Expanded Guide: When Your Mind Jumps to Conclusions

On Stoic Living Discussion Series · Guide 1 of 12 · January

For facilitators. Read before the meeting, after the Meeting Primer and the core reading (about 15 minutes).

The Meeting Primer covers the readings and key terms, and the meeting guide covers the flow and timing. This guide supports the discussion and the application that tests its understanding. It explains what each part is for, what to listen for, and what to do when the conversation goes somewhere unexpected.

What the discussion and application are for

January trains one skill: noticing a conclusion as a conclusion, and giving it no more confidence than its grounds support. The discussion asks why a conclusion feels known, what belongs to our judgment, and what grounds justify confidence. The application then tests this understanding by comparing interpretations and reconsidering a claim when evidence changes. A newcomer has the same facts as everyone else.

Keep two points in view throughout. They come up in almost every meeting on this topic.

- **Accuracy, not comfort.** A reassuring explanation ("they were probably busy") needs evidence just as much as a troubling one. The meeting does not teach positive thinking.
- **Withholding assent is not withholding action.** Leaving the colleague's motive unsettled doesn't mean doing nothing. You may not know why they haven't replied, but you know you need an answer by tomorrow. Separate *What do I know?* from *What should I do, given what I know?*

Members following *On Stoic Living* will have spent four weeks on this: the Fundamental Rule (Week 1), the Stoic Pause (Week 2), Bracketing (Week 3), and Examine Your Impressions (Week 4). The email case comes from Week 4, so some may recognize it. That helps: they can say what they noticed during the month while newcomers meet the case fresh.

Leading it Socratically

This topic suits a Socratic meeting because the practice itself is a form of questioning. Your job is to model the move, not to explain it.

- **Ask for reasons, not agreement.** When someone offers a conclusion, ask what supports it. Ask the same of a reassuring one. The symmetry is the lesson.

- **Restate before you test.** “So you’re saying the silence means they’ve seen it?” lets the speaker correct you and slows the room down.
- **Use the case as common ground.** Personal examples are welcome, but the email case lets everyone test a judgment without exposing their own. Return to it whenever the conversation drifts.
- **Invite disagreement.** “Who reads this differently?” is more useful than “Does everyone agree?”
- **Let uncertainty stand.** If the group ends a question unsure, that is often the right result. “We don’t know yet” is a judgment this month teaches, not a failure of the discussion.

0–10 minutes — Open and encounter the case

Welcome everyone, explain the discussion agreements, and read the shared case aloud:

> You emailed a colleague this morning. You need an answer by tomorrow. It’s late afternoon, and there’s no reply. You think, **“They’re deliberately ignoring me.”**

Ask the opening question printed in the meeting guide. Hear two or three interpretations without judging them against the practice steps. Carry the differences directly into question 1. Personal experience is welcome; the case supplies common ground and nobody needs to report completed weekly practice.

10–55 minutes — Discussion: five questions

Each question has a purpose, two follow-ups (the meeting guide prints the first), and something to listen for.

1. Why can a first impression feel like something you already know? *Purpose:* name the problem. Impressions arrive looking like facts.

- Which came first: the observation, the feeling, or the explanation?
- If it felt just as convincing tomorrow, what would that tell you about its truth?

Listen for the difference between feeling certain and having grounds. If someone says the feeling *is* the evidence, ask what else could produce the same feeling.

2. What belongs to your judgment here, and what depends on someone else? *Purpose:* apply the Fundamental Rule to the case.

- How does needing an answer differ from knowing why none has arrived?
- Which claim can you examine yourself, and whose choice is the reply?

Listen for "control" used loosely. You can influence whether a colleague replies, but the reply is theirs. The judgment about their silence is yours. Things not up to us can still deserve care and effort.

