Expanded Guide: What's in My Control?

The Stoic Fellowship Meeting Guide · Everyday Problems

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

The Meeting Primer introduces the reading and key terms, and the meeting guide gives the sequence and timing. This guide explains what each part of the meeting is for and what to listen for.

What this meeting is for

This session picks up the second topic of *What Is Stoicism?*: what's up to us. Epictetus's distinction is the foundation of the year. *Anger*, *Worry About the Future*, and *Difficult People* each come back to it.

A participant should leave able to take one real worry apart, divide its pieces into what is theirs and what isn't, and name the judgment or action that belongs to them. Two points matter most:

- **Choice, not influence.** The line doesn't fall between what we can and can't affect. It falls between our own judgments and intentions and everything else, including results.
- **Care, not detachment.** What isn't up to us can still deserve effort. The rule tells us where our effort belongs, not that the rest doesn't matter.

Leading it Socratically

- **Ask how they'd know.** When someone says "that's out of my control," ask how they would tell, and what part still belongs to them.
- **Keep it concrete.** A worry about "work" becomes useful only when it's broken into parts.
- **Name it the Fundamental Rule.** Mention that it's also called the Fundamental Divide; the practice step *Divide* will help members link it with *Enchiridion* 1. If someone says "dichotomy of control," note that many Stoic writers now avoid the phrase because *control* can mislead.
- **Welcome disagreement about the divide.** Is health up to us? Arguing it out is the learning.
- **Avoid metaphysics.** If the room starts debating free will, bring it back to the example: "In this case, what is your judgment?"

The discussion: five questions

Each question has a purpose, two follow-ups, and something to listen for. The meeting guide prints the first follow-up as the probe.

1. Think of that worry. Which parts of it were genuinely up to you?

Purpose: apply the distinction to the worries named during Open.

- What judgment or intention belonged to you?
- How much of the worry was about a result you couldn't decide?

Listen for worries that are mostly about outcomes or other people's opinions. Usually only a small part is ours, and that part is where action lives.

2. Is your health up to you? Your job? What part of each belongs to your choice?

Purpose: test the line on hard cases.

- Where does influence end and choice begin?
- If you exercise and still fall ill, what did you control?

Listen for the difference between influencing and deciding. Our choices affect our health and careers, but the results also depend on genes, luck, and other people. What's fully ours is the choice to act well.

3. If outcomes aren't up to us, why try at all?

Purpose: answer the most common objection.

- What does effort give you that a result can't?
- Think of an archer: what is the archer's job once the arrow leaves the bow?

Listen for the idea that acting well is worth doing for its own sake. Effort is ours; results depend partly on others. That's no reason to stop trying.

4. What changes when you aim at your effort rather than the result?

Purpose: show the practical payoff.

- Could that make you more effective, not less?
- What would preparing for the interview look like if you aimed at your effort?

Listen for less anxiety and better focus. People who use the rule well often act more, because they stop spending energy on what they can't decide.

5. Where could this idea go wrong if it's taken too far?

Purpose: guard against misuse.

- What happens if "not up to me" becomes "not my concern"?
- Could the rule become an excuse for passivity or indifference to others?

Listen for the difference between acceptance and neglect. Other people's suffering isn't up to us, but how we respond to it is. Justice still asks something of us.

Going deeper, for a room that is ready: Epictetus says that if you attend only to what is yours, no one can force or hinder you. Is that freedom, or a retreat from the world? Let both sides speak; Epictetus was enslaved for part of his life, which gives the claim weight.

The practice: mine / not mine

> A job interview is next week. You keep replaying what the interviewers might think of you, whether your experience is enough, and who else has applied.

Use the case, or a volunteer's real worry if one is ready. Reveal one step at a time and take two or three answers at each.

1. Name the parts. What is this worry made of? Take the parts aloud: the panel's opinion, the other candidates, your experience, your preparation, how you present yourself.

> **Sample response:** "What they think of me, who else applied, whether I've done enough, and how I prepare."

2. Divide. Which parts are up to me, and which are not? Expect some disagreement. Experience is a fact now; preparation is a choice. The panel's opinion and the other candidates aren't up to you.

> **Sample response:** "Their opinion and the other candidates aren't mine. How I prepare, and how I conduct myself in the room, are."

3. Act on mine. What belongs to me, and what will I do? Ask for one concrete action.

> **Sample response:** "I'll prepare three examples and practice them aloud. Whatever they decide, I'll have done my part."

The reveal (if time allows). The interview is moved up to tomorrow. Which parts changed sides? What is still yours to do? Less time changes the plan but not the divide: preparation is still yours, and the decision still isn't.

Misunderstandings to watch for

IF YOU HEAR…	THE MISUNDERSTANDING	TRY
"So nothing matters."	What isn't up to us doesn't matter.	"Outcomes can deserve care. What is yours to bring to them?"

IF YOU HEAR...	THE MISUNDERSTANDING	TRY
“It’s out of my control, so it’s not my problem.”	The rule excuses passivity.	“What part of your response is still yours?”
“I just need more control.”	The goal is more influence.	“Even with more influence, would the result be yours to decide?”
“This is learned helplessness.”	The rule means giving up.	The rule puts full responsibility on what is ours.

Facilitating the people in the room

WHO	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TRY
The philosopher	Wants to settle free will first.	“Let’s stay practical: in this example, what is your judgment?”
The fixer	Gives advice about someone’s worry.	“What did you find was yours when you faced something like it?”
The skeptic	Thinks the rule is passive.	“What did the archer do before letting go?”
The quiet one	Listening but not speaking.	Offer an easy entry: “Which part of the case is hardest to place?”

When a worry is serious. If someone names a worry about health, money, or family, acknowledge it and don’t press. Offer the shared case. Preparing for real risks is part of the point; the group is for philosophy, not therapy.

Questions you may be asked

“Isn’t this just the Serenity Prayer?” The ideas are related, and the comparison is a good starting point. Epictetus draws the line more precisely: only our own judgments and intentions are fully ours.

“Is my body really not up to me?” Epictetus lists the body among things not up to us. We can care for it, but illness, injury, and aging can come regardless.

“Do I need to read anything?” No. Newcomers need no preparation. The Meeting Primer is optional.

Adapting the meeting

- **Mostly newcomers.** Use the shared case for the practice, and give question 3 extra time.

- **Mostly experienced members.** Use a volunteer's real worry, and leave room for the going-deeper question.
- **Online.** Put the three steps in the chat and call on people by name.
- **A large group.** Divide the case in pairs or threes, then hear one answer from each group.
- **Short on time.** Skip the reveal or shorten question 4.

Adapted from the Kit's meeting guide, The Fundamental Rule.