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An IPA of Experienced Stoics Repeating a Guided Writing Program: Daily Death Contemplation and Philosophy as a Way of Life

Kate Hammer^{1,2*} and William Van Gordon^{1,3}

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¹School of Psychology, University of Derby, Great Britain

²ORCID: 0000-0002-3801-2686

³ORCID: 0000-0002-5648-3043

*Corresponding author: Kate Hammer, kate.hammer@me.com

Abstract. *Context:* As theorized in terror management theory, death anxiety affects mental health, which can be addressed via various self-help and clinical treatment approaches based on Stoic principles. Stoic death contemplation is often used in such approaches and reflects a long-established practice that forms part of philosophy as a way of life (PWL), a paradigm formulated by historian Pierre Hadot. *Objective:* This study aimed to explore the experiences of practicing Stoics returning to a daily death contemplation activity called Stoic copywork, undertaken in a temporary online community lasting 28 days. *Methods:* Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze interviews with three experienced Stoics returning to the guided writing program for a second or third year. *Results:* Four experiential themes were identified: Community as the Context for Connection; Deepening a Personal Stoic Practice Daily; Death's Importance for Life; and Refracting Self-development and Personal Identity Through Stoic Practice. *Conclusion and Implication:* Results highlighted the importance of phenomenological inquiry in research about PWL. Key findings include the role of personal-existential mortality awareness in being Stoic, the role of self-talk in active self-development, as well as the relevance of Little's personal project analysis to understand Stoics' ongoing activities and the role of creativity therein. Implications, limitations of the present study, and future directions are identified.

Keywords: Adult Personality Development, Death Anxiety, Death Contemplation, Expressive Writing, Marcus Aurelius, Personal Project Analysis, Philosophy, Pierre Hadot, Stoicism, Terror Management Theory.

Introduction

“The need for denial of death cannot be denied. Death is [...] the ultimate threat” – Jeff Greenberg (2012)

Individuals die; human life is finite. As a field, psychology contends with finitude in two ways. At an aggregate level, psychologists study death anxiety using the paradigm of terror management theory (TMT). TMT is a psychosocial theory underpinned by decades of research (Dar-Nimrod, 2022; Greenberg, 2012; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Solomon et al., 2015) and encompasses experimental existential psychology (Greenberg, 2012; Koole et al., 2006). At the level of individual differences, mental health clinicians explore the relationship between death fear and wellbeing through research and clinical practice. To situate the present study, these two approaches are discussed in turn.

TMT’s premise is that death’s inevitability is countered with death denial. Psychologically, death is denied through the formation of a “symbolic self”. This symbolic self is characterized by “a sense of personal value that is obtained by believing (a) in the validity of one’s cultural worldview and (b) that one is living up to the standards that are part of that worldview” (Pyszczynski et al., 2004, pp. 436–437). In other words, according to TMT, self-esteem and solidified worldview both buffer death anxiety. The production and maintenance of self-esteem and a stable worldview amounts to “terror management” (Greenberg, 2012).

However, terror management comes at a cost to our species. The defense of a singular cultural worldview can be enacted as patriotism, warmongering, and xenophobia, as shown through empirical TMT studies (Greenberg et al., 2001, 2014; Legendre et al., 2022; Tjew-A-Sin & Koole, 2018). According to Rutjens and Loseman (2010) worldview defense is a meaning-seeking response evoked by mortality salience. Moreover, disgust sensitivity has empirically been associated with death fear (Kelley et al., 2015). In studies by social psychologists Cuddy et al. (2007) and Leyens et al. (2001, 2007), disgust is seen to play out in the inhumanisation process which imputes humanity exclusively to the ingroup. Overall, TMT places fear of death at the heart of human culture, where culture is understood as an elaborate “illusion” shielding people from finitude (Greenberg, 2012, p. 17).

At the level of individuals, TMT’s model implies “contingent self-esteem” resulting in “unstable self-worth” (Ryan & Deci, 2018a, p. 255). For this reason, TMT can be regarded as “a deficit-need theory, since the motivations it has in focus are primarily defensive and reactive in nature” (2018b, p. 92). In the past decade, empirical findings relating to individual differences have borne out the deficit-need theory. For example, Iverach et al. (2014) characterized death anxiety as the core of mental disorders. Furthermore, fresh empirical evidence indicates that death anxiety is present in treatment-seeking individuals across diagnostic categories (Menzies et

al., 2024; Menzies & Menzies, 2023). TMT anticipated this. For example, the development of PTSD is positively associated with degrees of dissociation in trauma and negatively associated with what TMT calls the existential illusions comprising normal terror management defenses (Greenberg, 2012). Broadly, Menzies and Menzies (2023) stipulate 11 areas for future research to deepen understanding of the role of death anxiety in mental disorders. These stipulations, while not exhaustive, are consistent with the wider and growing interest in how clinical practice should respond to death anxiety.

Overall, grappling with death anxiety is both a cultural priority and a clinical challenge. Where do people turn, to cultivate death acceptance?

Death Acceptance Propounded in Ancient Western Philosophy

“Death is nothing to us” – Epicurus

Philosophers of the Hellenistic period in Ancient Greece engaged with questions of reality, life, and how to live. Death acceptance is a central theme in this philosophical tradition which included the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the Skeptics (Sellars, 2018). These schools continued to develop in Rome in the first centuries of the common era (Reydams-Schils, 2016). Thus, the period of interest spans from 3rd Century BCE through 2nd Century CE.

Ancient philosophers in this period viewed death as inevitable, natural, and not fearful (Sellars, 2018, pp. 143–158). For example, in his Letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus wrote, “when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not” (Epicurus, 2023; Laertius, 1925; Rosenbaum, 1986). Seneca likewise averred, death “reduces all things to nothing” (Seneca, 1900). Life’s finitude was a recurrent theme in Marcus Aurelius’s meditations on Epictetus’s teaching (Aurelius, 1992). According to contemporary Stoic philosopher Massimo Pigliucci, death’s “inevitability was a reminder to focus on the *hic et nunc* (the here and now), to help them be more mindful of how they were living and what they were doing” (2015, p. 16).

The practical implications Pigliucci observes are central features of this philosophical tradition. A therapeutic aspect (Sellars, 2018), even “therapeutic goals” (Robertson, 2016, p. 374) were espoused in this philosophical tradition, whether through the attitudes philosophers propounded or the practices they advocated. This therapeutic dimension is tangibly pursued through what classicist Pierre Hadot called “spiritual exercises” (1995, pp. 79–144). Knowledge is thus “made part of one’s character through a lifetime of meditation and ascetic exercises” (Scherz, 2017, p. 10). Pigliucci enumerates five Stoic exercises relating to death:

- (i) Meditate on the deaths of powerful or famous people. [...]

- (ii) Read about the good deaths of worthy people.
[...]
- (iii) Ponder the endings of entire civilizations. [...]
- (iv) Meditate on cosmic conflagrations. [...]
- (v) Reflect on individual mortality as a way to
renew appreciation of life. (Pigliucci, 2015, pp.
22–23)

Whereas TMT gives grounds to avoid mortality salience, Hellenistic philosophies promote it. The account each gives of humankind contrast starkly. Table 1 sets out some contrasts, taking as an example from the Hellenistic period, Stoicism. Its depiction of Stoicism draws on the events, activities, publications, and organisations making Stoic philosophy increasingly accessible to people in all walks of life (Farnsworth, 2018; Flood, 2020; Modern Stoicism, 2017; Pigliucci, 2017; Pigliucci & Lopez, 2019; Rainey, 1999; Sellars, 2019). They emphasize the practical dimension of Stoic strategies for living. While the facets in Table 1 blur descriptive and normative observations, all relate to how people live.

