The Epictetus Club
Lessons from the Walls
A Cognitive Skills Novel

“Nothing stops a bad future like good thinking.”

Using the Epictetus Club Book in a Court or Correctional Setting

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A free PDF of The Epictetus Club book is available on request.
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Introduction: The Story Behind the Story

*The Epictetus Club: Lessons from the Walls* by Jeff Traylor with Inmate Zeno is a unique 155-page “cognitive skills novel” that is used in correctional facilities, community programs, and university criminal justice classes around the country. The book is a direct descendant of a sixteen-session cognitive skills program developed and led by the book’s author, Jeff Traylor, a former counselor at the Ohio Penitentiary, Marion Correctional Institution, CROSSWAEH Community-Based Correctional Facility and Bridge Community Mental Health Center. That program was a popular and effective course that made a significant impact on the inmates. However, Traylor saw a need for these concepts to reach a larger number of offenders in a more cost-effective way, so in 2004 he struck upon the idea to provide these timeless teachings through the book *The Epictetus Club: Lessons from the Walls*.

The Epictetus Club: Lessons from the Walls

Mr. Traylor, who in addition to counseling had written a series of popular travel books in his home state of Ohio, set out to write a book that would help offenders around the country learn how to change the thinking that had gotten them into trouble. He had used the work of Dr. Albert Ellis and Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) extensively in working with inmates, and wanting to enhance that work, had begun adding quotations from the Greek philosopher Epictetus, a former slave and prisoner, to his group sessions. He discovered to his surprise that Epictetus immediately “clicked” with the inmates – as one young drug dealer said, “Man, that guy is down!” Because of his famous maxim that “people are not upset by things themselves, but by what they tell themselves about those things”, Epictetus is widely considered the father of cognitive therapy, the most effective method of changing criminal thinking and behavior. Traylor knew the book would have to be interesting and entertaining, relevant to the inmates’ lives, easily read, and address the most common thinking errors that land people in jail.

*The Epictetus Club: Lessons from the Walls* is both an entertaining novel and a unique thinking skills teaching tool. Set in the Ohio Penitentiary, the book follows a group of inmates who meet weekly to study the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus, a former slave and prisoner who used adversity to become wiser and more compassionate. The group is led by a lifer named Zeno, a former professional boxer who points out that our greatest opponent is our own thinking. Zeno compares thinking skills to boxing skills, and teaches the men the ABC’s of Inner Boxing and the Ten Rounds to Self-Mastery. The reader sits in on life-changing group sessions where the men discuss finding a sense of purpose, “knocking out” excuses, turning adversity to benefit, converting entitlement to gratitude, identifying consequences of actions and how others are affected, handling provocation, dealing with stress, and many other key life lessons. *The Epictetus Club* is an easily read paperback book divided into short chapters that encourage reading and discussion.
Traylor initially saw the book as a self-study piece that could be used as a reentry resource, as complementary reading in academic and treatment programs in correctional facilities or as part of a court diversion program. More than a dozen correctional facilities in California and Ohio began using the book in this way. However, one inmate who was a library clerk came across the book in his prison library and was so struck by it that he wanted to discuss it with others. He arranged through the institutional librarian to obtain several more copies with the goal of beginning a discussion group, and contacted the author for suggestions. Ironically, after serving more than twenty years in prison, the inmate was granted parole just before the start of the discussion program. The prison librarian then took over the planning and implementation of the group, which became extremely popular at the prison. Inspired by this librarian and inmate, Mr. Traylor created a group discussion guide. With this guide, a wide range of individuals could participate in the program, including non-readers, with librarians, teachers, probation and correctional staff, clergy, mentors, and even carefully selected inmates facilitating the discussion groups.

The book soon moved beyond prison walls when several university professors began using the book in their criminal justice classes, where it received a very enthusiastic response from the students. It became a part of college course curricula at schools in California, Minnesota, Oregon, and Massachusetts. Epictetus Club Certificates, which are granted upon passing the short quiz in the back of the book, have now been awarded to hundreds of inmates, college students, prison wardens and college professors. With its popularity, ease of reading, and low cost to implement, The Epictetus Club and its accompanying discussion guide are a great way to provide affordable programming to inmates and students.

**Using The Epictetus Club in a Court or Correctional Program**

*The Epictetus Club* is designed to serve as a resource throughout an offender’s sentence and to provide maximum flexibility for the court, correctional facility, or reentry program. The book can be easily introduced into your programming in several ways, depending on your unique concerns and programs. No additional training or staffing is required, making this an easy, effective and inexpensive resource for your program.

