

Stoic Week 2015 Report Part 3: Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours and their relationship with well-being

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Introduction

This article is the third part of the report on Stoic Week 2015. The previously published parts of the report summarised the [demographics](#) and [the impact of taking part in Stoic Week on well-being](#). Part 4 (to follow) will provide an analysis of qualitative feedback given by participants and will draw overall conclusions.

Over two and a half thousand Stoic Week participants took the Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours scale as well as three established well-being questionnaires.¹ Whilst part 2 of the report analysed the impact of *completing* Stoic Week on well-being, this article provides an analysis of the relationship between Stoicism and well-being *before Stoic Week began*. In this way it is possible to infer whether being Stoic tends to go with a flourishing, happy life - or not. The sample for Stoic week of over two thousand five hundred people is a very large one so allows us to draw some statistically significant conclusions.¹

The headline is that the vast majority of Stoic attitudes and behaviours are strongly associated with well-being. In addition we found that some (but not all) plausible anti-Stoic attitudes turn out to be *negatively* associated with well-being. It should be noted that whilst this is positive news for advocates of Stoicism, it does not prove the direction of *causation*. Further conclusions, as well as the limitations of this study, will be given in the final section of this article and in part 4 of the report.

Background

The SABS 2.0 scale is a 31 item scale using a 7 point Likert scale. The SABS scale used in 2015 is a development of the 19 item scale originally created by the Stoicism Today project team in 2013. Prior to Stoic Week 2015, experts in Stoicism and the Stoic community in general were asked to suggest extra items to add to the existing SABS scale (SABS 1.0). These additional items came into three categories

- Key ideas from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*
- Plausible ideas with which Stoics would disagree - these items are negatively weighted in the SABS 2.0
- Virtues - courage, self-control, justice, practical wisdom and compassion

¹ For example, if the correlation value is .05 then the chance of this being accidental with a sample this size is less than 1 in 100. If the correlation value is .1 then the probability of this being accidental less than 1 in a million.

Association of Stoicism with well-being: Overall Findings

	Flourishing	Emotions (SPANE)	Life Satisfaction (SWL)	Average
STOIC ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS	0.47 (.45)	0.41 (.43)	0.33 (.37)	0.4 (.42)
STOIC ATTITUDES	0.30 (.32)	0.30 (.31)	0.22 (.26)	0.27 (.3)
STOIC BEHAVIOURS	0.55 (.5)	0.44 (.47)	0.37 (.4)	0.45(.46)

Table 1: Overall association of Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours with the 3 measures of well-being (2014 results are in brackets)

Table 1 above gives the overall correlations between total SABS scores and the various well-being scales. A high correlation means the two items are strongly associated. As can be seen, there is a high positive correlation between having Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours and well-being. This is true however you measure well-being, though the association is strongest for flourishing and weakest for life satisfaction. There is a stronger relationship between well-being and Stoic *behaviours* than Stoic *attitudes*. The results are similar to the findings from 2014.²

Association of Specific Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours with Average of well-being scales

The previous section suggests that there is a positive association between Stoicism and well-being. It is possible to analyse in more detail *which* Stoic attitudes and behaviours are *most* associated with well-being, thereby potentially discovering the most “active ingredients” in Stoicism. Table 2 (below) lists item in the SABS scale in order of the strength of their association with well-being (using an average of the 3 well-being scales). Also given are the correlations between SABS item with each particular well-being scale, a comparison with the 2014 results and predictions made by a small group of Stoic experts on how significant each item would be.

Note that some items in the scale are reverse-scored –these are italicised and marked with an asterisk in Table 2. A high correlation for these items indicates a high association between well-being and the *opposite* of this attitude or behaviour.

² See <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2015/02/09/stoic-week-2014-the-results/> for the report from Stoic Week 2014.