Table 1

Key facets contrasting terror management to Stoicism

Facet	Terror management	Stoicism
Relation to mortality	Death must be actively denied. Death fear relates to disgust sensitivity. Mortality salience activates defensiveness.	Death is accepted as part of nature. Impermanence is inevitable.
Relation to others	Ethnocentrism, patriotism, fandom buffer death anxiety. A stable cultural worldview must be maintained and defended, even if it dehumanizes others.	Philanthropy (loving humankind) and identifying as a citizen of the cosmopolis contribute to harmonious living.
Emotionality concept	Unpleasant emotions are to be suppressed or buffered. If defenses fail, anxiety will prevail.	Emotions are judgements that can be subject to rationality and rationality is virtuous.
Self concept	The ego of the symbolic self is fragile. Self-esteem is contingent. Self-worth is unstable. Unconscious processing of impersonal death cues mobilizes the symbolic self's defensiveness.	Training cultivates a virtuous self, and can supervene disposition. Four virtues are cardinal: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Reflection and contemplation enlarge awareness.
Orientation	Closed	Open

Philosophy as a Way of Life

Broadly, philosophy as a way of life (PWL) is “philosophical reflection on how to live combined with strategies for living in accordance with our convictions about the good life” (Hidalgo, 2021, p. 259). Hadot summarized this combination in the phrase “the ever-fragile *exercise* of wisdom” (1995, p. 211). To convey what this exercise consists of, Hadot relied on the Roman Stoic Marcus Aurelius. Hadot defined PWL’s “triple form”: attempting to be objective, to live justly “in the service of the human community” and to “become aware of our situation as a part of the universe [...] to render oneself open to the universal” (Hadot, 1995, p. 212).

Similarly to Hadot, Sellars identified “strong therapeutic ambitions” (Sellars, 2018, p. 10) in the later Roman Stoics, including Marcus Aurelius. These therapeutic ambitions are relevant to psychologists studying death fear and death acceptance. Specifically, Stoicism is recognized by clinical psychologists and psychotherapists as a resource for addressing mental suffering generally (Menzies & Whittle, 2022; Robertson, 2018; Still & Dryden, 2012). Moreover, clinicians recognize Stoicism specifically as a resource for addressing death anxiety.

Stoicism’s Clinical Applications

One way of applying Stoicism is to build training programs using Stoic materials for use by clinical and sub-clinical populations (Brown et al., 2022; MacLellan & Derakshan, 2021; Menzies et al., 2021, 2023). For example, the online CBT training program for Overcoming Death Anxiety (ODA) incorporates Stoic death concepts (Menzies et al., 2021, 2023). ODA includes a memento mori quote from Marcus Aurelius, an audio recording of an interview with existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom, and a recommendation of his book, *Staring at the Sun*. ODA’s reflective activities directly engage users in imagining the finitude of their own lives. At one point, participants are asked: “How would your life be different if you truly kept in mind the fact that you could die at any point, as could those around you?” (Menzies et al., 2021, p. 24).

Another route is to take up Stoic practice in a more sustained way, as advocated by PWL. Through living as a Stoic, people can explore Stoicism’s contribution to their own flourishing. Contrasting with the deficit-theory of TMT (Ryan & Deci, 2018a), PWL seems to offer another path to overcoming death anxiety through confrontation and acceptance (achieved through Stoic practice) rather than suppression and defense (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2024a).

Stoic Writing

Writing has long been part of Stoic practice. For example, Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Meditations* as personal reflections on Epictetus’s *Enchiridion*, which means manual (Reydams-Schils, 2016, pp. 20–21). Modern Stoics use writing as part of their reflective practices (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2024b). One form of writing is journaling on Stoic themes or in

response to Stoic quotations. This is an activity used in Stoic Week (Modern Stoicism, n.d.), and in self-help workbooks such as Pigliucci and Lopez (2019) and Polat (2022). Journaling is also elicited in reflection tasks within the CBT-based program, Overcoming Death Anxiety pioneered by Menzies and team (Menzies et al., 2021, 2023; Menzies & Whittle, 2022).

Another, more creative form is community-based copywork, a method formulated by Kathryn Koromilas, a Stoic teacher and creative writer. Koromilas's reflective tasks are more complex than conventional journalling prompts. Koromilas invites contemplators to copy out, interact with, dismantle, and rewrite passages from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* to produce their own reformulations of Stoic wisdom (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2023). Koromilas's guided writing program is called *28 Days Joyful Death Writing with the Stoics* (hereafter *28 Days*).

For 28 days, adult contemplators from any walk of life receive the same daily prompt containing the day's *Meditation* passage and recommended activities. See Figure 1. Non-proprietary digital platforms that are free to access (first Facebook, later Slack) provide a focal point for contemplators, where they can share their reformulations and reflections, read and respond to others' posts. This fosters a temporary digital community of diverse individuals who asynchronously "meet" to converse in a liminal space. (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2023)

The purpose of the present study was to qualitatively explore participants' firsthand experiences of joining a *28 Days* program for a second or third time. More specifically, the research question was, "What are the subjective experiences of Stoics repeating *28 days*?"

Figure 1: *The First Prompt Sent to 28 Days Participants (reproduced with permission)*

I'll be counting down the days. A little "death deadline" to keep us focused and remind us that our time is finite. So... 28 Days Left...  Good morning, ἀπὸ τοῦ θανάτου. Exit gracefully. Today's meditation is from Marcus Aurelius' <i>Meditations</i> Book 12.36 and it's about the final scene, the end of the play, your exit. You've lived in this great city. What difference does it make if you've had five years or fifty-five years? The laws don't make that distinction. What's so bad about it? You're not being sent away by some tyrant or by some injustice! It's nature—who first invited you here—that's now asking you to leave. It's like the director of a play hires you as an actor only to fire you mid-scene and you say, "But, wait, I didn't get my five acts, only three!" Yes, but...your life is complete in three acts. It's up to the director who created your role to also end your role. It's not up to you. So, go on, exit gracefully. Meditations, Book 12.36. (My reformulation) ♥ If you don't have a copy of <i>Meditations</i>, you can access it online for free. For example, here is the Glengary translation. But I'll be including enough of the text for you to complete the 28 days without a copy. © 2019-2023 Kathryn Koromilas. All rights reserved.	Marcus Aurelius practises two ideas that will become fundamental to our own journey towards joyful death contemplation. The actor in a play - Let's consider life as a play. You are the actor and you have a role to play, but you haven't written the play. (Epictetus, <i>Encheiridion</i>, 17.) - So, you can't logically argue an opinion about how long you ought to have in the play. The only thing that depends on you is living your role excellently. (We can talk about what excellence and virtue mean another time, but for now, if you live excellently right now, you'll be happy, regardless of how long you have!) The universal perspective - Our default perspective in the world is personal, human-centred. We're the protagonist of our life's drama and everything revolves around us. So, our life and death and the lives and deaths of our loved ones always seem more important, more urgent. - But this is faulty thinking. - Pierre Hadot (<i>Philosophy as a Way of Life</i>, p. 83) says that we really need to undergo a "complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things." - He means we need to switch our "human" vision of reality, in which our values depend on our emotions, to a "natural vision of things, in which our values depend on our reason which is thinking in agreement with the perspective of universal nature." - This is why Marcus Aurelius notes that it doesn't matter whether you have a few years or more years. He says this because he is taking a universal or natural perspective. - From the perspective of nature and the laws of nature, five, ten or twenty more years makes no difference at all. - So, stepping back and seeing things from a larger, broader, more universal perspective really helps. 𐀀 © 2019-2023 Kathryn Koromilas. All rights reserved.
Today's Writing Exercise Time: 20-60 mins for the complete exercise, but . . . If you only have 5 minutes: - read the above meditation out loud, and - maybe think about it once or twice (for 30 seconds each time) during the day. If you only have 10 minutes: - read the above meditation out loud, - copy out the meditation in longhand in your journal (this is copywork), and - maybe think about it once or twice (for 30 seconds each time) during the day. The blank pages of a journal are an open invitation to rumination. But overthinking death is the last thing we want. (Here's how a more Stoic approach to journaling helped me stop overthinking.) We won't be doing too much personal, freeform writing, but when we do, we'll impose some constraints on time spent and structure. So, today, a PERSONAL RESPONSE AND REFRAMING activity. It goes like this: - Read the meditation selected for today. - Take your time. - Read it out loud. - Copy the meditation word-for-word in your journal of choice. - Pay attention to the text. - Allow your thoughts to come and go - Keep coming back to the text - Complete the copywork © 2019-2023 Kathryn Koromilas. All rights reserved.	- Now, set a timer for 5 minutes. - Write longhand, freestyle from a personal perspective in response to today's meditation. - When the time is up... - Quickly go over what you've written as if you are a friend or a therapist - from that perspective. - Choose a couple of sentences or words or phrases that seem unhelpful. - By this I mean, that complicate things, that suggests unclear, irrational thinking about the subject. - Rewrite from a Stoic perspective. - By "a Stoic perspective," I mean the perspective that makes nature's will your own will/choice. - Rewrite those sentences in a more helpful, less personal way. - Try rewriting using "you" instead of "I." - Optional: - Take a photo of your journal pages and share it in the Salon in the relevant channel. - If you are sharing on social media, tag me @KathrynKoromilas and use #joyfuldeathwriting And... Take a deep breath. Close your journal. Grab a treat. A warm beverage. Or take yourself out for a walk. Or listen to a tune from our Joyful Death In the Stoic Salon Playlist (and add your own). Enjoy your day!  © 2019-2023 Kathryn Koromilas. All rights reserved.

