Doing the Work

From Understanding to Action: A Stoic Perspective on Recovery and Personal Change

Inspired by Epictetus and the principles of SMART Recovery

Introduction: Knowing Is Not the Same as Doing

Many of us come to recovery with a reasonable understanding of what needs to change. We recognize destructive habits, identify unhealthy patterns of thinking, and begin to understand the consequences of our behavior.

We attend meetings. We listen to others. We read books, learn new techniques, and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of ourselves.

And yet, sometimes, remarkably little changes.

This is not necessarily because we lack knowledge, intelligence, motivation, or good intentions. It may be because understanding change and practicing change are two different activities.

There is a difference between knowing how to challenge an irrational belief and actually challenging it when we are distressed. There is a difference between understanding how urges work and practicing urge-management techniques when an urge appears. There is a difference between identifying our values and consistently making decisions that reflect them.

Recovery is not simply the acquisition of knowledge. It is the application of that knowledge to everyday life. This is what we mean by doing the work.

More than two thousand years ago, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus challenged his students with a remarkably similar observation. He questioned why people who already understood the principles of a good life continued waiting for further instruction before putting those principles into practice.

His challenge was not simply to learn philosophy, but to live it. The same challenge applies to recovery.

SMART Recovery offers practical tools drawn from evidence-based psychological approaches, including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), and motivational methods. These tools help us examine our thinking, manage our emotions, change our behavior, and build more satisfying lives.

But the tools cannot do the work for us. A meeting can introduce a technique. A facilitator can demonstrate it. Another participant can describe how it helped them. Yet the change itself happens when we begin using that technique in our own lives, particularly when doing so is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or difficult.

The following contemporary interpretation of Epictetus invites us to consider a simple question: If we already know some of the things we need to do, what are we waiting for?

The Challenge: A Contemporary Interpretation of Epictetus

How much longer are you going to wait before you expect the best of yourself? Before you commit to living according to your own principles, guided by reason rather than impulse, fear, or convenience?

You already know what matters. You have thought about it, examined it, and decided what you believe is right. So what are you waiting for? Who else needs to tell you what to do? What teacher, mentor, or authority are you still hoping will come along and give you permission to become the person you know you ought to be?

You are no longer a child. You are an adult, responsible for your own choices and the direction of your life.

If you continue to make excuses, avoid difficult decisions, and put off the work of improving yourself, the days will pass whether you are ready or not. You may not even notice how little progress you are making.

And eventually, you will reach the end of your life having never become the person you were capable of being.

So make a decision. Starting today, live as someone who takes responsibility for their own development. Decide what is right, what is reasonable, and what is worth pursuing. Then hold yourself to those standards, especially when doing so is difficult.

When you face hardship, temptation, criticism, praise, success, or failure, remember that these are not interruptions to your development. These are the very moments in which your character is formed and revealed.

The challenge is not somewhere in the future. It is here, now, in the circumstances directly in front of you.

You are already on the field of life. The game has begun, and the clock is running. You cannot postpone your participation until you feel better prepared. You may already be in the second or third quarter, and there is no knowing how much time remains.

Every decision matters. Every response is an opportunity to practice the principles you claim to believe in. In any given moment, you can either strengthen the person you are trying to become or return to the habits you are trying to leave behind.

This is how great men live. They do not wait for ideal circumstances before practicing wisdom. They examine their thoughts, question their assumptions, and allow reason to guide their actions in the situations life presents to them. They observe, orient, decide, and act.

You may never become a great man. That is not the point. The point is to live as someone who is genuinely trying.

Not tomorrow. Not when life becomes easier. Not when someone else shows you the way. Now.

What Does “Doing the Work” Actually Mean?

In recovery, doing the work means deliberately practicing behaviors that support change, rather than relying exclusively on insight, intention, or motivation. It means moving from passive understanding to active participation in our own development.

Consider some examples:

Understanding	Doing the work
Knowing that urges are temporary	Practicing urge surfing when an urge appears
Recognizing irrational beliefs	Writing out an ABC exercise and disputing those beliefs
Understanding triggers	Identifying high-risk situations and preparing responses
Knowing our values	Making decisions consistent with those values
Recognizing unhealthy habits	Repeatedly practicing alternative behaviors
Understanding the benefits of change	Completing a Cost-Benefit Analysis when motivation weakens
Knowing that setbacks happen	Examining a lapse, learning from it, and adjusting our plan
Wanting a better life	Taking specific, observable steps toward building one

There is nothing inherently wrong with attending meetings, reading recovery literature, or discussing our experiences. These activities can be enormously valuable.

But we should occasionally ask ourselves whether they are helping us change our behavior or whether we have begun to mistake participation for progress.

Recovery meetings are places where we can learn and practice. Much of the work takes place between meetings.