**Intake/Reception/Admission**

Providing a copy of the book to the inmate upon admission provides a positive mindset for the new arrival and offers a beneficial way to view one’s incarceration. Helping a new arrival develop a positive view not only will serve the inmate well during his time at your facility, but it also makes a statement about your institution – *change is expected and encouraged*. In addition, often there is a significant period of time between the inmate’s arrival and the start of any programming, and the book fills that gap in a positive way.

**Library Program/Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy consists of the selection of reading material that has relevance for a client’s life situation. The idea of bibliotherapy is based on the human inclination to identify with
others through their expressions in literature and art. It can consist solely of reading and self-study, or it can be complemented with discussion. A description of the Epictetus Club library program at California State Prison/Solano is included later in this manual.

**Academic Reading Programs/Book Discussion Groups**

The book is easily read and understood by a variety of students with different learning styles. It incorporates tools such as restatement, acronyms, diagrams and examples relevant to an inmate’s daily life, making the book beneficial to visual learners as well as conceptual learners. The book reinforces many of the concepts taught in correctional treatment programs, creating a synergy between the education department and other institutional programs. A book discussion guide is included in this manual. A digital version of the book can also be used to enhance computer skills along with literacy and thinking skills.

**Cognitive Skills Programs**

With its emphasis on the importance of identifying and challenging self-defeating thoughts, the book complements various counseling programs by introducing the idea of paying attention to one’s thoughts. The most common criminal thinking patterns are addressed in the book and “counterpunches” are offered using the ABC Model of Inner Boxing and the Ten Rounds to Self-Mastery. Among the criminal thinking patterns countered are the lack of a constructive purpose, excuse making and blaming, victim stance, arrogance, closed thinking, entitlement, and poor stress and anger management skills. The book can be used either as a prequel before the start of such programs, as a supplementary text during the course of the program, or as a reward for program completion.

**Twelve-Step Programs/Substance Abuse Treatment Programs**

One of the cornerstones of twelve step programs is the Serenity Prayer, which advises that one should know the difference between what one can control and what one can’t. Epictetus’s famous statement that “some things are up to us and some things are not” is the forerunner of the Serenity Prayer and makes the book a nice complement to these programs.

**Self-Study/Home Detention/Probation/Alternative Sentencing**

A major advantage of the book is that it can be read and reread in the privacy of one’s own cell or dorm, or on home detention. Some inmates are reluctant to openly share in a group setting out of fear of ridicule or retaliation, and the book allows such inmates to learn the material through self-study. A quiz in the back of the book can be used to verify that the book has been read if assigned by a teacher, counselor, or parole officer, and an attractive Epictetus Club Certificate can be awarded for successfully passing the quiz. A Certificate that can be used by the instructor is available at no charge by email request.

**Disciplinary Action/Isolation Cells**

The Epictetus Club can be used as part of the institution’s disciplinary program. “Hole” time can be a turning point for some inmates, and having the book available in a correction cell can be a useful complement to the discipline, or in some cases even an
alternative to time in a correction cell. Additionally, the best security tool that a prison can have is an inmate population that is not easily provoked.

**Lifer’s Program**
More and more inmates are facing life and life without parole, which can lead to futility, frustration and feelings of uselessness. By giving hope through the book, who knows what untapped potential may arise from this group of inmates?

**Staff Development**
The book makes an effective staff development tool by modeling positive and helpful interactions between staff and inmates, and providing a vision that offenders can change with the right tools and support. The chapter on handling provocation can be useful for both inmates and staff as it teaches the reader how to keep from escalating problem situations. The awarding of in-service credits for reading the book and completing the quiz is one way to use the book in the training department.

**Epictetus Self-Mastery Program (ESMP)**
The book serves as complementary reading for the Epictetus Self-Mastery Program, a detailed sixteen-session course in cognitive skill development. A 270-page ring binder including reproducible handouts, worksheets and homework assignments is included for the instructor. Contact us for information about the ESMP.

**Prerelease/Reentry Program**
One of the original purposes for writing the book was to provide a resource that the inmate could take home to help him or her avoid returning to prison. It makes an appropriate graduation gift at the end of a prison term (or welcoming gift from a community reentry program), and by sharing it with family members it provides a common language and a way for them to work together in reintegrating the offender into society.

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**A Sample Epictetus Club Discussion Program**

Greetings Jeff:

I have been meaning to email you for some time. We have multiple book discussion groups going on both Facilities 3 and 4. The guys are signing up in droves. These groups have just blossomed and the feedback from the participants has been fantastic. Who would have thought that this would take off in a big way? They are after all, a captive audience, however they are very receptive. The inmate facilitators tell me that their discussions are more fruitful without librarians or clinicians leading them.