Methods

Study Design

This study is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) following the approach of Smith et al. (2009), grounded in a hermeneutic-phenomenological epistemology (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Our study makes three key epistemological assumptions: that access to the world and to experience is via interpretation (Polkinghorne, 1983); that people “find themselves in the experience” of being in the world into which they’ve been thrown (Vagle, 2018, p. 21); that, rather than pre-existing, meanings “come into being” through relating to people, contexts, and objects (2018, p. 43).

The study’s hermeneutic structure was more elaborate than IPA’s characteristic double hermeneutic since study participants lived through two or more *28 Days* cycles separated by a year, during which they didn’t stop “being Stoic” nor forget their earlier Stoic death contemplation. Prior experience is thus nested within their more recent experience, during both participation and research phases. To designate the temporal span of interpretative activity, we adopt the terms “intensive” and “extensive,” where intensive pertains to the current *28 Days* and extensive pertains to the longer span of time across which experienced Stoics involved themselves in active death contemplation or Stoic practices more broadly. (see Table 2). Valid analysis must register and respond to this extensivity.

Table 2

Multiple Hermeneutics of Studying Experienced 28 Days Participants

Timeframe/locus	Stage
During each <i>28 Days</i> , and possibly after	<i>Intensive</i>: Experienced participants read and reformulated Marcus Aurelius death meditations daily. While practicing as a Stoic, experienced participants shared reformulations and discussed personal experience within the mixed group of newcomers and veterans. <i>Extensive</i>: Experienced participants reflected during subsequent <i>28 Days</i> how their current reformulations and contemplative experience corresponded and diverged from prior reformulations in other <i>28 Days</i>.
In the interview	Each participant gave an account in interview with the researcher focused on Stoic stances and emphasized what had been written/created

In the analysis	over time (including in prior years' <i>28 Days</i> programs). The researcher formulated themes and narrative for this being and becoming a Stoic with reference to the conditions given by <i>28 Days</i> .
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We note also that the source material, Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, was itself an interpretative exercise offering "the clearest example of writing as ongoing training" (Reydams-Schils, 2016, p. 21). Moreover, *28 Days* participants work with passages in translation, and those translations themselves are products of interpretative labor.

Participants

Participants were purposively recruited from the November 2021 cohort of *28 Days*. Per the inclusion criteria, all research participants were adults aged 18 or over fluent in English undertaking *28 Days* in late 2021.

Nine people volunteered and all volunteers completed the informed consent process and subsequent interview. Of these, six were newcomers and three were returning to *28 Days* from prior years. After data collection, returning participants were grouped by researchers into a separate dataset because interviews showed the first author (Hammer) that their experiences were meaningfully distinct from newcomers'. Data on newcomers to *28 Days* was analyzed first and is reported elsewhere (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2023). The segmentation ensured neither study engaged more than six participants (Smith et al., 2009).

The participants of the present study were all people who had taken part in *28 Days* in prior years, completing *28 Days* two or more times. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews. No unnecessary personal data was collected. Pseudonyms chosen by participants were applied before transcription: Aurion, Cordelia, and Debby. More information about these individuals is provided at the start of the Results section.

Ethics Statement

The University of Derby College of Health, Psychology and Social Care Research Ethics Committee provided ethical approval on 4 November 2021. Approval of Application ETH2122-1095 was in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics April 2021.

Materials and Procedure

Online semi-structured interviews (SSI) were held the same month the guided program concluded (December 2021), lasting 40-90 minutes. The interviews generated unexpected answers that opened unforeseen lines of questioning (Smith et al., 2009). Table 3 provides sample questions asked of interviewees, either uniformly or uniquely following on from a participant's prior statement.

Table 3*Sample Questions from the Semi-Structured Interviews*

Uniform question examples	Unique question examples
What has been your experience doing Stoic copywork?	As I listen, I just get the sense that you're dwelling within your mortal home. What was your relationship to mortality and how has that shifted? [asked of Debby]
How would you describe the 28 Days Joyful Death Writing program to someone you like and trust who isn't doing it/doesn't have a Stoic practice?	You mentioned Stoicism was over there and you were here, and the Stoic copy work has brought you closer. Why for you has it been important to have a Stoic practice? [asked of Aurion]
What's the one question you wished I had asked? [asked at the end of each interview]	So, thinking that [copywork] was stupid and like third grade, what made you sign up for it? [asked of Cordelia]

Analytic Plan*Methodological Sensitivity to the Material*

In the semi-structured interviews, experienced *28 Days* participants described their reasons for returning to join the intervention again, their investment in death contemplation and Stoic practice more broadly. Spontaneously, each described how re-examining a single meditation enriched their perspective. The Analytic Plan responded to this depth and breadth in participants' statements. A phenomenological attitude (du Plock, 1996) was adopted when conducting the interviews and immersing in the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Consequently, we elaborated canonical IPA method in two ways.

First, we noted the temporal span returning participants described. Extensivity pertains to the unique processes over years through which each participant deepened their personal Stoic PWL.

Smith characterizes the "center of gravity for an IPA study" as being the question, "what does it mean?" (2019, p. 167) but this question resonates less for experienced Stoics than for newcomers. Hence, the second elaboration altered the focus of IPA away from "in-ness" (Vagle, 2018) towards "as-ness" of repeating daily death contemplation as a Stoic using familiar Aurelian meditations. Grasping "as-ness" showed Stoicism as "a way of life" appearing in the interviews beyond the guided writing program as an event. "As-ness" accounts, we discovered, are rich, multi-layered, and harder to wrestle into a streamlined narrative because no singular event anchors participants' own interpretations.

Reflexivity Statement

The study findings and framing are informed by the authors' research positionality. Hammer is a practicing existential psychotherapist, coach, and coaching supervisor and Van Gordon is a contemplative psychologist

and former Buddhist monk. In private practice, Hammer helps clients learn to live with inner consent oriented towards personally held, enduring, and ever-changing situational values, using a phenomenological and depth psychology approach informed by her training with Alfried Längle, successor to Viktor Frankl (Längle, 2019). In her personal life, Hammer is a published poet, and her poetry practice began after using a dozen *28 Days* prompts in a solitary way following a Stoicon-x workshop led by Kathryn Koromilas in November 2020. Van Gordon researches clinical applications of Buddhist meditation and Buddhist conceptions of self and suffering, and created the ontological addiction theory. Both authors have an interest in Stoic writing as a clinical application, as well as in common factors that may exist across Buddhism, Stoicism, and Länglean existential analysis. However, neither researcher is a Stoic. Our readings of Finlay (2002) and Gough and Madill (2012) informed this statement.

Analytic Process

Primary coding focused on the individual participant (Larkin et al., 2006), first identifying objects of concerns, experiences, and stances (Larkin, 2020) before producing lengthy pen portraits (Blundell & Oakley, 2024). Cumulative coding then preceded integrative coding.

