

# Why stoicism is changing people's lives for better

By Sarah Berry



Stepping out of his white T-shirt and jeans: Tim Ferriss. Photo: Getty Images

During the 1976 Olympics, Japanese gymnast Shun Fujimoto broke his right kneecap during his floor routine.

Astonishingly, sickeningly, he continued to compete.

During the rings, his final apparatus, he dismounted with a double twisted somersault. The landing sent forceful reverberations through the broken knee, ripping the ligaments and tearing the knee joints apart. Despite this, he "raised his arms in a perfect finish before collapsing in agony". His team won the gold medal.

It is this kind of alien disregard for pain or human emotion – applicable perhaps only to a percentage of elite athletes, "stiff upper lip" military and insane people – that comes to mind when I think of stoicism.

Yet, stoicism, which has been described as "a no-nonsense philosophical system designed to produce dramatic, real-world effects", applies – or perhaps ought to apply – to all of us.

The philosophy, which has roots in ancient Athens, is experiencing a renaissance and is being credited for the success of elite athletes and entrepreneurs, politicians and parents. It may even be the underpinning philosophy of your latest health kick, the way you cook, or your minimalist, normcore closet.

"Stoicism as a philosophy is really about the mental game," explains Ryan Holiday, author of stoicism book, *The Obstacle Is the Way* that has inspired everyone from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Olympic athletes. "It's not a set of ethics or principles. It's a collection of spiritual exercises designed to help people through the difficulty of life. To focus on managing emotion; specifically, non-helpful emotion."

Non-helpful emotions like fear.

American author of the New York Times bestseller *The Four-Hour Body*, Tim Ferris uses the philosophy to address his own fears of poverty or losing a certain quality of life.

"It's changed my life," Ferris says in a new podcast.

He regularly uses the philosophy to experiment with his fear, wearing the same white T-shirt and pants for weeks in a row, have periods of living modestly ("rice and beans – it's \$2-\$3 a day") and fasting once a week.

"It's inoculating yourself against unfounded fear because when I find myself defensive, fearful of losing whatever success or money or prestige or status I might have or whatever – it could be any number of other types of fears – they're usually nebulous," he explains. "You worry that your quality of life will drop, you'll be very unhappy, but if you rehearse that condition – the worst-case scenario – you realise it's not that bad and that's tremendously empowering.

"It allows you to make better investment decisions, it allows you to take the steps to start your own company, start a relationship, end a relationship – because you are rehearsing the worst-case scenarios instead of letting them bounce around your head in a very unformed, nebulous way."

It's the same tacit mentality behind many "cleanse" programs.

Right now, I am doing a bad job of Flow Athletic's 30 Days Clean Program.

The idea is to refrain from sugar, caffeine, alcohol and bread/pasta. When we abstain, we drop our "food panic" and can, theoretically, make better choices for ourselves because we realise we can survive perfectly well without those indulgences.

Yet, the Facebook "support" group demonstrates the palpable fear of going without coffee for a few weeks (which admittedly I may or may not be succeeding at).

Similarly, this philosophy of going back to basics to remove our dependency on transient, luxury items pervades *Simplicious*, the latest offering of Sarah Wilson (who also quit sugar). It is very much about going back to basics and even includes a rather handy leftovers index.

I ask her whether stoicism influenced the book.

"I guess it does indirectly," replies Wilson, who studied philosophy. "I personally live to some Stoic principles."

She says she doesn't intend to spruik those principles to the public, but concedes, "the benefits of going without are part of the book".

If it all seems like a bah humbug, joyless kind of approach to living, it's not. Exactly.

Rather, the idea is to experiment with ourselves – and our fears – from time to time so that we are not held captive to our comfort zone and can practise courage in the face of change.

"Manliness [or rather humanness] gains much strength by being challenged," says the philosopher Seneca in *The Tao of Seneca*, which Ferris has turned into a new audiobook series.

"There are more things ... likely to frighten us than there are to crush us. We suffer more in imagination than in reality."

So taking a week (or 30 days) here or there to test ourselves against our fears – big or small – can help strengthen ourselves against the "irresponsible licence of a frightened mind", as Seneca puts it.

It's tasting the have-nots so that we can appreciate what we have and can begin to take better control of our lives in the moment by playing with our fear of losing control in the future. There's no need to break a leg for that.

### **FIVE SENECA QUOTES ON STOICISM TO GET YOU THROUGH CHALLENGES**

- "No prize fighter can go with high spirits into the strife if he has never been beaten black and blue. The only contestant who can confidently enter the lists is the man who has seen own blood, who has felt his teeth rattle beneath his opponent's fists, who has been tripped and felt the full force of his adversary's charge, who has been downed in body, but not in spirit, one who, as often as he falls, rises again with greater defiance than ever."

- "We are in the habit of exaggerating or imagining or anticipating sorrow. We are torn by things present or about things to come ... Consider whether your proofs of future trouble are sure. For it is more often the case that we are troubled by our apprehensions."

- "Let us become intimate with poverty so that fortune may not catch us off our guard. We shall be rich with all the more comfort if we learn how far poverty is from being a burden."

- "This is surest proof that a man can get of his own competency; If he neither seeks the things that allure him to luxury nor is led into them. It shows much more courage to remain dry and sober when the mob is drunk and vomiting. but it shows greater self-courage to refuse to withdraw oneself and to do what the crowd does but do it in a different way."

- "When you challenge yourself by living without luxuries or indulgences, say to yourself: 'is this the condition that I feared?' The soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of greater stress. It is while fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against its violence."

Source: <http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/life/why-stoicism-is-changing-peoples-lives-for-better-20160209-gmptyy.html#ixzz3zk5R4T2S>