

To Be Virtuous Is to Be Temperate

Temperance is all about putting the virtues into practice. We can use the 3 A's to help us move from knowing to doing.

- **Awareness:** Gain insight into strengths and shortcomings.
- **Attention:** Focus on one virtue and leverage strengths.
- **Action:** Virtue is to act.

Awareness: Calming Our Brain

One aspect of awareness is the ability to remain calm under pressure. It's easier said than done. After all, the architecture of our brain is built on emotions. We feel first and think second, which means we cannot easily control our emotions under all circumstances. To be resilient and tenacious, we have to develop executive functions such as self-regulation and flexibility.

When threats, either real or perceived, are triggered, the amygdala can shut down the thinking brain. When the brain is focusing on the threat, it's difficult to take in new information. After the amygdala is activated, it takes about twenty minutes for the thinking part of the brain to kick in.

One simple technique to reset the brain is to pause and plan. This means that when adrenaline starts to flow, you take deep breaths for 60 seconds. Sit up straight in your chair, close your eyes, and rest your hands in your lap. As you calm your brain, you can think straighter, make better, more rational decisions, and act with more self-control.

“Calm Is Contagious”

In a chaotic environment, the role of the leader is to lower anxiety. “Calm is contagious” is something you have to train for. Under pressure, people default to their training.

Like the Navy SEALs, NASA trains its astronauts so that what is learned becomes a default habit. Even the bravest of astronauts



becomes terrorized when completing a spacewalk. Astronauts report that a spacewalk gives the sensation of experiencing a crushing free fall tumbling back to Earth. Training does not eliminate this fear, but it can teach astronauts to cope. Habitual change is achieved by practicing until the trainees no longer need to think about the new habit. Under pressure, they will remain calm and default to the standard of their training.

Attention: Life-Work Balance

Attention is the second of the 3As of temperance. Attention means focusing on what is important—the virtues—and leveraging strengths to become better.

Mahatma Gandhi reportedly said, “Work is a means of living, not life itself.” And yet in the globalized economy of today, when businesses run 24/7, it is difficult to have a satisfying career while also making time for family and friends.

No matter how rich or poor you are, time is the one thing that remains constant. Our use of time calls into question what exactly we are living for. Society so often uses the phrase “work-life balance,” but we prefer “life-work balance.” First we need a life; then we work. Temperance is the struggle to make the right decisions to balance the finite resource that is our time.

Knowledge alone will not help us lead a balanced life, because insight doesn’t always lead to action. So we must pay attention. We must focus on what is important and attend to it.

Screen Time Versus Face-to-Face Time

Technology has made physical presence far less important in the workplace. Work can be conducted from home. Even doctors can see patients remotely with the expansion of telemedicine.

As much as technology blesses our lives, it can also be a curse. When everyone in a meeting is glued to a screen, opportunities to connect are lost. Meetings are less efficient as people juggle multiple tasks at once, trying to get more done in less and less time.

According to Clifford Nass, psychology professor at Stanford University, nonstop multitasking actually wastes more time than it saves. Multitaskers experience a 40 percent drop in productivity, take 50 percent longer to complete a single task, and have a 50 percent higher error rate.¹



To defend against negative technology habits, a team can follow this pro-people hierarchy to create a balance—temperance—so that we might control technology rather than technology controlling us. When it comes to resolving conflict or issues that are complex, technology is the wrong tool for the task at hand. Instead, consider this hierarchy:

1. Whenever possible, talk face to face.
2. If face to face isn’t possible, Skype. If Skype isn’t possible, talk by phone.
3. When a phone call isn’t possible, text requesting time to talk face to face. A limited number of characters forces you straight to the point.

Some organizations ban emails on the weekends. To get the best out of technology, we have to practice temperance. Relationships are improved when we develop a habit to talk or phone first, and text and email last.

Upside of Stress

Although stress is often seen as a bad thing, it can actually make us smarter, stronger, and more successful. Stress tells us to pay attention to something we care about deeply and nudges us to bring our A game.²

In a 1998 study, 30,000 adults were asked about their stress levels, as well as whether they believed stress was harmful. Eight years later, in 2006, researchers followed up with participants and found that high levels of stress increased the risk of dying by 43 percent. But interestingly, those who believed stress was not harmful had lower death rates than those who reported high stress.

Other studies reveal a strong relationship between stress and social interactions. Exposure to chronic social stress for an extended period of time makes us more likely to catch a cold. But when we participate in supportive social networks, we enhance our immune systems.

Even good relationships are occasionally stressful. Raising a child comes with loads of stress, along with times of pure bliss. The pressure to make payroll weighs heavily on entrepreneurs, and yet, they also find deep fulfillment in running their own business. Doing something meaningful requires sacrifice.

When we view stress as harmful, we believe that it depletes health, debilitates performance, inhibits learning, and should ultimately be avoided. However, when we believe that stress can make us stronger, we realize that stress enhances performance, improves health, facilitates learning, and is ultimately beneficial.

Learning to view stress as a positive force helps us thrive in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world. We learn to accept stressful events as part of life. Sometimes we can remove the source of stress, and sometimes we have to change how we cope.

The goal, then, is to learn to fear stress less and respond to stress better, engaging in the virtue of temperance. People who grow from stress learn to stand up for themselves and to seek support. As they practice temperance, they balance their lives, make better habits, and demonstrate self-control.

Action: Making New Habits

The last of the 3As is action. After all, it is not a virtue until we act. We can practice temperance by making a concentrated effort to create new habits. We have to practice deliberately, devoting our full concentration and effort toward our goals. Learning to change our habits isn't easy, though. Habitual change takes time and effort.

To practice temperance, start with a compelling purpose governed by intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation. Next, seek feedback from a trusted source and reflect often. As you refine your habits, you can continually improve and grow closer to becoming the person of character you are striving to be.

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1. NPR, "The Myth of Multitasking," Talk of the Nation, May 10, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/05/10/182861382/the-myth-of-multitasking>
 2. Keller, A., Litzelman, K., Wisk, L., Maddox, T., Cheng, E.R., Cresswell, P.D., and Witt, W.P. "Does the Perception that Stress Affects Health Matter? The Association with Health and Mortality," *Health Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 5, December 26, 2011, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0026743>