In the broadest of strokes, the way we started at CSP-Solano was to identify several inmates who were interested in the Epictetus Club book, who had solid leadership skills and were very dependable. Most of the credit for the success of our discussion groups must go to the inmate facilitators, who are all lifers--I believe, but will verify--and were
very carefully selected. Some were involved in other inmate self help groups already. I requested permission from our Principal or Supervisor of Correctional Education Programs to place this under the umbrella of the Vaca Valley Adult School rather than have the certificates say CSP-Solano. Approval granted, then the potential facilitators read the book, took the test and were willing to lead groups in their housing units. They posted a sign up sheet in their units and choose the participants. Whenever possible, we try to select inmates who are genuinely interested and not just doing this for the chrono (laudatory report) and certificate. The groups are composed of one facilitator and four to five inmate participants. Each group maintains an ethnic balance, ie: Black, Hispanic, White and Other (Asian or Native American). The groups meet for between 6 to 10 weeks depending upon how quickly they read the material and if we have a lockdown or other unusual occurrence. They meet once a week for about an hour to an hour and a half for discussion in the dayroom in the units. Each facilitator has a copy of your study guide now, but did not have it when we started. Dr. Tyler developed some work sheets for the exercises from the copy of the Epictetus Club book that she is using and has shared with us. At the completion of the groups and exam, each participant and facilitator receives a chrono and a certificate. Copies of all of these are distributed to the inmate, his counselor, the writer and the original goes into the inmate's central file. Their central files are reviewed by the counselors when the inmates go to Classification or transfer or prior to the inmate going to the Board of Prison Hearings. For lifers, going to the Board, these laudatory chronos are very important and much sought after. Each participant also completes an evaluation form so we have feedback on their experience, the facilitator and how we can improve the Epictetus Book Club groups.

The evaluations have been extremely positive. In general, most of the comments have been that the inmates who participated have learned that they can choose to think differently about things that happen to them and how they interact with others. Some wrote that they wanted their entire housing unit to practice the teachings and embrace what they had learned. It is sort of infectious in a way that we never imagined. One housing unit, Building 14, a dorm unit has about five inmate facilitated self help groups going at any given time. Building custody officers have been amazed at the activity level of these groups in Building 14 and tell me that the inmates are programming so well that their jobs have been easier! Now that is amazing.

Best regards,
Helene Kosher
Senior Librarian
California State Prison-Solano
Comments on The Epictetus Club

Comments from Corrections Staff:

“As a psychologist in moderate and maximum security prisons, I have used this book for the last three years with inmates to create a new philosophy for those who would open their minds and "think outside the box." The story is real to these inmates because they can easily identify with the inmate characters in the book. The book also has a rap called "The Epictetus Rap." At least one of the inmates in each of my eight-week groups has been willing to practice the rap and give it as an entertainment piece. Copies of the diagrams of the "ABC's of Mental Boxing" are handed out to the inmates who want them. The story is read to the inmates by those inmates who wish to participate and the leader and discussion follows. The word gets around the prison that this is a good group to attend and the waiting list grows. I recommend it to any group leader who wants to have a positive, Stoic philosophy experience, see how it can work in anyone's life and be entertained.” -Dr. Janet Tyler, California Department of Corrections

“Your book has been a hit with the men I have recommended to read it. They have also been letting others read their copies. It is spreading like a wild fire!! Thank you for all of your past efforts and any that you may currently be involved with, that provide an opportunity to help those who are seen by some to not be worth the trouble.” - Sarah Brooks, M.Ed., Treatment Specialist, Airway Heights Corrections Center, Airway Heights, WA

“I was completely mesmerized by this recipe for inner change. After reading The Epictetus Club, I have concluded that every group member can put this into immediate action. Thank you for opening my mind to a new and less complicated message of hope for those who desire to change.” – Ronald Pryor, Chemical Dependency Counselor

“I use your book as a text for a Correctional Treatment CD group prior to release to an aftercare program. By our conservative calculation - we have passed the 1,500 mark. Over 1,500 of my clients have read the book "The Epictetus Club" and completed the Epictetus Self-Mastery Program. If you are interested in a series of pictures sometime (or would like to visit) the 5 West Unit of The Correctional Treatment Facility is painted with a series of quotes (and of course the "Rounds") from Epictetus. One of my clients even created and painted on the wall our own unique Epictetus Club emblem. My office has a excellent drawing of Epictetus hanging on the wall. Thought you might be interested. – Kevin Rainey, Lucas County Correctional Treatment Facility, Toledo, Ohio

