting to pity yourself and complain because of our self-centered human nature. Instinctively, your first reaction is to blame other people, believe yourself to be the victim, and cry out: "Poor me! Poor me!"

¹ Or in your head. The mind is simply what the brain does. If you believe the mind must be something mysterious that you can't understand, then you can't discipline it.

² Physical discipline + unregulated mind could cause great harm.

³ But it's often achieved by believing untrue consolations. The harder one's life is, the more intense emotional consolations one'll crave, and the more tempting it is to believe what feels good.

The cure is to recognize the world *doesn't* care what you complain; it rather hurts *yourself* the most. When you want to complain, remember Ben Franklin's advice: "Let your discontents be your secrets — if the world knows them, it will despise you and increase them." Instead of blaming other people, society, or the world, always ask yourself: "What can *you* do to make things better?"

Envy. Human history is a history of envy — you can explain a high percentage of human follies and tragedies with envy. Envy often leads to ridiculous views, e.g. some people wish everyone, including themselves, to be equally poor rather than growing rich together because some would inevitably get richer than them.⁴

The cure is to know your *self-worth* clearly.⁵ Whatever you want in life, make sure you actually *deserve* it.⁶ Don't wish to get what you don't deserve. Instead, either be contented with what you deserve — or better yet — if you long for anything beyond your current competence and merit, *work* to improve yourself.

Regret. Regretful people get stuck in the past, believing "If something had or hadn't happened before, I would be so much better off now." They constantly remind themselves (and others) how unhappy they're now and how much happier they would be in the hypothetical world — as if doing so could change what has happened.

The cure is to not allow yourself to think about "what-if"s. It doesn't matter what has *already* happened; what matters is what you should do *now*. Also, try to minimize future regrets by choosing carefully at present. Don't do things that would leave you with deathbed regrets; do things that, if not tried, would leave you with deathbed regrets.

Unhelpful Cynicism. Saying, either to yourself or to other people, that something can't be done is easy and sounds "smart" and "adult"-like. Unhelpfully cynical people laugh at earnest people for being "naive" with the following "logic:" because *I* can't do anything good in this world, *you* can't either.

The cure is to recognize that believing nobody could ever do anything constructive hurts the progress of human civilization. The mentality won't solve any problem that led to the belief; it'll only make the world worse — if you believe nothing *can* be done, nothing *will* be done.

Why Are They Counterproductive? What those emotions have in

⁴ But they wouldn't like it if it actually happens; they aren't careful what they wish for.

⁵ Aristotle's magnanimity virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁶ It, of course, requires you to judge what you deserve and don't deserve. It's tempting to fool yourself into overestimating what you deserve. Hence, people who habitually fool themselves can't get rid of envy.

common is that they *don't* work. Self-pity won't solve your problem; envy won't give you what you want; regret won't make any difference; unhelpful cynicism won't improve this world. They rather hurt *yourself* in every way because they distract you from doing what's needed to deal with the trouble. They're extremely harmful and massively stupid.

Since those counterproductive, harmful, stupid emotions spread like disease, stay away from people who habitually generate them.

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How to handle those emotions?

(A stable environment in early life helps. If you grow up with violent emotions, it would be much harder to control your emotions. But you can do nothing about either choosing your own early environment or what has already happened; we can only talk about what's up to you.)

Body and mind are interdependent. Physical discipline is the foundation of mental discipline, so avoid addictive recreational chemicals, eat healthily, exercise frequently, sleep regularly, etc. They aren't easy; you need to work on them.

Unfortunately, you can't cut your emotions like a knife cutting butter; it isn't how the human brain works. Why? Because direct self-control of the mind is too dangerous. Imagine our ancestors could easily command their minds to do something while ignoring food or sleep, they would die and wouldn't leave enough children. Hence, evolution discourages us from directly controlling our mind.⁷

⁷ Marvin Minsky's *The Society of Mind* and *The Emotion Machine*.

It perhaps worked fine for our ancestors in the ancient world where physical survival was hard and had the first priority. But in the modern world where (thankfully) we need to deal with subtle mental events more often than simple physical survivals, this ancient mechanism gives us more inconvenience than benefit.

Before we have the technology to fix this legacy bug in our brain, we have to deal with counterproductive emotions with hard work.

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Because you can't completely control your emotions, when unpleasant things happen — no matter how much you've prepared — counterproductive emotions will show up. But what you can do is to realize

they appear. The quicker you can notice, the less harm they'll cause to you (and others) because merely knowing they show up weakens their intensity. Thus, cultivate a sensitivity to your own emotional state.