Next, an independent researcher audited the coding and theme table. The auditor read through the transcripts and independently undertook some provisional coding and theme construction accordingly. The auditor then compared this to the analytic plan tables, theme tables, and full results write-up, to report congruence with the analysis conducted. The independent researcher communicated their impression that the resulting thematic structure did the raw data justice and aptly represents participants' lived experiences.

Yardley's (2000) validity criterion "sensitivity to context" was engaged at two levels: working with the data (S1) and framing the data (S2). A picture of relevance and resonance (Finlay, 2011) emerged during analysis. At this stage, Hadot's paradigm began seeming especially relevant to understanding returning participants as Stoics repeating *28 Days*. Making the stages of analysis explicit facilitates resonance and relevance articulation (Table 4). Validity is further considered in Table 5, which maps study elements to the quality markers of Finlay (2011) and Yardley (2000, 2017).

Table 4*Activities and Outcomes for Each Analytic Stage*

Stage	Activity	Outcome
1. Cumulative coding	Case analysis categorizing all material as objects of concern, experiences, and/or stances	Cumulative code tables for each participant (S1) and pen portraits
2. Integrative coding	Connecting the lines of commonality across the cases while cautiously dialoguing with theory	Theme tables oriented on the lived experience of doing the intervention repeatedly as a Stoic
3. Questioning the research context	Pen portraits and integrative code tables in relation to wider literature	Clarity about how to frame the study (S2)
4. Independent Audit	Another researcher read the raw data through to the theme tables	Validation of the theme hierarchy
5. Thematic narrativizing	Using summary, paraphrase, and verbatims to tell a story	Results section
	Using psychological literature to articulate a gap and address it using study findings	Discussion and Introduction sections

Table 5*Mapping Validity Criteria onto Report Elements*

Finlay's markers	Yardley's markers	Report element
Rigor	Commitment and rigor	Study Design, Analytic Plan, Results
Resonance	Transparency and coherence	Results, Discussion
Reflexivity	Transparency and coherence	Discussion
Relevance	Impact and importance	Introduction, Discussion

Results

Three Stoics returning to *28 Days* recounted their experiences, situating them within their ongoing Stoic development. To orient readers, Table 6 provides abbreviated pen portraits of each.

Table 6

Brief Portraits of Participants Returning to 28 Days

Chosen pseudonym	Description
Aurion	Linguist, husband, father, and university instructor, Aurion regards Stoicism as a self-development practice which he's explored together with his wife for five years now. He first encountered Marcus Aurelius through a fellow <i>Star Trek</i> fan. He describes his mind as rigid. Aurion relishes the physical evidence of his Stoic engagement: notebooks, an annotated bibliography, and a digital library he's creating so that he can see a given <i>Meditations</i> passage in 12 translations. Community helps Aurion perpetuate his copywork practice.
Cordelia	The pseudonym he chose means "tomorrow" in Ancient Greek. In interview, he explained it's the first word in the memento mori phrase: "Tomorrow you will die." Medical doctor, wife, friend, mother, Cordelia calls herself a "natural Stoic." She was orphaned when she was seven. Her mother's wish placed Cordelia in an adoptive family rather than with relations, and there Cordelia faced hardship that led her to invent for herself principles to help her cope. Stoicism speaks to suffering of the orphan, the captive, the prisoner. For Cordelia, who lives in her mind, community is a place of shared ideas where she's found other people who think and talk about death. She'd like society to be more accepting of death. Also, the promise of no longer being "a stranger in your own land" appeals to Cordelia.
Debby	Wikipedia told Cordelia the pseudonym she chose spontaneously derives from lion-hearted. "Courage does have some meaning," she observed. Mother, wife, employed, and busy at home, Debby has established a family very different to the one in which she was raised, where nothing substantial (including death) was ever discussed. As a young teen, she joined an evangelical Protestant Christian group that had all the answers about the afterlife. She lost this promised afterlife once she came to see the group as a cult, and left. She still fears death. She is an active parent to her teen daughter and younger son, spending time with them and their friends and involving her son in her copywork. She questions gendered obligations about housekeeping and ideal body shape. Her inner critic is harsh. Humor is one way Debby grapples with her desires and fears. Her pseudonym references the iconic porn movie title, <i>Debby Does Dallas</i> , and she used it previously when writing anonymously on her midwife's community forum about "birth stuff".

Our interpretation elicited four themes. The first theme, Community as the Context for Connection, describes the sites of community and forms of connection participants observed or made; and the aspects of their experience characterized by disconnection and distance. The second theme, Deepening a Personal Stoic Practice Daily, encompasses participants' accounts of their repetition of activities including but not limited to death contemplation and other Stoic activities. The third theme, Death's Importance for Life, captures participants' stances on meaning in life and their cultural perspectives on death as part of life. Finally, the theme of Self-Development and Personal Identity Refracted through Stoic Practice captures experiences concerning character formation and self-understanding. The broader arc of developing as Stoics is reflected in all four themes.

These four themes contrast with the newcomers experiencing *28 Days* (and in some cases, Stoic thought) for the first time. Table 7 shows Stoics' and newcomers' primary and secondary themes side by side. Whereas newcomers are focused more on the immediate *28 Days* experience and its meaning for them, experienced Stoics are engaging with matters of existential significance as defined by Smith (2019), namely questions of identity and life purpose.

Table 7

Primary and Secondary Themes of Experienced Stoics and Newcomers

Experienced Stoics (this study)	Newcomers (prior study)
1. Community as the Context for Connection 1.1 Connection and Contribution 1.2 Disconnection and Distance 2. Deepening a Personal Stoic Practice Daily 2.1 Repetition 2.2 Expansion 3. Death's Importance for Life 3.1 Death's Existential Meaning 3.2 Cultural Perspectives on Death and Dying	1. Contemplative Context 1.1 Communitas (temporary community) 1.2 Alterity 1.3 Wider world 2. Death Contemplation Significance 2.1 Loss 2.2 Gain
4. Refracting Self-development and Personal Identity Through Stoic Practice 4.1 Identity 4.2 Character Formation 4.3 Self-understanding	

Community as the Context for Connection (Primary Theme 1)

To understand how these individual Stoics were re-engaging with *28 Days* for a second or third time, we looked first to their descriptions of community. We found that they spoke of the broad ambit of community, from all of humanity (which is a Stoic theme) or enduring tradition (again, Stoic

thought through the ages) to the more specific interactions they described amongst group members during *28 Days* programs.

The telescoping out and in is consistent with Stoic thought. So, for example, Debby spoke of the human cosmopolis, identifying one aspect as nurturing people who face misfortune and another as handling hard situations well. For Cordelia, “it’s been helpful to [...] know these are not just my ideas, these are other people’s ideas,” where other people are fellow *28 Day* participants as well as Stoics across the millennia. Participating in a long tradition of contemplation is meaningful to her. Cordelia characterizes the *28 Days* as being useful. When she reformulates Aurelian meditations, she has in mind “someone my age or maybe a little bit younger than me,” in a time of life when they are still “outward focused towards the world.”

Reaching others matters to Cordelia; she regards the *28 Days* creator Kathryn Koromilas as an exemplar, for Cordelia too wants a way “of pushing thinking about death out into the world. I wish I could figure out a way myself to do that.” Cordelia’s understanding is both personal and professional. “I think that there is a lot of suffering that Stoicism could improve in the world,” she notes, clarifying “it’s definitely my patients, but you know, other people certainly as well could benefit from a little dose of Stoicism.”

Death, Cordelia observed, is “one of the more meaningful things that we think about and, you know, it’s fun to talk about things that have meaning.” This fun fosters connection amongst strangers drawn together by Stoicism, and Cordelia pointed out how strangers in her first year became lasting friends. Taking her “results to the first-year group,” she thought: “‘Oh my gosh, these are such interesting and fabulous people,’ and I was hooked.”

