

7 Stoic Moves for Modern Anxiety

Seven practices you can run this week when your chest tightens and nothing has happened yet.

Simply Stoicism · by Jon High

Not medical advice. Training, not treatment.

Open

Your chest tightens at 7:42 a.m.

Nothing has happened yet. The Slack is quiet. The calendar is still blank for another hour. Your coffee is still hot. And your mind is already three meetings ahead, rehearsing a layoff that hasn't been announced, a diagnosis that isn't on the books, a relationship ending that nobody has asked for.

Your body does not know the difference between a movie in your head and a real threat. It just runs the stress script.

Seneca saw this two thousand years ago:

> "We suffer more in imagination than in reality."

> - Seneca

That is not a pep talk. It is a diagnosis. Most of the suffering is happening before the event. Sometimes without an event at all.

Here is the misconception we need to clear up first: Stoicism is not "feel nothing." The Stoics were not marble busts with the emotions sanded off. They felt fear, grief, irritation, and dread. What they practiced was not numbness. It was skill. A gap between the spike and the spiral. A way to answer anxiety without pretending it does not exist.

This PDF is that skill set in seven named moves. No toga. No ancient Greek homework. No promise that you will never feel wired again.

Just seven practices you can run when the chest tightens and the day has not even started yet.

How to use this (under 10 minutes a day)

Two ways in. Pick one.

Option A: One move for seven days. Choose the practice that matches your current spiral. Run it every day for a week. Learn it in your body before you collect the whole set.

Option B: The daily stack. Morning prep (Move 5, 1 min) plus Premeditation or Control inventory (Move 1 or 2, 5 min). Stoic Pause (Move 3) whenever you feel the signal. Evening review (Move 7, 5 min) before sleep. Add View From Above or Voluntary Discomfort when the week asks for them.

Total daily time stays under about 10 minutes if you keep the boxes honest. The point is not to become a monk. The point is to have something to *do* when imagination starts writing horror scripts.

Sticky note version: **one move before coffee cools.**

The 7 moves

1. Premeditation of Evils

Time box: 5 minutes, morning

Why: Anxiety loves surprise. When you have already walked through a realistic worst case (and asked whether you could handle it), the day loses some of its ambush power. This is immunization, not doom-scrolling.

Exact steps:

1. Name one anxiety-producing event on today's calendar (a 1:1, a pitch, a hard conversation, a silent inbox).
2. Spend two minutes vividly imagining the worst *realistic* outcome. Not zombie apocalypse. The version that could actually happen.
3. Ask out loud or on paper: "Could I handle this?"
4. Write one prep action you can take in the next hour (send the outline, pack the backup slides, draft the opener).
5. Close the exercise. Do not sit in the movie for the rest of the morning.

Modern example: Before a performance review, you picture the blunt feedback you fear. You notice you could survive it. You prep three concrete examples of your work. When the meeting is merely awkward (not catastrophic), your nervous system is not starting from zero.

2. Dichotomy of Control inventory

Time box: 5 minutes

Why: A lot of modern anxiety is effort spent on the wrong column. Epictetus drilled this hard: some things are up to you, some are not. Energy on the second list is expensive and usually useless.

Exact steps:

1. Draw a line down a page (or two columns in Notes).
2. Left: everything about this situation you cannot control.
3. Right: everything you can control, influence, or change today.
4. Circle one item on the right. Do only that next.
5. When your mind drifts left, name it ("that's THEIR column") and return right.

Modern example: Work presentation anxiety.

You stop auditioning for control you do not have. You spend five minutes on the slide that actually needs work.

3. The Stoic Pause

Time box: 30-60 seconds

Why: Between the spike and the spiral there is a gap. Most of us skip it. The Pause is how you install a button in that gap. You are not trying to erase the feeling. You are choosing the next useful move before imagination takes the mic.

Exact steps:

1. **Notice the signal.** Racing heart, tight chest, hot face, clenched jaw, sudden urge to check your phone again. That is the button lighting up.
2. **Name it.** One short label out loud or in your head: "Ego hit incoming." "Doomscroll starting." "I'm rehearsing a fight that hasn't happened."
3. **Choose a useful move.** Ask yourself: Is this in my control? Is my current response helping or harming me? What is the smallest useful action right now? Then take that action (or deliberately take none).

Optional add-on (10 seconds): If your body is still loud after the Pause, briefly ground: name one thing you see, one you feel under your hands, one sound in the room. Then return to the useful move. Sensory ground is a support act here, not the headliner.

Modern example: Your boss asks in Slack, "Got a minute?" Your stomach drops. You notice the signal, name it ("catastrophe trailer"), and choose: reply with a time, stand up, drink water, then open the thread. You do not invent three firings before you know the topic.

