

## THE STOIC

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In the practice of psychotherapy, marital counseling, or in various kinds of therapeutic groups, a practitioner is sometimes confronted with a client who manifests very few "symptoms" and insists that "everything's all right with me."

This person may have come into contact with the therapist as a partner in a troubled marriage, in which the other partner is feeling almost all the pain and discomfort of the conflict. Or, the client may have joined a group for assistance with his or her children, or his or her work. The therapist may become puzzled by an inability to reach the client and feel impatient with the task of attempting to help a person who proclaims that he or she really needs no help.

Such a person may be a stoic, defined in Webster's Dictionary as one who is "not affected by passion or feeling and manifests indifference to pleasure or pain." The original Stoics were members of a school of philosophy founded by Zeno about 308 B.C. They were pantheists who taught that the world reveals itself as the embodiment of a divine mind. Since the world is, in that view, the work of divine wisdom governed by divine law, it is man's duty to conform freely to whatever destiny may be his. The wise man should thus be free from passion, unsubdued by joy or grief, willingly submissive to natural law.

To classify this client as passive, or as compulsive, is not helpful in aiding the therapist to reach his or her need.

Consider, then, the possibility that the client is unknowingly a follower of the original Stoics. He maintains an attitude of calm resignation to whatever life offers, minimizing what others see as significant.

This is the person who avoids feelings, saying:  
"If only I don't get angry, or show joy, love, or fear,  
I will have a place of significance in the world."

He will:

Act stoic when others are moved,  
Be indifferent to others' pain,  
Be casual about his own pain or discomfort,  
Minimize his own joy,  
Minimize his own fear,  
Maximize his own "cool",  
Be very cautious lest he get trapped in a situation which  
might stir his feeling,

Hesitate before any interaction with another person,  
Avoid provocative encounters,  
Speak in an even tone,  
Listen selectively for the expected sounds,  
Undertake new tasks only after careful deliberation,  
Enjoy routine activities more than unexpected spontaneities,  
Avoid new experiences, preferring the "tried and true",  
Take pride in his "strength of character",  
Feel humiliated when he does not control the expression  
of his feelings,  
Feel superior to persons whose emotions show.

He will also:

Act bewildered if his wife, child, or other dear one  
expects him to be demonstrative,  
Have difficulty showing tenderness,  
Be a poor risk for intimacy,  
Explain any show of feeling with an intellectual reason,  
Narrow his associates to those who "understand" him and  
admire his "strength".

He will not:

Rock the boat,  
Make waves,  
Seek excitement,  
Assert himself.

He is steady, reliable, dependable, but constricted in the fulfillment of the enjoyment of life. In this culture, the Stoic is much more likely to be male than female. He has been brought up to believe that real men don't cry, for instance. He is more likely to have been ignored or mistreated than to have been pampered.

A female with these characteristics may sometimes weep, but she will avoid discovering or disclosing why she weeps. The male is more likely in similar circumstances to explode in righteous indignation.

If a client fits a majority of the foregoing measurements, he needs to discover that his world will not fall apart if he discovers his feelings and that he can lose his constriction and isolation only if he risks showing those feelings in himself and also shows concern, care, and interest in others.