

HOW TO BUILD A LIFE

11 Ancient Solutions for Modern Malaise

The Roman philosopher Seneca's essay "On a Happy Life" is full of lessons that are as pertinent today as they were two millennia ago.

By Arthur C. Brooks



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"How to Build a Life" is a weekly column by Arthur Brooks, tackling questions of meaning and happiness. [Click here](#) to listen to his podcast series on all things happiness, How to Build a Happy Life.

“All men, brother Gallio, wish to live happily,” wrote the Roman philosopher and statesman Lucius Annaeus Seneca to his brother around A.D. 58, “but are dull at perceiving exactly what it is that makes life happy.” Seneca may very well have based that assessment on himself. He was a happiness expert, writing throughout his life about the ancient concept of *eudaemonia*, which roughly means “living in agreement with nature,” or perhaps, in today’s language, “inner peace.” Yet his life was anything but peaceful.

After experiencing years of severe health issues, Seneca was exiled from Rome under Emperor Claudius, then returned to tutor and later advise Emperor Nero, by whom he was first beloved and then accused (probably falsely) of conspiracy—and thus compelled to take his own life. As the creator of the website Daily Stoic, Ryan Holiday, remarked to me by email, “That he could even get out of bed in the morning, let alone smile, was a feat of sheer human endurance.”

No doubt all of this is more harrowing than what you endure in daily life—you thought *you* had a bad boss?—but perhaps you can relate nonetheless. You want to be happy and well, but your messy circumstances bite and gnaw at you relentlessly, distracting you from the habits of thought and action that could help you find enjoyment and remember the meaning in your life.

Seneca wrote his essay “On a Happy Life” during those difficult last years with Nero—written as advice to his brother, but no doubt advice to *himself*—on what one needs to do to maintain equanimity in the face of personal chaos. Every paragraph is a gem, and the whole thing is worth your time. But luckily for us, he also helpfully lists 11 of the most important lessons he believed one must follow to achieve peace. They are as pertinent today as they were two millennia ago.

Lesson 1: I will look upon death or upon a comedy with the same expression of countenance.

Seneca is not suggesting that you laugh at funerals or cry at comedies, nor is he saying that sadness and laughter are bad. He is simply exhorting you to manage your emotional extremes so they don’t manage *you*. And it’s great advice: In 2020, French researchers studied the relationship between an even state of mind and various measures of feeling and behavior. They found that equanimity predicted lower negative states such as rumination, catastrophizing, and neuroticism.

Lesson 2: I will submit to labors, however great they may be, supporting the strength of my body by that of my mind.

One of the great lessons from modern research is that physical and intellectual fitness are central to a happy life. Two of the lifelong habits of older people who are both happy and well are continuous learning and healthy exercise. As an easy rule of thumb, read and walk each day—two activities that are as revolutionary today as they were in Seneca’s time. Or, if you are feeling really efficient, walk while listening to a book!

Lesson 3: I will despise riches when I have them as much as when I have them not; if they be elsewhere I will not be more gloomy; if they sparkle around me I will not be more lively than I should otherwise be: Whether Fortune comes or goes I will take no notice of her.

This lesson is much deeper than “Money doesn’t buy happiness.” Seneca’s assertion is that an attachment to riches will bring misery, and the research couldn’t support him more clearly. For example, writing in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* in 2017, researchers showed that materialism can lower well-being and raise depression.

Lesson 4: I will view all lands as though they belong to me, and my own as though they belonged to all mankind.

This lesson expands on Lesson 3 to assert that misery comes not only from grasping for things but also from holding what one has too tightly. This idea is present in many religious and philosophical traditions. For example, it is akin to what Catholics call “solidarity”: the idea that we are all sisters and brothers, so (for example) my ownership of property is fundamentally one of stewardship for the greater good of all.

Lesson 5: I will so live as to remember that I was born for others, and will thank Nature on this account: for in what fashion could she have done better for me? She has given me alone to all, and all to me alone.

In other words, charity is a gift to the giver. Service to others is one of the easiest ways to get happier. Volumes of research attest to the fact that giving to charity and volunteering, spending money on others, and more radical acts such as donating blood and organs all raise well-being.

