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The Relevance of Modern Stoicism

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As a medical provider, the most pressing goal is primum non nocere. The psychiatrist metaphorically coaxes the patient back from a ledge, the neonatologist tirelessly cuddles the premature infant, and the emergency physician deftly juggles a myriad of life-threatening acute-care cases. Regardless of specialty, all physicians aspire to improve the lives of their patients.

Although aspirational goals should respect mortality, personal denial is an understandable and commonly employed human coping mechanism. One constructive approach may be to incorporate the tenets of stoicism and Memento Mori, the inevitability that one day you will be gone.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is increasing physician burnout [1, 2]. This pandemic highlights our impermanence. Physicians who were previously unobservant now face the mirror with an honest look at their own mortality. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, wrote in his journal, "All that you see will soon perish; those who witness this perishing will soon perish themselves. Die in extreme old age or die before your time - it will all be the same" [3].

This observation , while callous, reflects organic life. Simply consider the annual life cycle of leaves that change colors and fall to the ground, then gently decompose for the next generation. More personally as a physician, you respond to a "code blue" and watch your patients slip away even though you did everything in your power to save them. Those closest to your age contemplate a premature death, and die.

In the medical professions and most societies, death is a distant abstraction while navigating life. Although many people purchase life insurance and adaptively ponder their own death, those who fail to do so are often overwhelmed with manifestations of existential death anxiety. These thoughts of death can invoke a sense of powerlessness and undermine happiness. This may result in thanatophobia, the fear of the dying process or death.

One approach to death anxiety, for both physicians and patients, is the love of one's fate (amor fati). This was popularized by the prominent Greek Stoic philosopher, Epictetus. He counseled, "Demand not that events should happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will go on well" [4].

The foundation of Stoic philosophy is that only one's thoughts and one's actions are under our control. Other concerns are unmanageable, so no need to waste the energy trying to control them. When you pull onto a freeway deadlocked in traffic, why curse it? It is out of your control. Instead, accept it for what it is and smile because it has given you a chance to finish the podcast you started last week. "We cannot choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how we respond to them" [3]. The weather, traffic, unruly patients, others' attitudes, and a pandemic are all outside of your locus of control.

With life whittled down to just what we can and cannot control, it seems fruitless to forget about the commonality that everyone shares: death. Birth and death are the bookends of our lives and although we have no control over either, learning how to die can greatly assist in the task of how to properly live. "It takes the whole of life to learn how to live, and—what will perhaps make you wonder more—it takes the whole of life to learn how to die" [5].

Memento Mori, which translates to "remember you must die," refers to an artistic or symbolic reminder of the inevitability of death. In the Roman tradition, a victorious general was driven through the streets of Rome in a horse-drawn chariot to the applause and praise of the people. A slave would whisper in his ear, "Memento Mori," reminding him of his mortality. The constructive principles of Memento Mori are summarized by Marcus Aurelius: "You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do, and say, and think" [3]. If I died right now, what have I left undone? Would my children think of me as a good parent, or someone who never had time for them? Would my colleagues think of me as an honest and diligent worker, or would they be happy someone else was filling my role now? Would my patient think I took the time to listen, or did I just hear them? Controlling your perceptions and conducting yourself in an honorable manner fall in line with embracing and accepting your fate.

The Stoic principle of loving one's fate, and the practice of Memento Mori, are tools that physicians can use to navigate our lives as virtuously as possible. We can mitigate the effects of burnout with a sense of purpose, providing the best possible care to our patients. These tools aid in guiding us to be productive family members and positive role models to our societies.

Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, explains these tenants the best: "A man's excellence or virtue does not depend on his success in obtaining anything in the external world; it depends entirely on having the right mental attitude toward things" [6]. We are all going to die, but only some of us will live our best possible lives, and Stoic philosophy provides us a path to navigate the chaotic modern world with intention and virtue.

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