The *28 Days* community is a site for connection for all three participants. Aurion described it as a reason to make an effort each day. For Debby, it provides a “wonderful chance to share” once she’s finished her daily copywork. The connection extends beyond friendship. For Aurion

One of the amazing things about working in a group is that sometimes the other people will come up with completely different approaches and that’s so much fun to see. Like “Oh I didn’t even imagine that you could come at this brief passage from that direction.” And sometimes three or four of us would converge on a particular theme.

Aurion provided a specific example, written on 12 November 2021, when he had 24 days left in his second *28 Days*. In his reformulation, he wrote as a final line:

“In death the illusion that I am separate, apart, different, will vanish and I will return to being fully unselfconsciously part of everything.” [...] Someone just responded, “Yes, to being unselfconsciously part of everything,” with a sort of sparkly emoji and I thought, “Oh yeah,

there is something in that, that's nice." It is really validating, you know, in a very un-Stoic way, right, like a Stoic isn't meant to be depending on that, but we do live in community and, you know, community can help us grow.

Aurion further articulated the value of community in his copywork when he switched from first-person to second person in one reformulation: "My part in the great story of all is so inconsequential that if I had never walked on the stage, the difference would not be noticeable" became "Your role in the great story of all is minute, but I have been on stage with you, my role makes more sense with you present." In this way, Aurion offers a striking example of how the reformulation-and-sharing process realizes the Stoic ideal of the human cosmopolis, which is something all three participants voiced: they each valued connection and contribution realized in different ways within their temporary community.

The opposite – disconnection and distance – appear in participants' remarks as counterpoints to their Stoic contemplation in community during *28 Days* programs. Connection fails in professional contexts, and in family settings. For example, Aurion described how his work does not provide him with a niche in which he makes a unique, meaningful contribution the way he can in the Stoic community. In 2020, Cordelia found as a medical doctor, she "was up to my eyeballs in Covid" during her second *28 Days*. And over the three years she did *28 Days*, Cordelia's husband and adult daughter were unlikely to be watching her Stoic videos. Thus, both Aurion and Cordelia received connection during the *28 Days* that might otherwise not be available in their wider lives. Aurion described it as a "sense of fullness that I didn't have before."

For Debby and Aurion, disconnection *from* Stoic practice arises *after* the *28 Days*. When we met, each was experiencing this for the second time. Aurion noticed the habit of copywork ebbing after the *28 Days* without "the structured community thing." Likewise, when the daily writing "tapered off" after her first *28 Days*, Debby had to "find just a little project to do as a daily process." Debby formulated an image for the disconnection she experiences when her daily practice withers; falling asleep again is Debby's image for losing connection with her inner sage.

Losing connection with her inner sage threatens Debby's cultivated Stoic practice. Her reformulation dramatizes this disconnect in a duologue she imagined between herself and a character she created during *28 Days* called Captain Philosophy who offers to stir her when she falls out of awareness, as if asleep. Reading the duologue, Debby's voice swelled with tears. She then explained she accepts that she can't be "100 percent awake and aware, [...] completely present" and while part of her wants this, another part wants "to go back to sleep [because t]his is painful." "Sleep" disconnects Debby from awareness. Like waking, sleep is temporary, because her Captain

Philosophy is there, assuring her, “I’ll wake you up again soon.” This reliance is possible when Stoic philosophy has become a way of life.

Deepening a Personal Stoic Practice Daily (Primary Theme 2)

Repetition is one way of deepening a Stoic practice. For Aurion, the daily copywork and reformulation offers “a way to reflect and center myself each day and to ground myself in something that isn’t all the chaos around me.” He elaborated, “I tend to do it in the evenings because I haven’t got around to it before then” but “it’s one thing I’m still trying to settle. I would love to do it in the mornings because I feel like that’s a great time to do that grounding and start the day,” Aurion further explained. Regular practice is essential, for Aurion: “Just doing something every day [...] is the key.”

I have a very rigid kind of mind when it comes to daily routines [...] It’s not that I’m in principle opposed to deviation, it’s just deviation is extra work for me, right. So, if I want to form a habit it’s easiest to form the same habit day-to-day and I really liked that.

Like Aurion, Debby treated getting daily copywork done as “a priority” even when life was busy. “I built up the days,” she declared. For Debby, the facilitator’s daily emails were like Santa Claus delivering presents. Similarly, for Cordelia: “It’s a daily practice which is, you know, a very valuable thing to do. Something every day, every day, every day. [...] That’s been an interesting practice for me, to just, to do them every day.”

Repetition gives rise to personal change. For Debby, repeating daily Stoic copywork embedded her Stoic practice into her daily life.

To commit to that for this particular four weeks, do it *every* day and I stuck with it which was really good and I was really proud of myself even though there was life stuff happening, it was like every day I did it. And it was just really transformative in terms of my Stoic practice because it made this daily practice that was so, so close to me. I had it more throughout my day so then it also made it easier to behave well, to change [laughter] some of the things that I’ve been trying to change. [...] There’s like this magic that happens when you do that.

Explicitly, Debby’s Stoic practice extends beyond her *28 Days* participation while also, the guided writing program heightens and deepens her Stoic practice, transforming it. In turn, her Stoic practice had greater impact on the aspects of her personality and behavior that she’s “been trying to change”.

This intensifying of Stoic practice Cordelia experienced as “a deepening of my understanding of the texts and engagement with the texts. And [...] being in a group allows us to some extent kind of borrow each

other's energy." When the researcher asked, is it a "feeling of exchange" Cordelia said "Mm-hmmm, yes, yes."

Repeating the *28 Days* led Cordelia to change her meditation reformulation medium. Returning to *28 Days* for a third year, Cordelia focused on making videos. This was Cordelia's way of customizing *28 Days* to remain relevant and interesting for her. She explained:

I didn't really want to do it a third year and yet
I do want to be supportive of Kathryn [the
facilitator] and I recognized it as a *good*, a
useful thing for me to do, so I said, OK, fine
I'll do it, but I'll do it this way because this will
be a way for me to develop myself personally
as well.

People's delight in her beautiful surroundings surprised Cordelia when she posted a video introducing herself in her rural setting in Year 1. The contemplative videos she went on to make in Year 3 took viewers to the water's edge, as winter settled in her property's woodlands and lake. She shared Year 3 videos on Facebook as a way of continuing to connect with people she'd befriended in prior years as well as other Facebook friends.

Like Cordelia through her videos, Aurion made his work visible to other participants by posting his reformulations in the Slack community. He "mostly shared everything that I journaled," explaining this in relation to his profession: "I'm an academic, I'm not shy about sharing my words, you know, imperfect as they are." Repeatedly posting is a way of connecting with others.

Expansion is another way of deepening a personal Stoic practice. It happened for each participant, and the practices each chose as a focus reflect their own preferences and aptitudes. Thus, Aurion expanded his Stoic practice in archiving, Cordelia moved from written copywork to video, and Debby went from hesitating as a writer to fully realizing creative concepts combining drawing with words, and developing a new kind of inner dialogue about, for example, her self-doubt. These expansions emerged because these Stoics returned to *28 Days*.

For Aurion, daily reformulation helped him expand his Stoic practice beyond the guided program's timeframe. He explained, 28 days is "a good chunk of time" "to really build a habit in a community" and Aurion "found afterwards I was able to carry it on, on my own for quite some time" "almost every day for the better part of a year." Expansion derives not simply from continuing the daily habit, but through deepening one's Stoic practice. Aurion explained how this was rooted in the structure of the *28 Days*:

The way that Kathryn [the facilitator] set it up
[...] it's a real active engagement, you know,
like we were creatively producing our own
writing that reflected the passages but it was
our own writing, our own ideas, our own
reformulations. And I felt like I owned my

Stoicism more having practiced that than before. [...] It changed how it felt, like what Stoicism is and my relationship and it helped me to get a bit more regular and consistent about practicing it.

In delving into his own reformulation process, Aurion clarified that owning Stoicism is about taking a stance. Having copied out the day's meditation, Aurion would "then either re-write it in my own words if I felt like I wanted to reformulate it or respond to it if it kind of felt like something that I wanted to say back to Marcus." The group Slack would ultimately be the site for that "saying back."