The Stoic Connection: What Is Within Our Control?

One of the central ideas of Stoic philosophy is the distinction between what is within our control and what is not.

We cannot always control the appearance of an urge, the behavior of another person, our circumstances, or the immediate emotional reactions produced by years of conditioning.

We can, however, develop greater influence over how we interpret those experiences, what we choose to practice, and how we respond.

This distinction closely resembles an important principle of SMART Recovery: although thoughts, feelings, and urges can be powerful, they do not necessarily dictate our actions.

With practice, we can create more space between an experience and our response. We can learn to pause, examine our assumptions, consider alternatives, and make decisions more consistent with our long-term interests.

The objective is not perfect emotional control. It is greater behavioral flexibility and personal agency.

Progress, Not Perfection

Epictetus used uncompromising language when challenging his students. That language can be motivating, but it requires some care when applied to recovery. We should not interpret his challenge as a demand for flawless performance.

Recovery is rarely linear. Habits formed through years of repetition do not disappear simply because we have developed a better intellectual understanding of them.

Old patterns may reappear, particularly during periods of stress, fatigue, emotional distress, or unexpected difficulty. A setback does not erase previous progress. Nor does every unsuccessful decision represent a failure of character.

What matters is how we respond. Can we examine what happened without unnecessary self-condemnation? Can we identify what contributed to the behavior? Can we modify our strategy and practice again?

Doing the work includes learning how to recover from our mistakes without turning those mistakes into an identity. Self-compassion and personal responsibility are not opposites. Both can support meaningful behavioral change.

From Old Automaticity to New Automaticity

Much of our behavior operates automatically. Repeated thoughts, emotional responses, habits, and coping strategies can become so familiar that they seem to occur without conscious deliberation.

Changing these patterns requires us to interrupt old responses and deliberately practice new ones.

Old automaticity → Conscious awareness and deliberate practice → New automaticity

At first, a healthier response may feel awkward, unnatural, or difficult. That does not mean it is ineffective. It may simply mean that it is unfamiliar.

Through repetition, new responses can become easier and more accessible. Eventually, behaviors that once required substantial conscious effort may become established habits.

The purpose of doing the work is not to remain in a permanent state of exhausting self-monitoring. It is to practice healthier responses often enough that they become increasingly natural.

Five Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What do I already know that I am not consistently putting into practice? Is there a recovery tool, behavior, or decision I have repeatedly postponed?

2. Am I confusing participation with progress? What am I doing between meetings that produces observable change in my life?

3. What am I waiting for? Am I waiting for motivation, confidence, certainty, better circumstances, or someone else's approval before taking action?

4. How do I respond when I fall short of my own expectations? Do I use setbacks as opportunities for learning, or do I turn them into reasons to abandon my efforts?

5. What is one specific action I can take before the next meeting? Not something I intend to think about, but something I can actually do, practice, and evaluate.

A Small Commitment: Before the Next Meeting

Choose one behavior you would like to change and one SMART Recovery tool or technique that could help you work on it.

The behavior I want to work on:

_____

The tool or technique I will practice:

_____

When and where I will practice it:

_____

How I will know that I have done the work:

_____

At the next meeting, consider what you learned. Did the technique help? Was it difficult to use? Did something unexpected happen? What might you do differently? The goal is not to report perfect success. The goal is to develop the habit of deliberate practice, honest evaluation, and continued adjustment.

The Original Inspiration: Epictetus

The contemporary interpretation above is based on Enchiridion (also known as The Handbook), Section 51, attributed to Epictetus and compiled by his student Arrian.

"How long are you going to wait before you demand the best for yourself and in no instance bypass the discriminations of reason?"

It ends with a challenge to live not necessarily as Socrates himself, but as someone who sincerely aspires to follow his example. The essential message is that philosophical principles have little practical value unless we apply them to the circumstances of our lives.

Epictetus reminds us that the opportunity to practice is not some future event for which we must prepare indefinitely. The opportunity is the present moment.

References and Further Reading

Stoic Philosophy

Epictetus. Enchiridion, Section 51. Compiled by Arrian. Available in multiple English translations, including public-domain editions.

Epictetus. Discourses, Book I, Chapter 1, concerning what is within our power.

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A Final Thought

Recovery is not something we accomplish merely by understanding ourselves. It is something we practice.

We practice when we are motivated, and when we are not. When circumstances are favorable, and when they are difficult. When we succeed, and when we have to begin again.

We do not need to wait until we have mastered every technique, resolved every uncertainty, or become the person we hope to be.

We can begin with the knowledge we already have, the tools already available to us, and the circumstances directly in front of us.

The question is not whether we are capable of perfection. The question is whether we are willing to practice.

Independent educational handout inspired by Stoic philosophy and SMART Recovery principles. Not an official SMART Recovery publication.