> **Sidebar: The Emperor's Filter**

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> When a headline (or a group chat screenshot) spikes your pulse, ask one question before you react:

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> **Fact or perspective?**

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> Facts usually fit in one sentence. Perspectives take paragraphs, adjectives, and a soundtrack. Underline the facts. Notice how little remains. That is often enough to stop the spiral from borrowing your afternoon.

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> (Borrowed from our Emperor's Filter practice. Use it under Pause or after a Control inventory when the news is the trigger.)

4. View From Above

Time box: 2 minutes

Why: Anxiety zooms in until one email becomes the whole universe. Marcus practiced the opposite: climb altitude until the problem shrinks to its actual size. Not "your feelings are fake." Proportion.

Exact steps:

1. Close your eyes (or soft-focus on a wall).
2. Picture yourself above your desk, then your building, then your city, then the country, then Earth as a pale dot.
3. Hold your current worry in that frame for one breath.
4. Come back to the room. Ask: "What is one next action that still matters at this altitude?"

Optional variants (pick one when the sky zoom feels too abstract):

- **Calendar zoom:** Open your calendar to the full year view. Find today. Notice how small the square is.
- **One-year lookback:** Picture yourself one year from now looking back at this exact stressor. Notice what changes when time sits between you and it.

Modern example: You are convinced a muted reaction to your proposal means your career is over. Two minutes of altitude later, it is still a real meeting. It is no longer a funeral.

5. Morning preparation (expect the mess)

Time box: 1 minute while you get ready

Why: Surprise multiplies irritation. A short morning immunization makes difficult people and friction less personally radioactive when they show up. Marcus wrote this to himself as training, not as a personality.

Exact steps:

1. While you brush your teeth, make coffee, or wait for the kettle, say (quietly is fine):

> When you wake, tell yourself: the people you meet today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly.

> - Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Book 2)

2. Add one modern line of your own: "Today will include delays, unclear Slack, and at least one person who did not read the doc."

3. Remind yourself: this is immunization, not pessimism. You are not hoping for bad people. You are refusing to be shocked by ordinary friction.

4. Walk into the day one notch less brittle.

Modern example: The standup runs long. Someone talks over you. You feel the flare, then remember you already expected "meddling." You ask one clarifying question instead of drafting a resignation letter in your head.

6. Voluntary discomfort

Time box: once this week (5-10 minutes is plenty)

Why: Anxiety whispers that you cannot handle hard things. A small, chosen hard thing is evidence to the contrary. Keep it light. No shame. No heroics. You are not auditioning for a documentary.

Exact steps:

1. Pick one mild discomfort you can finish: a 60-second cold finish on a shower, a walk without headphones, skipping one snack you want but do not need, leaving your phone in another room for one meal.

2. Do it on purpose. Name why: "I am proving I can stay with hard for a minute."

3. Notice the urge to quit. Stay through one more breath than feels comfortable.

4. Stop. Do not escalate into punishment. Log one sentence: "I handled that."

Modern example: You take the last 90 seconds of your shower cold on Thursday. It is unpleasant. You are fine. Friday's tense email feels a little less like proof that you are fragile.

If you have a health condition that makes cold exposure or food restriction a bad idea, skip those options. Choose something else mild (phone out of reach, stairs instead of elevator). The point is chosen friction, not harm.

7. Evening review

Time box: 5 minutes before sleep

Why: Unexamined anxiety repeats. A short review turns the day into a lab instead of a highlight reel of everything that went wrong. You are collecting what worked, not grading your soul.

Exact steps:

1. What spiked anxiety today? (Name one or two moments. Be specific.)
2. What did I do when it spiked? (Pause, scroll, snap, prep, avoid?)
3. What helped, even a little?
4. What will I try tomorrow in a similar moment? (One move from this PDF is enough.)
5. Close the notebook. Sleep is part of the practice.

Modern example: You note that the spiral started when you opened news in bed. Tomorrow's experiment: phone charges in the kitchen after 10 p.m., and you run Move 3 if you still feel wired.

Your week in one glance

If you only remember three: **Pause when it spikes. Sort control in the morning. Review at night.**

Close

You are on the Simply Stoicism list now.

Tuesdays we go deeper (the Deep Dive). **Monday, Wednesday, and Friday** you get Morning Minutes: one idea, one move, before the day gets loud. Stoicism without the toga. Practical enough to use between meetings.

If you want the full onboarding map (control, feelings-as-not-facts, time, and a starter kit of daily practices), the Stoic Starter Kit / Getting Started path is waiting when you are ready: [simplystoicism.com](https://www.simplystoicism.com). No rush. This PDF already gives you seven moves you can run this week.

Reply to any email from me and tell me what usually sets your spiral off. I read every one.

Calm the next spiral,

Jon

Footer

simplystoicism.com

Not medical advice. If anxiety is blocking your work, your sleep, or your safety, talk to a clinician. These moves are training for ordinary modern stress. They are not treatment, diagnosis, or a substitute for care.

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