Slack is also where the exchange with others expands the meaning a participant finds in a given passage. Cordelia recalled "a whole lot of conversation about this phrase [in a meditation by Marcus Aurelius] that I would have thought of as kind of a throwaway phrase" - one that she'd "glossed over". The community aspect actively honed her understanding of the original text.

Evidently, repeating *28 Days* is enriching. Aurion declared:

I have a document where I've compiled all my reflections on these passages and I started it towards the end of the last *28 Days*, just because I – some of the things I really do want to keep. [...] Looking at the two versions, I had a much more *full* engagement last year. And some of them [...] I was much more impressed with the engagement I had this year.

Returning to the program over time supports Aurion's change: "I think this year I was able to explore other things. Part of it was exploring deeper and part of it was refreshing that same practice." Consulting Greek texts and various translations widened the range of sources Aurion used in reformulation.

Returning to *28 Days* also opens creative possibilities. During the most recent *28 Days*, Debby involved her young son in her Stoic reformulations, whereas she "wouldn't have thought to do that a few years ago":

He drew a Captain Philosophy for me as well, so it was this neat sharing of it and I read him my thing and he wrote this little poem at the top of it as well. It was really cute. He wrote "A knight or spear or cannonball, Philosophy will stand at all." [...] And he also drew this figure, the elephant, the scars and [...] she's got this sword in her belt and you can see her scars on her, and she's got a parrot too and on the back he sort of drew a little vest on the back of her and it says "Try me," and I LOVE that because it was this twofold thing, this tough

Captain Philosophy, like “Oh yeah, try me buddy,” and then also an invitation, like “Try me, try philosophy, try this,” [...] I just really liked it.

In this, Debby is modelling how Stoic philosophy can enter a family’s way of life.

Expansion, for Cordelia, meant taking on another self-development practice. Several months before her third *28 Days*, she started working through her Enneagram (note1). She identifies herself as a Type 6, named The Loyalist and characterized as “The Committed, Security-Oriented Type: Engaging, Responsible, Anxious, and Suspicious” (‘The Loyalist: Enneagram Type 6’, n.d.). Cordelia said, “I’ve been working on six and six *issues* for, I’m going to say, about four to five months.” In accordance with Type 6, “I do very definitely recognize that I live in my mind,” Cordelia explained.

In the interview, Cordelia wondered whether Enneagram Type 6 traits don’t resonate or “are so deeply enmeshed” is like a fish not knowing it’s in water. “I don’t know [...] how does one fundamentally tell the difference? I don’t know.” Her openness and humility were echoed by other participants.

Death’s Importance for Life (Primary Theme 3)

Participants talking about their death awareness shows how Stoicism equips people to move beyond the death fear that is assumed by terror management theory. These Stoics explain death’s existential meaning and their sense of cultural norms about death and dying. Making death their object of contemplation, experienced Stoics show they have broken with death taboos in the dominant culture.

Aurion observed, “Everyone is mortal and that’s a really good way to ground yourself” since “it’s easy to become unmoored when you’re going from thing to thing.” Cordelia observed, without death, “we lose the ability to view the whole of our lives. [...] How can you really figure out how to make any meaning of your life if you don’t have a clear idea of the fact that it’s going to end?” For Debby, since “Tomorrow you’re going to die,” Debby confronts herself with the question, “What are you going to do right now?” Death, in other words, takes these Stoics back to life and how they will live.

Cordelia said, “I think it is really necessary to think about death and the fact that life ends to give it any meaning.” Confronting the attachment Debby feels to herself and her loved ones, she discovered this for herself. In reformulating Marcus Aurelius’s Meditation 4.15 in 2021, Debby wrote herself out of wishing her beloved would live on forever, realizing they and their beloveds would then roam as a “zombie horde”. From there, she cautioned herself instead: “Love them as they crumble. Keep them as Precious Indifferents – interrupted, but whole.” For Debby, confronting death so vividly was enlivening.

The existential meaning of death appears to be the way one’s personal death gives life weight. For Aurion, death is “inherently personal when you

really think about it and so you can't help but get personal." In *28 Days*, he committed to confronting the prospect of his own death. "The passages where I really engaged and I'm like, 'Yeah, this is an actual thing that's going to happen to me, I'm going to put myself in that headspace and try to write *from* there.'" Similarly, Debby experienced the memento mori as "this shadow sitting right there and [her] knowing that it's right here." In the shadow's presence, Debby found she became "a little more comfortable with being uncomfortable with embracing my own mortality [... that] this life, this amazing thing is not something we get to have forever. [...] Everything's borrowed and everything's returned."

Debby continues to "grapple" with the mortality: "you come from stardust and you're going back to stardust," she wrote. In her 2021 reformulation Marcus Aurelius's Meditation 8.21 Debby practiced letting go of her physical form. She found a way to confront her tendency to romanticize aging by looking at death in terms of physical decomposition, which she had to research before writing "Feast of Me" in which she vividly described the process of a corpse becoming "worm meat". This visceral confrontation seemed to be Debby's way of turning towards her own finitude. "I think as you get older, death has a way of demanding one's attention," Cordelia explained.

Their singular lives emerge as more precious and richer in potential for these experienced Stoics precisely because death belongs to life in general. This perception runs against cultural norms. For example, Debby grew up in a family that never talked about death. She joined an evangelical Christian group as a young teen because she was so afraid of death. "It was my desire of being more comfortable with death, [which] definitely drove me in that direction." The group prescribed beliefs and behaviors that ultimately, she could not endorse. While the promise of an afterlife was the hardest aspect to surrender, she is learning how to live with *what is*.

As an orphaned child who grew up and became a primary care medical doctor, Cordelia regards death avoidance as a distorted attempt to prevent death. "Most people I think are really sure that if they don't think about death then they won't die." In her profession, Cordelia sees this firsthand. "We end up with people who come to the end of their lives and are sort of shocked that they are going to die." By contrast, working as a doctor in a hospital, a hospice, and a nursing home, Cordelia lives with death's reality. Death is "a big part of what one does as a doc," she makes plain.

Yet Cordelia's professional familiarity with death is not reflected in wider culture. "We make death so far removed from us," she observed. In earlier eras, "You saw people dying and cared for people dying, like ourselves. We didn't pack them up and send them off someplace else. [When we do,] then we don't have to think about it, it's just like a person has gone on a long trip." The suppression of death in euphemism troubles Cordelia. Similarly for Debby, spiritually bypassing death creates an intolerable pretense. "When you lose people around you, you don't want to ignore that

and pretend it didn't happen. [...] How are we going to face that? How are we going to grapple with that?" she asked.

"Stoicism helps [her] with the grappling," Debby affirmed, especially *28 Days* "of death writing, definitely, definitely" helped. "There's like this magic that happens when you do that [daily]. And there's something about focusing on death too, I have to say." It seems it's the combination of daily Stoic practices and death contemplation that has had such an impact on Debby.

Aurion also has overcome the cultural barriers to death confrontation, with the help of Stoic teachings.

I do feel like I've spent more time sitting with the idea of the reality of my mortality. And so I'm more confident that [...] when I see my death coming more imminently, [...] I'll be able to handle that in the way I choose. [...] I'm more likely to [die] the way I want than I would have been [...] before.

Debby has also progressed with her death acceptance by participating twice in *28 Days*.

One of the ways it helped me was [...] getting a little bit more comfortable with being uncomfortable with embracing my own mortality [...] to be able to acknowledge that this is something that's finite. This life, this amazing thing is not something that we get to have forever.

Similarly, Cordelia affirmed, "It is the nature of all living things to, you know, sicken, age and die." Accordingly, Cordelia has raised her college-age daughter to be familiar and comfortable with this reality. "She gets that, I think in a real way, in a healthy way," Cordelia observed. For all three Stoics, death acceptance is part of wellbeing and living well.

Refracting Self-Development and Personal Development Through Stoic Practice (Primary Theme 4)

Identity, character formation, and self-understanding are preoccupations for these experienced Stoics returning to daily death contemplation through the *28 Days*.