After you detect them, stop doing what doesn't work: indulging yourself in counterproductive emotions merely because it's human nature. Recognize and accept the unpleasant fact that this world *doesn't* care what you feel — it won't change merely because you're emotional about it; you'll only hurt yourself. Therefore, develop a skeptical view of emotions, especially your own emotions.

What works? It's useful to think of life as playing cards: although luck matters — might even matter a lot — the best *you* can do is to play your hands well: (1) accept what isn't up to you (i.e. the hands that you have to deal with) and (2) focus on what's up to you (i.e. how well you can play your hands).

So distinguish between what's and what isn't up to you. If your trouble isn't caused by your own folly, why bother? Caution: you need to be honest with yourself because there's no clear-cut distinction between what's and what isn't up to you; all you can rely on is your own judgment. It isn't hard to distinguish them — you just need common sense; but it's hard to not fool yourself — you're tempted to believe all your troubles aren't your fault because it feels good.⁸ The danger of fooling yourself is great, as always, at any time, on any matter.

One typical example of what isn't up to you and you must accept is the past. Therefore, never ask "what-if"s. Whatever has happened *already* happened, you can do nothing about it.⁹ Instead, focus on what you can do *now* for the *future*. Once you've learned the lessons from the past, don't dwell on it. Look forward, not backward.

After you accept what isn't up to you, you need to focus on what's up to you. The best thing to do is, of course, what's needed to deal with the trouble. But if there's nothing you can do, e.g. the trouble is caused by unfavorable external forces that you can't control, it's useful to distract yourself with active pursuits, e.g. reading,¹⁰ work,¹¹ art,¹² etc. You can avoid acting on emotions when they're intense, and it might help your productivity.¹³ Why not?

Mental discipline is easier if you're independent-minded because lots of emotional disturbances come from social surroundings. Most people, like reeds swaying in whichever direction the wind blows, are held in bondage to what the crowd believes,¹⁴ surrendering control of their

⁸ In fact, the opposite extreme — believing you're the cause of all your troubles — is a much, much better idea than blaming other people and believing you're the victim. But it'll get you stuck in the past and negative emotions, stopping you from doing what's needed to improve the situation.

⁹ However, it's counterproductive to over-generalize this nothing-I-can-do view to (1) whatever happened *had to* happen or (2) whatever will happen *will* happen. Nothing in the past that happened had to happen; it happened because of people's choices and the development of numerous events that intertwined in complex ways, eventually becoming out of everyone's control — something we call fate before and randomness today. It didn't have to happen — if people could've chosen differently or events could've developed differently, it might not have happened (but you also never know, so it's a waste of time to speculate). However, it's a *fact* that what happened *already* happened and you can't change it now. Therefore, getting stuck in the past doesn't help; you should accept it as it is. But if you extend this view to the future too, you'll become counterproductively passive. Of course, you can't control lots of what'll happen, but you can control *some* of them (even if, in theory, people might say the world is entirely deterministic or entirely random, in practice, you have to *pretend* free will exists; otherwise, individuals and society wouldn't function), which is what you should focus on now. So what you're doing at present matters.

¹⁰ Especially reading what can give you a sense of *impersonal feeling*, e.g. biography, history, philosophy, etc. They expand your narrow world from here and now, and most importantly, from yourself. You would realize what you call misfortune is nothing compared to what our ancestors had to deal with, making you appreciate how lucky it is to live today. Or your troubles look unimportant from the viewpoint of the grand universe and the (seemingly) eternal flow of time. It might be a type of consolation, but it isn't based on false beliefs. Equally importantly, you can learn how to handle troubles from reading them.

¹¹ Not just the work narrowly defined, but anything rewarding in doing itself.

own happiness to other people. However, if you can stop caring what other people think and focus on your own thinking, your emotions can get detached. For example, when people say you're wrong, look at facts. If you think you're right supported by facts and reasoning, why bother? If you're indeed wrong, admit it, learn from it, and move on. The habit of looking at facts is very, very useful — it's not only the foundation of correct thinking but also the stabilizer of emotion.

Remember "This too will pass." When troubles come, the non-delusional hope is: they'll go away soon, like everything else. Counterproductive emotions will be gone too; time will weaken their intensity.

Try to understand what disturbs you. The more you can understand it *actively*, the less you'll be disturbed *passively*. For example, when you're disturbed by people, try to understand that their behaviors are determined by their inborn temperaments, experience, and the preceding conditions. Thus, getting emotional about them doesn't help — it won't change them; it'll only hurt yourself.¹⁵

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Perhaps what's the most useful in the long run is to develop the right view of life. We naturally avoid thinking about troubles because they're unpleasant. But an inescapable fact of life is that troubles — and more extremely — hardships will always come. So *expect* hardships. All you can do is to *face* and *cope*.

