

The Modern Marine and the Future of Stoicism

Going beyond the classics

by Capt Garrett W. Adcock

Young people experience challenges that are unknown to previous generations. With the rise of social media, people are more connected today than at any point in history, but at the same time, young people are experiencing sharply increased levels of anxiety and loneliness.¹ While the exact cause is unknown, social media exposure and the COVID-19 pandemic could be significant contributors.² Our young Marines are not immune to this trend. The COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected their formative socialization years; nearly all have a social media presence, and most likely spend hours per day on the internet.³ As Marine leaders, we have the obligation to connect with, develop, and lead the next generation—a task we can only accomplish if we understand the struggles of this generation's young Marines. This task is especially daunting because of a widening gap in experience; the new generation of Marines is more different from us than we were from our predecessors.

We must give our Marines a framework to simplify the complex world in which they live. Historically, Marine leaders used stoic teaching to help their Marines adjust to the profession of arms, but stoicism alone is no longer adequate to address the complexity of the modern world. Incorporating Alfred Adler's psychological principles into our development curriculum will enable us to meet our obligations to our young Marines. Alfred Adler is a lesser-known contemporary of Freud and Jung whose ideas have been largely overlooked for many years. Despite

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Adler's theories failing to gain traction in popular culture, they can enable our Marines in three ways: to foster small-unit cohesion while strengthening individual autonomy for the group's benefit, to develop personal competence, and to break from past trauma.

Applying Adlerian theories strengthens small-unit cohesion by developing a sense of security and belonging within the unit. Adler theorized that every person seeks a "community feeling."⁴ This means that everyone wants a "place of refuge" where they experience a "sense of belonging."⁵ To achieve this feeling, one must give up his or her individuality by conceding that "the 'I' does not rule the center of the world. ... [I]t is never more than a member of the community and a part of the whole."⁶ Only by investing in the unit and humbling oneself through service to the larger group does one derive fulfillment and a sense of belonging. Put another way, the individual feeds the community, which, in turn, sustains the individual—a description of the ideal small unit.

According to Adler, interpersonal relationships are a key component of community health. He acknowledged the complexity of social relationships

within units while emphasizing the need for personal autonomy and control. Adler understood that personality differences degrade unit effectiveness and cohesion by creating conflict within the unit. As one Adlerian scholar stated, "if one were alone in the universe and all other people were gone, all manner of problems would disappear."⁷ To simplify complex community interactions, avoid personality conflicts, and promote synergy, Adler divided the world into three primary subcomponents: occupation, friendship, and love. Within each subcomponent, each individual is only accountable for completing their own tasks without infringing on the tasks of others. Using this model, our Marines can break down any given situation into the appropriate subcomponents to identify and complete their respective tasks. This gives our Marines a simple framework to distill complex situations into simple, actionable steps. More importantly, this framework allows our Marines to determine who is accountable for each task. This clear delineation reduces the cognitive burden associated with unclear responsibility, allows Marines to exert control where appropriate, accept responsibility for

their own actions, and respect each other's boundaries.⁸ In this way, Adler's framework for community health directly improves unit cohesion.

While Adler emphasized the role of community involvement, he also acknowledged the importance of individual growth. According to Adler, the individual is driven by feelings of inferiority and becomes more competent by productively harnessing those feelings. The inferiority that Adler discussed was not externally imposed—through social media or fitness test scores—but internally imposed. Adler cautions us not to compare ourselves with others, but to compare ourselves to our ideal self. For instance, he suggested that rather than climbing a ladder in competition with others, individuals move on a horizontal plane with others, advancing in the same direction.

This idea of individuals moving in the same direction is an important concept for our Marines to understand. It emphasizes the community discussed earlier while reinforcing unit cohesion, providing our Marines with an organic support network of "comrades" instead of competitors. No longer in competition, our Marines are free to internally motivate themselves to accomplish more. According to Adler, people must believe that "I have the ability," and "people are my comrades," to reach their full potential.⁹ If our Marines start striving to overcome their deficiencies, then the unit will only become stronger as it works together to maximize each member's individual potential.

Finally, Adler teaches the idea of "teleology," which is defined as, "(from Greek telos, 'end,' and logos, 'reason'), explanation by reference to some purpose, end, goal, or function."¹⁰ Adlerian psychology uses the principle of teleology to look forward, declining to define an individual by past trauma and explaining the past through the lens of the future goal. This is in stark contrast to Freudian psychology, where trauma binds an individual to a predetermined path. Instead, under Adler's views, the past does not pre-determine a destination. It fuels the path forward.