The daily death writing in *28 Days* resolves identity questions for Aurion. Daily death writing "practice does remind me that 'I can practice this, I can, not just think of myself as a writer, but do the writing and I can get neat stuff out of it,'" Aurion affirmed.

All the people who love me and know me, they know that writing is part of how I express and sort of engage with the world, even though my actual life, writing output is minimal, that is part of my identity.

In reflecting on this, Aurion evaluates identity as a general concept.

I'm fascinated by how identity interacts with the reality that the identity is supposed to point to. I think of myself as a writer, you know, a creative writer, even though you know, I write very little except for my academic stuff which is largely not creative. And [my wife] doesn't think of herself as a writer but when she does sit down for five minutes with a pen she comes up with amazing stuff.

By expanding his Stoic writing project beyond daily formulations and into an annotated bibliography, Aurion further developed an "identity" "as a Stoic in the Stoic community" that, in his own words, has some "fullness" to it. The annotated bibliography he shares with others is a contribution to the community.

In contrast to Aurion's resolved and enriched identity, Debby described herself as a work-in-progress.

My inner voice used to be really, really, very harsh. Pretty harsh critic. And so that's definitely been something that I've tried to work on in the last few years. [...] She's becoming more like an inner sage, an inner wise woman rather than an inner critic.

Writing in *28 Days* has made this inner voice "more obvious."

Debby described the impetus to change as if she were talking to herself, saying "we need to work on this. [...] Let's see if we can sand off her edges a bit." Sharing her self-talk in interview, she laughed. Clearly, Debby's engagement with self-directed personal change is active, self-aware, and laced with humor.

Less explicitly, Cordelia also asks herself, who am I? Who she is derives from her "personal backstory" which is "the water" she swims in. In public blogposts on a Stoic website, Cordelia has written openly about the challenging life circumstances she endured as a child. Cordelia's mother died when she was seven, leaving her orphaned. More trauma followed, and what she knows now as Stoic principles were "just part of how I viewed the world and was able to make sense of the world as a young person." Cordelia maintains that the principles of Stoicism came to her as a child. She described

a phenomenon among people [who think about Stoicism] where [...] roughly...10 percent, maybe, of people have come to most of the principles of Stoicism themselves as children. I think it's maybe the only way to make philosophical sense of really horrible things that happen to you when you are stuck, especially as a child, or as, you know, as a child or as a prisoner or as a captive of some sort.

Cordelia's account says trauma initiates an adaptive response that takes shape as a life philosophy that people subsequently recognize in Stoicism. Cordelia's experience shows Stoicism as not merely philosophy as a way of life, but also as a means of psychic survival. By publishing personal essays online, she found readers' responses validated Cordelia's approach to character formation. Because it was about survival, Cordelia's PWL path contrasts with Aurion's.

Similarly to Aurion, Debby's impetus to cultivate her character seems to come not from adverse conditions but from unwanted behaviors she observes in herself that she wants to shed. For example, she dislikes that she tends to react with frustration or anger to an interruption.

Even if that was five minutes ago, that was a "what was" that comes back to me and then I judge myself, duh-duh-duh. And it's like, "No, it's what was, accept." We accept that and then you can't do anything about it, so it's the right now.

"Stoicism helps me a lot of the time" to grapple with what was, Debby explains. Recounting this, Debby was reminded of her reformulation of Meditation 4.23. In her reformulation, Debby uses sweet and rotten fruit offered by Nature as a way of staging her rejection of what is, her preference for sweetness, the feelings of "it's just so unfair" that leave her empty-bellied, until finally after "a million years or so" Debby-the-character meets Nature with a new attitude: "I can't quite see what's in Her hands but I vow to taste whatever is offered – delicious or vile. I won't miss it. It's what I have." The creative writing she's done in two *28 Days* provides a window into Debby's formation of a new attitude towards what is.

I still have this reaction most of the time when something happens which isn't indifferent [laughter], that I still want to argue with what is. And 'what is' is this cold, hard cement pillar of – you can tell I like certainty, right – you know, "what is" just is.

Cultivating acceptance was Debby's motivation: "I went into the *28 Days* [...] trying to work on this." Debby's example shows another direction from which an experienced Stoic approaches philosophy as a way of life.

Likewise for Aurion, proactive character development is also explicit. "Moving towards Stoicism is [...] the direction I want to go in terms of building my character and becoming a better person." Clearly, proactive character development is inherent to a deepening Stoic practice. "The promise of Stoicism, as I understand it, is, you know, you're always working on your character [...] it's a self-improvement thing." Again, writing contributes to Aurion's proactive process. "My character has been dyed to some extent by this habit that Kathryn and the community helped me to start," he affirms. What's more, Aurion has found ways to sustain his Stoic reformulation.

Outside of the *28 Days*, you know, when I carry it on, I don't focus on the death, I sort of move around different topics but it grounds me in sort of general principles of, you know, like "OK, what's important to me? How can I react to things as they come?" You know, these are the main values of Stoicism in general, like the building the character, how to deal with things.

Here, Aurion signals that Stoicism as a practical philosophy is about more than death acceptance.

Dealing with things for Aurion is about emotionality, an important dimension for Aurion's cultivation of his own character. "[A]nother bit that I work on as a Stoic is engaging emotionally with the world." The outward engagement connects with Aurion's inner life. "I look at Marcus Aurelius and he's always encouraging me to engage emotionally with the world and I think, 'Yeah, I want to,' you know [...] in family life, with friends." This keys into one of Aurion's self-change intentions: "a very specific part of my experience, my work is that small 's' stoicism is a big part of what I want to grow out of and big S Stoicism is part of my path for growing into, you know, being able to more openly engage with my feelings and emotional 'stuff'." Here, Aurion is referring to the common usage of stoicism (with a lowercase s) to mean emotionally repressed. As an experienced Stoic continuing to develop, Aurion does not settle for such a clichéd mischaracterization of Stoicism.

For all three participants, contemplation has led to creativity. In Aurion's estimation, his creativity has developed through his repeated engagement with *28 Days*. As a veteran of the program, Aurion is well-placed to assess his creative development.

I've been really startled by the creative engagement I've had with some of the passages [...] I've looked back on [what I wrote in the first *28 Days*] after we did this *28 Days* and I was just thinking, I am so delighted, I'm amazed that I was able to produce that because as an academic that is not the kind of writing I normally do.

The creativity Aurion has accessed through the *28 Days* relates to his accessing his emotions. "[T]he emotional thing is something that I still struggle with," he perceived, that Stoicism can help. "My reflex is generally to engage intellectually," Aurion observed. "Some of my Stoic practice is to just second guess that particular emotional reflex of mine and say, 'Ok, is this a time when I want to actually engage with the more human, more fully human emotional side?'" Regarding both creativity and intellectualization, Aurion's self-talk shows an active engagement in his own inner dialogue. This inner dialogue is constructive, appreciative, and curious, not critical,

much like Cordelia's perspective on her own "crazy sort of backstory" which meant "I've actually done a lot of the work as a little kid by myself."

Debby learned that writing facilitated proactive change.

I found that there's certain things that don't really change unless you actually write, for some reason. It's like, you need to add this internal observer. So, I had to add this internal observer and then I was able to actually make some more changes to my behavior, my choices so I realized there's definitely a bit of magic that happens, a bit of alchemy or something that happens with writing.

[...]

[The *28 Days*] made it this daily practice that was so, so close to me. I had it more throughout my day so then it also made it easier to behave well; to change [laughter] some of the things that I've been trying to change.

For example, through *28 Days*, Debby learned a new way of relating to her self-doubt.

it's the idea of putting your self-doubt and not ignoring it in the sense of repressing it but treating it like a caged pet that is like "yes, this is my self-doubt, I'm going to put it in this little cage here and I have to carry it around with me. I'm not going to ignore it; I can't just leave it in the closet to die because it's my responsibility and I'm going to set it here on the desk behind me and then do what I have to do."