Most importantly, recognize life can be paradoxical — hardships in the short run might turn out to be good in the long run. Therefore, don't wish to have an easy life — comfort and ease will corrupt you; wish to have the fortitude to cope with hardships.

For example: (1) Don't wish to get jobs done smoothly — you'll become careless if things always go well; wish to have the strength to overcome setbacks. (2) Don't wish to figure things out easily — you won't understand it well without struggles; wish to have the mental capacity to endure the pain of learning. (3) Don't wish to have perfect health — you'll be tempted to spend it on vicious pursuits; wish to use and protect your energy carefully. (4) Don't wish to make people obey you completely — you'll become arrogant rapidly; wish to use facts to prove you're right. (5) Don't wish to make yourself look "smart" — you can kill yourself by overestimating your ability; wish to know your limit and stay within it. (6) Don't wish to always get visible returns from your effort — you can't do great work without trial and error; wish to

¹² Good arts give order to the mind; bad "arts" destroy it.

¹³ People sometimes do their best work when they're disturbed in their personal life.

¹⁴ Which can change suddenly, violently.

¹⁵ Understanding what disturbs you is an idea repeatedly mentioned by so many philosophers and religions that it's interesting to think about how it works. If we generalize, it's causal determinism. Everything is interdependent with each other, forming an infinitely grand causal web in space; every event depends on its preceding events, forming an infinitely long causal chain in time. When, for example, you get angry with someone, you can remind yourself that he's like a puppet controlled by countless spacetime causes. It's not that he wanted to do it *knowingly*; he *couldn't* have done it differently given the external causes that were out of his control. As a result, you *redirect* the target of *responsibility* from the person to the numerous causes. And your emotion gets *diluted* — it's easy to focus your anger on a single person, how can you get angry with so many external causes that feel so grand, remote, and impersonal?

It has problems. (1) What's meant by "cause" is never clear, and its foundation became shaky since Hume. (2) You might fool yourself because many causes tend to be *imagined*. For example, you often don't know much about the person who disturbs you, and it's tempting to imagine causes that you *wish* to be true, e.g. "He must have had a miserable childhood that is worthy of my empathy." Fooling yourself is too high a price to pay. (3) Overdoing it would make you counterproductively passive, defeating your original purpose of weakening passive emotions and gaining active control of your mind. (4) Judged by the consequences, both individually and socially, it would be a disaster to get rid of personal responsibility. What matters is the outcome, not the excuse.

Averaged out, it's still useful to understand what disturbs you. Perhaps it's better to understand it through general human nature and history because the knowledge you gain is more reliable and less self-deceiving.

have the patience to keep trying. (7) Don't wish to get 100% of what you want — you'll become resentful, bitter, cynical if it doesn't happen; wish to do what you should, lower your expectations, accept whatever results you end up with, and let the world and the future judge.

In short, redirect your focus from external results to personal learning and improvement.¹⁶

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Handling your own counterproductive emotions is a process of *talking to yourself*¹⁷ in *various* ways, which isn't different from how you persuade other people. Like persuading others, using only a single way isn't enough;¹⁸ you need many different ways to deal with your own emotions *resourcefully* — if one way doesn't work, switch to another.

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Today, we need mental discipline more than ever because technology makes us more counterproductively emotional. For example, it amplifies envy. In old times, a peasant, in his lifetime, only knew his village, which didn't have much to envy. Now, with a few clicks, he could see the most luxurious lifestyle on Earth. Similarly, we're more vulnerable to self-pity, regret, unhelpful cynicism, greed, fear, anger on the Internet.

But it also means mental discipline is more rewarding. When many people are doing what doesn't work that hurts themselves (and others), if you can stick to what works, it's a huge advantage.

Mental discipline is, of course, a matter of practice, like everything else. It's a *trained mental habit* — nobody is born with mental discipline because it's against human nature; you can only obtain it by training yourself again and again.

So ingrain principles into the mind, and prepare for troubles. If you never practice mental discipline, you'll be helpless when you need it, which you never know when. It's like not doing your homework and a surprise exam comes, you'll fail. Therefore, when unpleasant things happen, tell yourself it's time to train your mental discipline, practicing what you know. As Epictetus said:

The true man is revealed in difficult times. So when trouble comes, think of yourself as a wrestler whom God, like a trainer, has paired with a tough young buck.¹⁹

¹⁶ People often react to those ideas by saying: "They're too unworldly or idealistic." On the contrary, they're worldly and realistic to the core because they're *what works* in the real world.

¹⁷ A great example is Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. Its original title literally means "To One's Self" in Greek.

¹⁸ e.g. when you want someone to do something, merely saying "Do it! Do it! I don't know how I can make you do it. But do it!" might, at best, only work at the beginning.

¹⁹ *Discourses*.