SABS Item	Average Of 3 scales	Flourish	SWL	Emotions	2014 Average (where available)	Prediction by Stoic experts
<i>*22. I spend quite a lot of time dwelling on what's gone wrong the past or worrying about the future</i>	0.46	0.41	0.41	0.54	.46	HIGH*
18. I am good at controlling my urges and impulses when that's better for me in the long run	0.34	0.39	0.31	0.32	-	MEDIUM
31. When making a significant decision I ask myself "What really matters here?" and then look for the option that satisfies the things that are most important.	0.32	0.39	0.29	0.28	-	MEDIUM
27. I do the right thing even when I feel afraid.	0.32	0.43	0.26	0.27	-	MEDIUM
24. When an upsetting thought enters my mind the first thing I do is remind myself it's just an impression in my mind and not the thing it claims to represent	0.29	0.32	0.23	0.32	.34	HIGH
23. I make an effort to pay continual attention to the nature of my judgments and actions.	0.24	0.34	0.18	0.20	.31	HIGH
13. I consider myself to be a part of the human race, in the same way that a limb is a part of the human body. It is my duty to contribute to its welfare.	0.23	0.33	0.17	0.20	.24	HIGH
25. Viewing other people as fellow-members of the brotherhood of humankind helps me to avoid feeling anger and resentment	0.23	0.27	0.20	0.23	-	HIGH
19. I try to contemplate what the ideal wise and good person would do when faced with various misfortunes in life	0.22	0.29	0.17	0.21	.22	HIGH
26. Recognising that only virtue matters enables me to face life's transience and my approaching death	0.22	0.26	0.19	0.21	-	HIGH
21. I treat everybody fairly even those I don't like or don't know very well	0.22	0.28	0.15	0.23	-	HIGH
<i>*17. If I was honest I'd have to admit that I often do what is enjoyable and comfortable rather than doing what I believe to be the right thing</i>	0.21	0.27	0.16	0.20	.23	MEDIUM*
2. It doesn't really matter what other people think about me as long as I do the right thing	0.21	0.22	0.17	0.23	.26	MEDIUM
11. I think about my life as an ongoing	0.20	0.28	0.16	0.16	-	MEDIUM

project in ethical development						
12. To flourish as a human being all you need is rationality and a good character; things like money, status, health and good luck are not essential	0.18	0.17	0.18	0.19	.18	HIGH
28. I feel sensitive to the suffering of others and take active steps to reduce suffering	0.17	0.31	0.11	0.10	-	LOW
15. I try to anticipate future misfortunes and rehearse rising above them	0.17	0.20	0.16	0.15	.16	MEDIUM
<i>*29. Happiness depends on things going well for me and my family and friends</i>	<i>0.15</i>	<i>0.12</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>0.20</i>	-	<i>MEDIUM*</i>
5. Peace of mind comes from abandoning fears and desires about things outside our control.	0.15	0.16	0.14	0.15	.18	HIGH
1. As long as you have the right attitude, you can lead a good life even in the worst of conditions, such as being tortured or being held prisoner	0.14	0.16	0.12	0.14	.19	MEDIUM
6. If bad things happen to you, you are bound to feel upset	0.14	0.10	0.10	0.21	.16	MEDIUM
8. The only things truly under our control in life are our judgements and voluntary actions	0.13	0.14	0.09	0.15	.14	HIGH
14. The cosmos is a single, wise, living thing	0.12	0.16	0.10	0.09	.1	MEDIUM
10. Virtue (or human excellence) consists in perfecting our rational nature, through cultivating wisdom	0.11	0.13	0.06	0.12	.17	HIGH
16. I often contemplate the smallness and transience of human life in relation to the totality of space and time.	0.10	0.13	0.09	0.09	.12	MEDIUM
<i>*30. We have to accept that some things that matter a lot for our happiness are outside our control</i>	<i>0.10</i>	<i>0.06</i>	<i>0.11</i>	<i>0.12</i>	-	<i>MEDIUM*</i>
<i>*3. It can sometimes be a good thing to get angry when people are really rude, selfish or inconsiderate</i>	<i>0.08</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>0.05</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>.09</i>	<i>MEDIUM*</i>
<i>*4. It's more important to feel good than to do good.</i>	<i>0.05</i>	<i>0.09</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>0.06</i>	<i>.07</i>	<i>MEDIUM*</i>
<i>*9. You should go wherever your emotions leads you</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>0.01</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>0.04</i>	-	<i>HIGH*</i>
<i>*7. There's no such thing as "good" and "bad"; it's a matter of personal or cultural opinion</i>	<i>-0.04</i>	<i>-0.04</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>-0.04</i>	-	<i>LOW*</i>
<i>*20. If you treat other people properly they are bound to like and respect you</i>	<i>-0.12</i>	<i>-0.15</i>	<i>0.12</i>	<i>-0.10</i>	-	<i>LOW*</i>

Table 2: Specific SABS item correlation with each well-being scale and an average of the 3 well-being scales

What are the most active ingredients in Stoicism?

