

Experiential Avoidance of Pain / Aversion to Pain

Post by “Matteng” of July 10, 2026 at 12:02 PM

Hi together,

in a substack article Donald Robertson argues for the Stoic views of Emotion.

Thereby there are some attacks and I think strawmen from Seneca about Epicurus view.

What do you think ? There is the teaching against the Fear of Pain, and to Endure it and even to see it sometimes as good when it leads to the "better good" so Pleasure.

And another question Can we match natural/necessary Desire in the same way as for Aversion ? Means reducing Desire also to reduce aversions ? Epicurean Courage would mean to conquer Pain and Fear.

That is the article:

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[Stoicism is not unemotional](#)

How not to be like a man made of oak or stone
substack.com

Main quote:

"Against the Epicureans

For this reason, Seneca elsewhere explains that whereas the goal of Epicureanism is “a mind immune to feeling”, this “unfeelingness” is actually the *opposite* of what the Stoics desire.

Quote

This is the difference between us Stoics and the Epicureans; our wise man overcomes every discomfort but feels it, theirs does not even feel it. (*Letters*, 9)

The virtue of the Sage consists in his ability to endure painful feelings and rise above them, with magnanimity, while continuing to maintain his relationships and interaction with the world. Seneca returns to this point several times:

Quote

I do not withdraw the wise man from the category of man, nor do I deny to him the sense of pain as though he were a rock that has no feelings at all. I remember that he is made up of two parts: the one part is irrational, — it is this that may be bitten, burned, or hurt; the other part is rational, — it is this which holds resolutely to opinions, is courageous, and unconquerable. [...] You must not think that our human virtue transcends nature; the wise man will tremble, will feel pain, will turn pale, for all these are sensations of the body. (*Letters* 71)

The Epicurean ideal, usually described as *ataraxia*, or freedom from all disturbance (such as pain or anxiety), is normally contrasted with the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, freedom from being overcome by passions *not* complete insensibility. As we're told Zeno put it, what the Stoics meant by a “passion” is “an irrational and unnatural movement [feeling] in the psyche” and “an excessive impulse” or desire. Stoic *apatheia* therefore specifically means freedom from unhealthy, irrational, and excessive desires and emotions.

This may be one reason why Stoicism has become popular with modern psychotherapists, whereas Epicureanism has not. The Stoic position corresponds much better with the goal of mental health as defined by modern psychology. Epicureanism sounds closer to what researchers today call “experiential avoidance”, meaning an urge to get rid of unpleasant or painful feelings. The excessive effort to avoid emotional disturbance has been found to correspond, *not* with emotional resilience, but with greater *vulnerability* and *poorer* mental health outcomes in the long-run. The Stoics, in other words, were closer to the truth than the Epicureans...."

Post by “Cassius” of July 10, 2026 at 12:23 PM

I may have more to say later but this is why you don't listen to stoics - or anyone who advocates relief from pain rather than pleasure - as what Epicurus taught as the Supreme Good.

The whole premise of the article is built on a false conception that Epicurus advocated tranquility ABOVE pleasure. If you want that, you should indeed be a Stoic.

Post by “Pacatus” of July 10, 2026 at 12:45 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

For this reason, Seneca elsewhere explains that whereas the goal of Epicureanism is “a mind immune to feeling”, this “unfeelingness” is actually the opposite of what the Stoics desire.

Wow! I've always had respect for Robertson as one of the better translators of Stoicism for the modern world. But that is so egregiously wrong. He clearly did not do his due diligence on that.



Post by “Cassius” of July 10, 2026 at 1:38 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

But that is so egregiously wrong. He clearly did not do his due diligence on that

Unfortunately, it's equally if not more probable than he's got a sheet-full of citations from modern writers supporting him on that. Wrong, but they are legion.

Post by “Cassius” of July 10, 2026 at 2:06 PM

Matt - In case you have not seen it, I have just updated my long-standing summary on the issue behind what Robertson is saying, which I believe needs to be taken in context of Plato's [Philebus](#). This contains my most complete list of citations on the topic.

[The Full Cup Model: Pleasure, Purity, and the Limit That Answers Plato](#)

An analysis of the Epicurean 'fullness of pleasure' model -- showing that the doctrines of painlessness, the limit of pleasure, and the terms ataraxia and...
epicurustoday.com