3. What would make deliberate avoidance more likely than ordinary delay?

Introduce the reading here, when the group needs a way to examine grounds: Epictetus compares an impression's admission with a watchman checking credentials. Read *Discourses* 3.12.13–17 aloud. Return to question 3: what could count as grounds in this case? Test a reassuring explanation as carefully as an accusing one. The reading supports the inquiry; it does not establish whether this colleague saw the message or what they intended. *Purpose:* practice asking what evidence would actually decide the question.

- If a kind explanation came to mind first, what evidence would you ask of it?
- What would show they saw the message? What more would tell you why they waited?

Listen for a list of real evidence: a read receipt, a pattern of missed replies, other messages answered. The aim is to see how much more it would take to know a motive.

4. How much certainty does the evidence support? What can you leave open? *Purpose:* the Week 4 test, applied directly.

- What one piece of new information would change your confidence the most?
- Which part of the explanation could you accept provisionally, and on what grounds?

Listen for answers that are neither "certain" nor "no idea." A firm conclusion, a tentative one, and an unsettled one can each be reasonable.

5. If your first judgment still stands, what did testing it accomplish? *Purpose:* make clear that examination isn't a way to prove ourselves wrong.

- How would you tell a sound first judgment from a lucky guess?
- What reason could you give someone who started with a different impression?

Listen for the idea that a tested judgment is held *for reasons*, which makes it easier to act on and easier to revise if new evidence arrives.

Going deeper, for a room that is ready: what could justify a firm judgment about a *pattern* of missed replies while leaving the motive for any one delay uncertain? This helps experienced members see that examining impressions is not the same as refusing to conclude anything.

55–80 minutes — Application: test a judgment

Return to the email case. Ask what the discussion has changed in the group's initial interpretations. Compare "They are deliberately ignoring me" with "They have not had time to

reply." Both contain claims beyond the observed silence. Use the three steps once to test one account. Keep sample answers in reserve until participants have given their own reasons.

1. Pause. Your judgment is yours to examine. Have someone name the claim: "I have the impression that they are deliberately ignoring me." Ask what accepting it would commit you to believing. Feeling convincing is part of what needs examination.

2. Bracket. What do I know? What am I adding? Hear the distinction aloud: the email was sent, a reply has not arrived, and the answer is needed tomorrow. Receiving it, reading it, and deliberately postponing a reply are further claims. A busy day is a possibility too; it belongs among the interpretations until supported.

3. Weigh. How much certainty do those grounds justify? Invite two accounts of what can now reasonably be accepted or left open. Compare the reasons rather than voting for the most comforting answer.

> **Sample response:** "The reply has not arrived. Deliberate avoidance and a busy day are possible, but I do not yet have grounds to settle the motive."

The reveal (if time allows). Your colleague acknowledged the email this morning and promised a reply by noon. It is now late afternoon. Ask what this strengthens and what it leaves open. Have someone state the revised judgment, then invite an objection.

> **Sample response:** "They received the message and missed the time they named. That gives me stronger grounds for those claims. It does not by itself establish their motive."

A reasonable follow-up can be mentioned, but do not make composing it the application's test. The change in judgment and its grounds are January's work. End by asking what the new evidence changed about confidence, including any uncertainty that properly remained.

80–90 minutes — Close

Ask what became clearer or what remains unsettled. Invite a reason for a changed view and allow disagreement to remain. End with the single take-home invitation in the guide, then briefly introduce next month's theme. The steps have already appeared in application; do not repeat them as an assignment.

Misunderstandings to watch for

IF YOU HEAR…	THE MISUNDERSTANDING	TRY
"So I should assume the best."	The practice swaps a gloomy story for a cheerful one.	"What supports that? Could the facts fit more than one explanation?"

