

What is an Epicurean viewpoint on dealing with anxiety? Of losing the pleasures that one holds dearest, such as losing friendships or a pet being sick?

Post by "Cassius" of November 23, 2019 at 7:29 AM

This thread will address the question asked by JK:

What is an Epicurean viewpoint on dealing with anxiety? Of losing the pleasures that one holds dearest, such as losing friendships or a pet being sick?

Post by "Cassius" of November 23, 2019 at 7:30 AM

To start, Epicurus held (according to his biography) that the wise man (the Epicurean) will feel his emotions more deeply than will other people. So the first point of observation is that it is entirely appropriate to feel loss in those situations you mention. To attempt to suppress a natural and appropriate emotion would be Stoicism, not Epicurean philosophy.

Next, and others will have many other ideas, it would be natural to ask whether the situation can be changed or not. Loss of a friend or pet may not be, but if you mention anxiety or a temporary situation that can be changed, then Epicurus is all about using your faculties to take control of what can be controlled (since he does not believe in fate) to take appropriate action (such as medical care if the anxiety or condition stems from something that is treatable) or simply acting to deal with the situation, like changing jobs or some other action appropriate to the situation.

So what I want to stress in this preliminary response is that Epicurean philosophy is not about "enduring" any pain that can be fixed, nor is it about suppressing feelings of pain that are legitimate under the circumstances.

Post by "Cassius" of November 23, 2019 at 7:32 AM

One passage I like to quote in response to questions like this is from Frances Wright's "A Few Days in Athens, where she has Epicurus address the pain of losing a close friend. This is not from an ancient text but I think does a good job of applying some of his principles on how to view a loss that is not fixable:

But there is yet a pain, which the wisest and the best of men cannot escape; that all of us, my sons, have felt, or have to feel. Do not your hearts whisper it? Do you not tell me, that in death there is yet a sting? That ere he aim at us, he may level the beloved of our soul? The father, whose tender care hath reared our infant minds — the brother, whom the same breast hath nourished, and the same roof sheltered, with whom, side by side, we have grown like two plants by a river, sucking life from the same fountain and strength from the same sun — the child whose gay prattle delights our ears, or whose opening understanding fixes our hopes — the friend of our choice, with whom we have exchanged hearts, and shared all our pains and pleasures, whose eye hath reflected the tear of sympathy, whose hand hath smoothed the couch of sickness. Ah! my sons, here indeed is a pain — a pain that cuts into the soul. There are masters that will tell you otherwise; who will tell you that it is unworthy of a man to mourn even here. But such, my sons, speak not the truth of experience or philosophy, but the subtleties of sophistry and pride. He who feels not the loss, hath never felt the possession. He who knows not the grief, hath never known the joy. See the price of a friend in the duties we render him, and the sacrifices we make to him, and which, in making, we count not sacrifices, but pleasures. We sorrow for his sorrow; we supply his wants, or, if we cannot, we share them. We follow him to exile. We close ourselves in his prison; we soothe him in sickness; we strengthen him in death: nay, if it be possible, we throw down our life for his. Oh! What a treasure is that for which we do so much! And is it forbidden to us to mourn its loss? If it be, the power is not with us to obey.

Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good? Shall we shut love from our hearts, that we may not feel the pain of his departure? No; happiness forbids it. Experience forbids it. Let him who hath laid on the pyre the dearest of his soul, who hath washed the urn with the bitterest tears of grief — let him say if his heart hath ever formed the wish that it had never shrined within it him whom he now deplores. Let him say if the pleasures of the sweet communion of his former days doth not still live in his remembrance. If he love not to recall the image of the departed, the tones of his voice, the words of his discourse, the deeds of his kindness, the amiable virtues of his life. If, while he weeps the loss of his friend, he smiles not to think that he once possessed him. He who knows not friendship, knows not the purest pleasure of earth. Yet if fate deprive us of it, though we grieve, we do not sink; Philosophy is still at hand, and she upholds us with fortitude. And think, my sons, perhaps in the very evil we dread, there is a good; perhaps the very uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes; perhaps all our pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption.

What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-

flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns, and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness. This, then, my sons, is our duty, for this is our interest and our happiness; to seek our pleasures from the hands of the virtues, and for the pain which may befall us, to submit to it with patience, or bear up against it with fortitude. To walk, in short, through life innocently and tranquilly; and to look on death as its gentle termination, which it becomes us to meet with ready minds, neither regretting the past, nor anxious for the future.

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Post by “Cassius” of November 23, 2019 at 7:33 AM

Posted by Elli:

I would like to share some of my thoughts that are based on my personal experience. When it happens to lose a loved one, the feelings of sadness i.e. these painful feelings should be felt like a burst/explosion of feelings that reach to the point, and to such an extent to be deflated. And that also means that when one holds or hides or buries the feelings of the pain/sorrow, these will be out, and on the surface of his life, in another way and another time, in which this person could not know what is happening to him and what is the first thing to blame! Because the subconscious did not bury the feeling of pain that the conscious tried to bury. The dreams of the person who buries his emotions are usually images of these buried/hidden emotions as well as a hidden fear of death. Epicurus exhorts: Of course, you'll feel the pain, you'll feel your anger - that this anger is usually remorse if there was a postpone of something to share with our friend- and at the same time, do not feel for your friend as were to be pitied. Because if he lived pleasantly and was safe all of his life, you have to do the same too i.e. you will continue your life without to postpone your joy and pleasure, and creating or maintain such relationships to feel safe and content.

Doctrine 40. As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbours, these also live most pleasantly with one another, since they have the most certain pledge of security, and after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1288-what-is-an-epicurean-viewpoint-on-dealing-with-anxiety-of-losing-the-pleasures-t/>