The items most strongly associated with well-being (and so likely to be the active ingredients) are:

Item 22 “I spend quite a lot of time dwelling on what’s gone wrong the past or worrying about the future” which is a proxy for rumination and is strongly negatively associated with all the measures of well-being.”

Item 18 “I am good at controlling my urges and impulses when that’s better for me in the long run” which is a proxy for the virtue of self-control.

Item 31 “ When making a significant decision I ask myself “What really matters here?” and then look for the option that satisfies the things that are most important.” which is a proxy for practical wisdom.

Item 27 “I do the right thing even when I feel afraid.” which is a proxy for the virtue of courage. This item has the strongest correlation with flourishing.

Item 24 “When an upsetting thought enters my mind the first thing I do is remind myself it’s just an impression in my mind and not the thing it claims to represent” (Cognitive Distancing). This item was third in terms of correlation with the balance of positive and negative emotions, whilst fifth overall.

Item 23 “I make an effort to pay continual attention to the nature of my judgments and actions.” (Stoic Mindfulness)

Item 13 “ I consider myself to be a part of the human race, in the same way that a limb is a part of the human body. It is my duty to contribute to its welfare”

Item 25 “Viewing other people as fellow-members of the brotherhood of humankind helps me to avoid feeling anger and resentment”

Were the results similar to previous years?

The results are indeed broadly similar to those of 2014, which is an indication of the reliability of the findings.

Are virtues significantly associated with well-being?

Five new items related to the virtues of courage, self-control, practical wisdom and justice (the cardinal virtues) and compassion. All these virtues had high associations with well-being, though

compassion had a strong relation with flourishing but a weaker relationship with life satisfaction and positive emotions.

Are attitudes and behaviours strongly linked with the ideas in Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* significantly associated with well-being?

Three items (25.26 and 11) were chosen as indicative of themes in Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. These items also turned out to have a significant association with all the measures of well-being.

Are anti-Stoic or non-Stoic attitudes and behaviours actually negatively associated with well-being?

Most of the anti-Stoic items turned out to be negatively associated with well-being. These include :-

Item 29. “Happiness depends on things going well for me and my family and friends” [happiness is contingent)

Item 6. “If bad things happen to you, you are bound to feel upset” (upset is inevitable)

Item 4. “It’s more important to feel good than to do good. (short-term hedonism)

The exception was item 20 “If you treat other people properly they are bound to like and respect you”. It does seem that this attitude is associated with well-being, whereas a Stoic might argue that this expectation is unhelpful.³ In addition item 7 “There’s no such thing as “good” and “bad”; it’s a matter of personal or cultural opinion” which is intended to be a proxy for relativism, turned out not to have a significant association with well-being.

Are these results exactly what we would have expected?

When we come to compare the results with the predictions of a number of experts on Stoicism (column 7) some interesting observations can be made.

- Overall, the predictions were good. All of the Stoic attitudes and behaviours turned out to have significant association with well-being as predicted. When we include the anti-Stoic attitudes and behaviours as well, the *direction* of the association was predicted correctly in 29 of the 31 items.
- The strength of the associations were predicted correctly for many items. However for other items some interesting discrepancies can be noted,
 - The association with well-being and the cardinal virtues is a lot higher than expected
 - Some anti-Stoic items are significantly negatively linked with well-being as expected. Other items (items 4 and 7, short-hedonism and relativism) have weaker association with well-being than predicted
- Some Stoic attitudes have a weaker association with well-being than anticipated, especially item 10 (“Virtue (or human excellence) consists in perfecting our rational nature, through cultivating wisdom”) and item 8 (“The only things truly under our control in life are our judgements and voluntary actions”).

Conclusions

By analysing the questionnaires filled in by the thousands of Stoic week participants at the beginning of Stoic week it is possible to draw some conclusions about the relationship between Stoicism and well-being. In short, they are strongly and positively related. Since correlation does not imply causation, this does not mean that Stoicism causes well-being but it will be argued in part 4 of

³ Item 20 was an item added for SABS 2.0 and so its validity is still under consideration. This will be considered further in part 4 of this report.

this report, there is actually a strong case for arguing that Stoic attitudes and behaviours probably are causally related to well-being. We have also seen how detailed analysis allows us to identify “active ingredients” in Stoicism. The cardinal virtues and items inspired by Marcus Aurelius’s ideas scored well, as did some items in the original SABS scale such as 24 and 13 – Cognitive Distancing and Stoic Mindfulness. Some caution is urged in terms of the interpretation of these findings since the SABS scale requires further work to become a fully psychometrically valid instrument. Further development of the SABS scale and development of Stoic teaching materials to take these findings into account will be amongst the recommendations of part 4 of this report.