IF YOU HEAR...	THE MISUNDERSTANDING	TRY
“So I can’t do anything until I know why.”	Withholding assent means withholding action.	“What does the deadline give you reason to do while the motive is open?”
“So I’m not supposed to feel annoyed.”	The practice suppresses feelings.	Distinguish an involuntary first movement from a judgment that may already be involved. Ask which claim is being accepted; a quick reaction alone does not settle this.
“You can never really know anything.”	All interpretations are equally good.	“Which explanation has better grounds? What would change your mind?”
“But sometimes people really are ignoring you.”	Examination assumes the judgment is wrong.	Agree. A test can confirm a judgment. The goal is confidence that matches the evidence.
“I only noticed afterward.”	The practice failed.	It counts. Ask what they knew at the time and what still deserves that confidence.
“This is just positive thinking.”	The practice is a mood technique.	It aims at accuracy, not comfort. A comforting story needs grounds too.

Facilitating the people in the room

A few familiar types show up on this topic. Each brings something the meeting needs, if you can steer it.

WHO	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TRY
The mind reader	Confident about others’ motives: “I know exactly why they did that.”	Thank them for a clear example, then bracket it with the group: “What did we see, and what are we adding?”
The optimist	Hurries to the kind explanation and treats the question as settled.	Ask what you’d ask of a gloomy story: “What supports that?”
The skeptic	Concludes that nothing can be known, so nothing can be done.	Separate the two questions: what we know, and what we should do given what we know.
The expert	Knows the Greek terms and starts to lecture.	Welcome it briefly, then widen it: “How would you say that to someone who’s new today?”
The problem solver	Wants to fix the colleague situation.	“Good idea. Before we decide what to do, which judgment are we testing?”
The talker	Fills every silence.	“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet.” A quick go-around helps.

WHO	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TRY
The quiet one	Listening closely but not speaking.	Offer a low-stakes entry: “Which claim would you like us to examine?” Passing is always fine.
The newcomer	Unsure of the vocabulary.	Define *impression* and *assent* in a sentence each as they come up. The case needs no background.

When an example is painful. Jumping to conclusions often involves people we care about. If someone shares a real and painful example, thank them, and don’t press for details or test their judgment in front of the group. Offer a pause, return to the email case, or move on. The group is for philosophy, not therapy; if someone seems to be struggling, check in with them privately afterward.

Questions you may be asked

“Is the Stoic Pause actually ancient?” The name is modern. The move is Epictetus’s: he describes asking an impression to wait while he examines it (*Discourses* 2.18.24). A slow breath is a modern aid.

“Isn’t this just cognitive behavioral therapy?” They’re related. Founders of modern cognitive therapy credited Epictetus’s point that we’re disturbed by our judgments about things. The aims differ: the Stoics weren’t treating a disorder but trying to live wisely, and they cared whether a judgment was true, not only whether it was helpful.

“Does Stoicism say emotions are bad?” Not as people usually mean it. The first jolt isn’t up to us and isn’t a fault. The Stoics criticized emotions built on mistaken judgments, such as anger that follows from “they’re ignoring me” when the evidence doesn’t support it. This month examines that judgment.

“What if my first impression was right?” Then the test confirms it, and you hold it for good reasons rather than by luck. That’s question 5.

“Isn’t ‘up to us’ just the dichotomy of control?” Close, but narrower. “Control” suggests anything we can influence. Epictetus’s line runs around our own judgments, desires, and intentions.

Adapting the practice and discussion

- **Mostly newcomers.** Define impression and assent as needed. Stay with the shared facts, and use questions 1, 2, and 4 as anchors; reserve time to test the judgment together.

- **Mostly experienced members.** Shorten the case, ask what people noticed during the month, and leave room for the going-deeper question.
- **Online.** Invite spoken comparisons of the known facts and added claims. Offer turns without requiring them, and allow passing.
- **A large group.** Run the three steps in pairs or threes for ten minutes, then hear one answer from each group.
- **Short on time.** Shorten follow-ups or omit the reveal. Preserve a brief reading within the inquiry and time to compare the grounds for a judgment.

After the meeting, send a short recap through your group's usual channel with one or two insights or open questions and the single take-home invitation. Experiences and fresh questions are welcome at the next meeting.

Source lessons: On Stoic Living, Weeks 1–4.