Debby asked her son to draw her self-doubt, making it "small and fuzzy and cute but something that thinks it's really tough, you know [sound of teeth baring] with big teeth" and now she can acknowledge her "imposter syndrome" by looking at self-doubt drawn "like 'you're adorable. OK, just sit over here' [laughter]". Here, we see how Debby's distancing techniques drain self-doubt of its inhibitory effects.

For all three participants, it seems that an interplay of inner processes of self-distancing and self-acceptance is involved in cultivating self-understanding. Self-talk is a means not only of communicating with the researcher but first and foremost a way of developing constructive attitudes and useful aptitudes.

Across the four themes, these experienced Stoics demonstrate what the Stoic Epictetus, teacher of Marcus Aurelius, stated plainly in *Discourses* 2.9.13: "philosophers recommend that we shouldn't be contented merely to learn, but should add practice too and then training." The practice exemplified by these three Stoics is, in part, imaginative and creative.

Discussion

To understand PWL, Hadot proposed “starting out from the lived experience of the concrete, living and perceiving subject” (1995, pp. 211–212). This study has done so by using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), whereby individuals returning to a four-week daily practice in a temporary online community appear to have deepened their Stoicism.

Participants’ accounts indicate that Stoic practice seemingly affirms or establishes a personal-existential mortality awareness. Stoic reformulation as practiced by Stoics in *28 Days* exemplifies a more personal, concrete form of death awareness consistent with empirical and theoretical work extending the terror management paradigm (Blackie et al., 2016; Cozzolino, 2006; Cozzolino et al., 2014). Present and prior studies (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2023) indicate that the *28 Days* program holds the potential for a sustained engagement in personal death confrontation and acceptance as part of becoming or being Stoic. The important question ODA participants are asked – “How would your life be different if you truly kept in mind the fact that you could die at any point, as could those around you?” (Menzies et al., 2021, p. 24) – is substantially engaged by experienced Stoics returning to *28 Days*.

The videos, prose-poems, and archives these participants have made occupy a place within the temporary community in Slack, but they also endure beyond the *28 Days*’ impermanent location. Anywhere they are encountered, those works can draw attention and evoke an emotional, cognitive, and/or somatic response in their creator or in others. Being-in-the-world-as-a-Stoic means existing in a necessarily open system, which contrasts with the defended worldview posited by TMT.

Active self-development appeared through participants’ self-talk during the interview along with the statements they made in the Stoic contemplations shared first with the community and then with the research team. Self-development and identity evolution in Stoics returning to daily death contemplation appears to be proactive, personal, and sustained. Stoicism scaffolds these inner processes, while a Stoic community provides support and context for them. A Stoic identity appears most definitely in all participants who each showed ways that their personal Stoic identity is not static. For Aurion and Debby, personal change is about cultivating new capacities for emotionality (Aurion), acceptance (Debby), and freedom from judgement (Debby). For Cordelia, self-directed personal change includes exploring her personality using the Enneagram framework. The armamentarium of reflective and creative practice nourishes these participants in their ongoing development as adults. Indeed, their accounts richly describe how knowledge, motivation, context, and habits interact; these are four problems that Hidalgo says plague philosophical reasoning detached from active, sustained practice (2021, p. 258).

The richness of participants’ experiences as Stoics over time is suggestive of Brian R. Little’s (2017) work on core personal projects. Little’s research uses a social ecological model where the unit of analysis is personal projects. Little claimed:

The greatest value in thinking of personality as ‘doing projects’ rather than ‘having traits’ is in the three powerful words: *potential for change*. We can consciously choose and adapt our projects in ways that we cannot change our traits. (2017, p. 43)

PPA engages with the meaningfulness of people’s pursuits and their deliberateness (Cervone & Little, 2019; Little, 2020). Experienced death contemplators in the current study spoke of their Stoic practices as core personal projects. They described vividly their open-ended creative responses to the daily prompts, which varied across participants. Cordelia took daily meditations with her to the lake, where she made videos for her personal Facebook page. Aurion has become an archivist of Stoic texts in translation. Debby briefed her young son in the characters she wanted him to illustrate in her Stoic copywork. In speaking of their experiences returning to *28 Days*, these participants gave us a window into their lives in the round.

Furthermore, the meanings these experienced Stoics have found enhancing their Stoic practices through daily death contemplation in *28 Days* is consistent with Hadot’s conception of PWL. Hadot outlined a “triple form” of effort: attempting to be objective, to serve humankind, and to recognize our situation as finite parts in an ongoing universe (1995, p. 212). This triple form appears in the Stoics’ accounts. Attaining an objective perspective in life situations, connecting to and serving their communities, and experiencing themselves as finite, feeling, creative beings in a vast cosmos are aspects of a core personal project “being Stoic” in which Aurion, Cordelia, and Debby persist.

Limitations

The present study was limited by its scale: three participants self-selecting to return to *28 Days* subsequently agreed to enroll in the study. The interview timing was within weeks of the conclusion of the November 2021 cohort, which was good from the point of view of reducing recall bias but means that only a snapshot of participant experiences was captured. Furthermore, the research design did not provide for second interview encounters nor informed consent to collect and excerpt the writing samples participants spontaneously offered. Starting with Gough and Madill’s question, “What’s it like to be a research participant?” could lead to different research designs that offer participants opportunities to participate more extensively (2012, p. 381). “Bolder designs” (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 52–53) might give rise to richer pictures of ongoing Stoic practice.

Implications/Future Directions

This work shows that phenomenological research sheds light on people’s experiences by exploring “unanticipated and unexpected findings” in depth rather than remaining limited to “researcher-led assumptions” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 70) and psychometric pre/post within-subject measures as in

the ODA pilot phase report (Menzies et al., 2023). We encourage more phenomenological work in contemplative psychology, which is an interdisciplinary sub-field (Van Gordon et al., 2022).

Comparing findings with a prior study (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2023), the present study demonstrates that returners in the very same cohort had a different experience to newcomers. The difference suggests phenomenological research should be ongoing. It can capture variance in the experience of people at different stages in their involvement in a program like *28 Days* as well as observing individuals themselves changing.

The impact of Stoic practice on character formation, personality development, wellbeing from a psychological perspective, and how Stoic practice relates to mental health is a young field. Elsewhere, we have posited that a process-centered approach to modify and develop biopsychosocial processes may benefit from accessible, open programs like *28 Days* (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2023). We have also described in practical terms how Stoic writing, for example, could lend itself to social prescription (Hammer & Van Gordon, 2024b). Furthermore, Stoicism as a contributing force in mental illness prevention is under-theorized. If, as has been postulated, death fear contributes to the “revolving door” phenomenon which sees clients returning for subsequent treatment for a new disorder or condition after successfully completing treatment for another prior condition (Iverach et al., 2014), then perhaps adopting Stoic PWL will prevent or mitigate mental conditions and attendant suffering.

This study illuminates the relevance of Hadot’s PWL paradigm for people who are already living as Stoics dedicating time to daily death contemplation. The PWL paradigm contrasts with historian Michel Foucault’s conception of technologies of self (Foucault, 1988, 2005). Assessing both frameworks against the lived experience of people beginning or extending their Stoic practices will assist clinical, contemplative, existential, and individual differences psychologists in understanding the inner processes and outward impacts of Stoicism on how people live.

Note 1

The Enneagram framework characterizes nine types in terms of basic desire, basic fear, and predictable behavior pattern. Daniels et al. described the framework as “a roadmap towards personal development throughout the lifespan” (2018, p. 232) consistent with Loevinger’s (1976) ego development theory. As a personality theory, Enneagram appealed to 20th century psychiatrists in the United States trained in psychoanalysis, and it has now spread in popular culture and across applied psychology (Alexander & Schnipke, 2020; Daniels et al., 2018).

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Availability of data and material

Data will be made available upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Author's contributions

1st: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – original draft. 2nd: Supervision; Validation; Writing – review & editing.

Ethics Approval

The University of Derby College of Health, Psychology and Social Care Research Ethics Committee provided ethical approval on 4 November 2021. Approval of Application ETH2122-1095 was in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics April 2021.

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