Appendices

Appendix A The Satisfaction with Life scale

The SWLS is a short 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life. This scale is widely used as part of the measure of Subjective Well-being (also known as happiness).

Question	Theme
Q1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal	Life is ideal
Q2. The conditions of my life are excellent	Externals met
Q3. So far I have got the important things I want in life.	Needs met
Q4. I am satisfied with my life	Satisfaction
Q5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	Acceptance

Using a 1-7 scale, users score between 35 (extremely satisfied) and 5 (extremely dissatisfied)

The SWL scale was developed by Ed Diener, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larsen and Sharon Griffin as noted in the 1985 article in the *Journal of Personality Assessment*. See <http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/SWLS.html>

Participants in Stoic Week's average SWL score was 22.3 at the start and 26 after Stoic Week.ⁱⁱ

Appendix B The Flourishing Scale

The Flourishing Scale is a brief 8-item summary measure of the respondent's self-perceived success in important areas such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism. The scale provides a single psychological well-being score. This scale was developed by Ed Diener and associates to measure a broader conception of well-being than purely subjective life satisfaction and presence of positive and absence of negative emotions.

Flourishing Scale Item	Theme
1. I lead a purposeful and meaningful life.	Purpose and meaning
2. My social relationships are supportive and rewarding.	Relationships
3. I am engaged and interested in my daily activities.	Flow & interested
4. I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.	Benevolent
5. I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me.	Competent
6. I am a good person and live a good life.	Ethically Good
7. I am optimistic about my future.	Optimism
8. People respect me.	Respected

Reference: Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). New measures of well-being: Flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 39, 247-266. <http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/FS.html>

Participants in Stoic Week's average Flourishing score was 41 at the start and 45.4 after Stoic Week. (Note this is

Appendix C The Scale of Positive and Negative Emotions (SPANE)

The SPANE is a 12-item questionnaire includes six items to assess positive feelings and six items to assess negative feelings. For both the positive and negative items, three of the items are general (e.g., positive, negative) and three per subscale are more specific (e.g., joyful, sad). Along with the Life Satisfaction scale, presence of positive and absence of negative emotions forms the other part of Subjective Well-being. Users are asked to select a number between 1 (very rarely or never) and 5 (very often or always) to indicate how often they have experienced the emotion in the last 4 weeks.

Positive Emotions

Contented
Joyful
Positive
Good
Pleasant
Happy

Negative Emotions

Unpleasant
Bad
Negative
Angry
Afraid
Sad

Three scores are derived: SPANE-P – some of positive emotions SPANE-N – sum of negative emotions – SPANE –B Balance of positive and negative.

- Participants in Stoic Week's average overall SPANE score was 3.7 at the start and 8.2 after Stoic Week.
- Participants in Stoic Week's average SPANE-P score was 20.1 at the start and 22.2 after Stoic Week.

- Participants in Stoic Week's average SPANE-N score was -16.3 at the start and -14 after Stoic Week.

Reference: Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). New measures of well-being: Flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 39, 247-266. <http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/SPANE.html>

Appendix D The Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours Scale (version 2.0)

Below are a number of statements which describe certain attitudes or behaviours. Although this scale is called the “Stoic attitudes and behaviours scale” note that some of the attitudes and behaviours listed are Stoic, others are not. Please circle the answer closest to how you feel, on the scale 7 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree). Please answer the questions as honestly as you can. Please answer all questions.

SABS ITEM	Theme
1. As long as you have the right attitude, you can lead a good life even in the worst of conditions, such as being tortured or being held prisoner	SABS1_A_AttitudelsSufficient
2. It doesn't really matter what other people think about me as long as I do the right thing	SABS2_A_DoingRightNotPeoplePleasing
*3. It can sometimes be a good thing to get angry when people are really rude, selfish or inconsiderate	SABS3*_A_AngerCanBeGood
*4. It's more important to feel good than to do good.	SABS4*_A_Hedonism
5. Peace of mind comes from abandoning fears and desires about things outside our control.	SABS_A_FocusOnWhatYouCanControl
*6. If bad things happen to you, you are bound to feel upset	SABS6*_A_UpsetInevitable
*7. There's no such thing as “good” and “bad”; it's a matter of personal or cultural opinion	SABS7*_A_Relativism
8. The only things truly under our control in life are our judgements and voluntary actions	SABS8_A_WhatWeCanControl
*9. You should go wherever your emotions leads you	SABS9*_A_Romanticism
10. Virtue (or human excellence) consists in perfecting our rational nature, through cultivating wisdom	SABS10_A_VirtueRationalityWisdom
11. I think about my life as an ongoing project in ethical development	SABS11_A_M_EthicalProject
12. To flourish as a human being all you need is rationality and a good character; things like money, status, health and good luck are not essential	SABS12_A_VirtueSufficentForFlourishing
13. I consider myself to be a part of the human race, in the same way that a limb is a part of the human body. It is my duty to contribute to its	SABS13_A_HumanityConnected