Lesson 6: Whatever I may possess, I will neither hoard it greedily nor squander it recklessly.

This lesson is a version of the old saying “All things in moderation,” but it goes beyond the claim that moderation is morally superior: In Seneca’s view, it also leads to inner peace. Once again, research seems to support the claim. It is easy to see this in cases such as drinking and eating, but moderation even in *virtues* is warranted, such that, for example, hard work does not become workaholism.

Lesson 7: I will think that I have no possessions so real as those which I have given away to deserving people: I will not reckon benefits by their magnitude or number, or by anything except the value set upon them by the receiver.

The idea here is that the true value of what I do is not how much it costs *me*, but how much it benefits *you*. For example, the true value of your work is not your salary but rather how much it helps others. Altruism won’t pay the rent, but if you take this lesson to heart, it can change your priorities, and maybe even lead you to a better job.

Lesson 8: I will do nothing because of public opinion, but everything because of conscience: Whenever I do anything alone by myself I will believe that the eyes of the Roman people are upon me while I do it.

This lesson is a twofer: first, to resist social comparison; second, to act in private the same as in public. The first lesson is a staple in the psychology literature, and probably explains in no small part why social media—in which we compare ourselves with strangers and friends constantly—is difficult for so many people’s well-being. The second lesson asserts that integrity and consistency lead to happiness—and that hypocrisy leads to unhappiness. Researchers have shown that the “self-perception of disingenuousness” harms our human need to see ourselves as authentic, consistent, and coherent.

Lesson 9: I will be agreeable with my friends, gentle and mild to my foes: I will grant pardon before I am asked for it, and will meet the wishes of honorable men halfway.

This ancient teaching—“Love your enemies,” in the biblical formation—lies behind many of the philosophies that seek to disrupt the tendency to hate our foes. “Love has within it a redemptive power,” Martin Luther King Jr. said in a 1957 sermon. “And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals.” In my

own research, I have shown that loving across differences is not only practical; it can also be a source of immense joy.

Lesson 10: I will bear in mind that the world is my native city, that its governors are the gods, and that they stand above and around me, criticizing whatever I do or say.

This advice takes part two of Lesson 8 up a notch: I should act not just as if others are watching; I should act like *God* is watching. One study showed that priming believers and nonbelievers alike to think about God or associated concepts before engaging in an experiment in which they could voluntarily give money to a stranger or keep it for themselves induced more than twice as much generosity as when religious concepts were not introduced. When secular moral institutions such as “civic” and “jury” are primed, the effect is almost as great. And remember what we learned from Lesson 5: Such induced generosity will benefit not only the people you give to but you as well.

Lesson 11: Whenever either Nature demands my breath again, or reason bids me dismiss it, I will quit this life, calling all to witness that I have loved a good conscience, and good pursuits; that no one’s freedom, my own least of all, has been impaired through me.

This lesson exhorts us to consider the good of others as the way to accept our own death peacefully. And indeed, a 2014 study of dying cancer patients found that peaceful patients were “other-person centered. They saw in their illness opportunities to give to others, whether it was by encouraging friends, teaching grandchildren about life, or participating in clinical trials in order to help future patients.” Seneca himself is recorded to have died with complete equanimity, forced to take his own life but doing so calmly and while speaking of courage in life and death. Peter Paul Rubens’s famous painting *The Death of Seneca* shows the philosopher dying standing up, signifying the Roman ideal of *virtus*: valor, bravery, and character.

Wise as they sound, Seneca’s lessons can be difficult to implement. They contravene many of our natural impulses: to behave egotistically, to compare ourselves with others, to acquire as much as possible, to stay alive at any cost.

Seneca understood this tension full well and, alongside his rules, helpfully offered a secret formula for getting the benefits of these goals even if embodying them perfectly is impossible: *try*. “It is the act of a generous spirit to proportion its efforts not to its own strength but to that of human nature,” he wrote, “to entertain lofty aims, and to conceive plans which are too vast to be carried into execution even by those who are endowed with gigantic intellects.” These goals are not an exercise in futility but rather in effort and progress. The only way to achieve true peace of mind is by trying a little each day.

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