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This idea is incredibly valuable for our Marines. Our Marines come from every walk of life with unique experiences, habits, and backgrounds that affect their behavior. This can cause significant friction within a unit if someone is unwilling, or believes that he is unable, to change. By utilizing Adler's teaching regarding teleology, Marines are empowered to write their own story moving forward, and they are not burdened by their past or upbringing. They are free to forge their own path, fully integrate into their unit, and change whenever they feel it necessary. This freedom gives our Marines the flexibility to adapt, grow, and self-actualize, and gives them the autonomy to take complete control and responsibility of their lives.

Given the ready application of Adler's principles to our Marines, it begs the question, why have these principles not yet been incorporated into development curricula? As mentioned above, many leaders utilize stoicism to develop young Marines, but stoicism alone is no longer enough to develop this generation of Marines.¹¹ Many of Adler's theories complement Stoicism and were developed from ancient Greek thinking. Accordingly, Adler's ideas are easily incorporated into any stoic-based mentorship or leadership curricula currently in use.

Stoicism is a good model for junior Marines because it teaches basic virtues and resiliency, but, like many good things, it can be romanticized, perverted, and misapplied with disastrous effect. Our Marines are not learning stoicism from the greats like Marcus Aurelius or ADM Stockdale. Instead, they are learning from the self-professed stoic teachers on the internet and social media. Stoicism requires a mature and deep appreciation of the philosophy's nuance. Unsophisticated teachers and impressionable students tend to believe that the ideal stoic is

devoid of all emotion. This inaccurate portrayal is typified by an ultra-macho, larger-than-life, meditating, non-sleeping, non-feeling, single-digit-body-fat automaton plastered across our Marines' social media feed. Immature leaders in the fleet can reinforce the more volatile aspects of stoicism by failing to acknowledge the compassion required to be an effective leader. The overall effect is that Marines can lose their sense of empathy for others and adopt a position of perceived moral superiority, ultimately degrading the integrity of the small unit.

My position on this point comes from personal experience. I freely admit that I am creating a strawman, and my intent is not to label all stoics as emotionless sociopaths: I know this is not true. I have inadvertently been the unsophisticated teacher, and I have seen stoic teaching go awry when I failed to adequately describe the nuance of the philosophy. One of my dear friend's children is contemplating joining the military. While discussing his future with him, I mentioned that military members must take their obligation seriously and keep a level head in the face of chaos and uncertainty—much in line with Stoic teaching. A few days later, my friend reported back that her child had stopped laughing and smiling, believing that was the best way to follow my advice. He heard my advice as a prohibition on displaying emotion. This encapsulates the difficulty of capturing the nuances associated with stoicism, and it has widely applicable warnings about the dangers of stoic philosophy being miscommunicated and misunderstood. To negate the possibility of stoic teaching being misconstrued and to achieve well-adjusted and balanced Marines, we should supplement our stoic teaching with Adler's principles discussed above.

Overall, these ideas can seem naive, idealistic, and soft. However, we

must acknowledge that our Marines are substantially different from past generations—not less capable or lethal, but undeniably different. With lifelong unfettered access to the world via the internet, and the COVID-19 pandemic having fundamentally affected their social development, our Marines are constantly exposed to an overwhelming amount of data, and it is having significant effects on their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Accordingly, we must adjust our approach to leading our Marines and empower them with a mental framework that allows them to succeed. Stoicism has provided a solid foundation for our Marines over the past few decades, but we must continue to add tools to our leadership toolbox and adapt to a changing world.

Notes

1. U.S. Surgeon General, *Protecting Youth Mental Health* (Washington, DC: 2021), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.
2. Staff, “The Teen Mental Health Crisis: How To Help Your Child,” *Cleveland Clinic*, May 24, 2024, <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/teen-mental-health-crisis>
3. Tori DeAngelis, “Teens Are Spending Nearly 5 Hours Daily on Social Media. Here Are the Mental Health Outcomes,” *Monitor on Psychology* 55 No. 3 (2024).
4. Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga, *The Courage to be Disliked* (New York: Atria Books, 2013).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Loren Grey, *Alfred Adler, The Forgotten*

Prophet: A Vision for the 21st Century (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

9. *The Courage to be Disliked*.

10. Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. “teleology,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/teleology>.

11. E.g., General Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Writing Contest winner in 2022: “Warrior Philosophy: The Case for Stoic Leadership,” by Maj Swift.



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