welfare.	
14. The cosmos is a single, wise, living thing	SABS14_A_CosmosLivingAndWise
15. I try to anticipate future misfortunes and rehearse rising above them	SABS15_B_NegativeVisualisation
16. I often contemplate the smallness and transience of human life in relation to the totality of space and time.	SABS16_B_ViewFromAbove
*17. If I was honest I'd have to admit that I often do what is enjoyable and comfortable rather than doing what I believe to be the right thing	SABS17*_B_ShortTermHedonism
18. I am good at controlling my urges and impulses when that's better for me in the long run	SABS18_B_V_SelfControl
19. I try to contemplate what the ideal wise and good person would do when faced with various misfortunes in life	SABS19_B_IdealStoicAdvisor
20. If you treat other people properly they are bound to like and respect you	SABS20*_A_ExpectingOthersToReciprocate
21. I treat everybody fairly even those I don't like or don't know very well	SABS21_B_V_Fairness
*22. I spend quite a lot of time dwelling on what's gone wrong the past or worrying about the future	SABS22*_B_RuminationWorry
23. I make an effort to pay continual attention to the nature of my judgments and actions.	SABS23_B_StoicMindfulness
24. When an upsetting thought enters my mind the first thing I do is remind myself it's just an impression in my mind and not the thing it claims to represent	SABS24_B_UpsettingThoughtJustImpressionCognitiveDistancing
25. Viewing other people as fellow-members of the brotherhood of humankind helps me to avoid feeling anger and resentment	SABS25_A_M_Brother_Less_Anger
26. Recognising that only virtue matters enables me to face life's transience and my approaching death	SABS26_A_M_Virtue_Coping_Death
27. I do the right thing even when I feel afraid.	SABS27_B_V_Courage
28. I feel sensitive to the suffering of others and take active steps to reduce suffering	SABS28_B_V_Compassion
*29. Happiness depends on things going well for me and my family and friends	SABS29*_A_HappinessContigent
*30. We have to accept that some things that matter a lot for our happiness are outside our control	SABS30*_A_HappinessOutsideControl
<i>31. When making a significant decision I ask myself "What really matters here?" and then look for the option that satisfies the things that are most important.</i>	<i>SABS31_B_V_PracticalWisdom_null</i>

Note: Items marked * are reversed_scored. The item marked in *italics* is not scored as part of SABS

In the themes column, each item is coded as follows:- SABS<item number><asterisk if reverse-scored>_< B=Behaviour, A=Attitude>_<M=item related to Marcus Aurelius, V=items related to virtue>_<theme name>

SCORING

The SABS v2.0 scale is currently being developed by the Exeter University Stoic Week team so your scores should be treated as merely indicative. There are two subscales - Stoic Attitudes and Stoic behaviours.

Add up your scores for questions 1,2,5,8,10,11, 12,13,14,25 and 26 = A

Subtract your scores for questions 3, 4, 6,7,9, 29 and 30 from 8

Your score for Stoic Attitude is A+ B. Your score will range from 12 (least Stoic) to 84 (most Stoic).

Add up your scores for questions 15,16,18, 19,21,23,24,27 and 28 = C

Subtract your scores for questions 17, 20 and 22 from 8

Your score for Stoic Behaviours is C+D. Your score will range from 7 (least Stoic) to 49 (most Stoic)

To obtain your overall score, add up your two Stoic attitude and behaviours totals, which will range from 30 (least Stoic) to 210 (most Stoic) .

ⁱ Details of these four questionnaires are given in Appendices A-D.

ⁱⁱ The average changes given in the appendices are calculated using all participants (including those who dropped out) whereas the averages given earlier exclude those who dropped out.