“These groups have just blossomed and the feedback from the participants has been fantastic.” - Helene Kosher, Senior Librarian, California State Prison – Solano
“The response from our patients and from our staff has been awesome. You talk about the deep stuff in your book and it connects! Thank you!!! --Brian Newell, Librarian, Logansport (IN) State Hospital

Comments from Professors:

“For all of my undergraduate and graduate internship students I require a book critique. This is my 40th year teaching, and I've never come across a book that my students praise as much as they do The Epictetus Club. Every student who has completed the book thinks it is one of the best books they have ever read. It carries many lessons that my students think is invaluable.” – Robert Prout, Ph.D., Chairperson, Criminal Justice Dept., St. Cloud State University

“I loved the book. It reminds me so much of my own work in the prisons. I have shared my copy with a female inmate with whom I work. She is trying to start a lifers dorm at a local prison. I am suggesting she call it the Epictetus Dorm!” - Laura E. Bedard, Ph.D., Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida State University

“The Epictetus Club is a great addition to any library and a necessary addition to the library of anyone in the social science field. Thank you for sharing your experience and knowledge.” – Christina Caifano, Criminal Justice Professor, California State University Bakersfield

“I started reading my copy of The Epictetus Club to my class today and there was such an overwhelming response from my students.” – Lee Ayers-Schlosser, Ed.D., Ph.D., Chair, Criminal Justice Dept., Southern Oregon University

“I actually read the book in its entirety the first night. I truly enjoyed it! I would like my students to get an Epictetus Club Certificate for completing the book – I think it would be a nice conversation piece/reward for them. Can you handle that bulk of responses?” – Anthony W. Flores, Ph.D., Professor, Dept. of Criminal Justice, California State University Bakersfield

Comments from Inmates:

“I will take these lessons with me when I go home and in my everyday life with my family and my daughter.”

“I really, truly feel that this class has helped and will be an excellent tool in recovery.”

“I’ve learned a lot about myself and now have the tools I need to change my life. It’s now up to me to use them.”

“This opened up my thinking.”
“I enjoyed this class and it was very helpful to show me where bad decisions and choices lead.”

“Thanks, I really learned a lot, and when I take this to the streets people are going to be really surprised with me.”

“I would have benefited from this class back in high school. It may have detoured me away from correctional facilities.”

“I feel that I can now become a very positive citizen in society.”

“I really believe this class saved my life. God bless you.”

“This is going to help me down life’s road to freedom.”

“This class is not only good for individuals in this correctional facility, but I strongly recommend it for individuals living in everyday society.”

*Comments from College Students:*

“I wasn’t really sure what to expect when I began reading “The Epictetus Club”. What were incarcerated inmates possibly going to teach me? Boy was I wrong!”

“Critiquing the Epictetus Club is not hard at all. I absolutely loved the book. The author gave me new insights to live by. At first, I did not know what the book was going to bring to me, but as I read on, I literally could not put the book down. I read the entire book in two days.”

*The Epictetus Club* by Jeff Traylor is a very important book that every college student across the country should be required to read. It shouldn’t be seen as a book about prisoners for criminal justice students, it should be seen as a way to live one’s life and to learn to work through their problems.

“The Epictetus Club was a very enjoyable read that I would recommend to others as it was very intriguing and quite interesting. It flowed effortlessly and I liked how each chapter was broken up by each week’s club meeting. Each of the 10 rounds to freedom presented valuable points and encouraged provoking thoughts.”

“Since reading this book I have already started applying the ABC model of inner boxing which starts with the attacking thought, by identifying self defeating thoughts. Secondly, block the attacking thought. Third, replace the thought with a productive thought. This model can be used in daily in life. I also like the point made that you probably will not meet a more formidable opponent than yourself.”

“I really enjoyed reading it and I have never read or finished a book within four hours before, in the middle of the night. As I read this book I felt that it was written for me. I
have never been in jail or have even come close to anything remotely like it, but I could relate to every lesson that the club discussed each week. I feel that anyone, anywhere in their life can benefit from reading this book.”

“After reading this book, I believe I have a new outlook on life and how I need to approach things. I have some friends going through some hard times as well, and I am definitely going to recommend this book to them. I am so glad this book was required for us to read.”

“Before reading this book, I had no prior knowledge of Epictetus or his work. As I began to read the book, I found it impossible to put down. I would sneak away every chance I had to read a few more pages. The Epictetus Club was very fascinating to say the least. It contained so much wisdom in so few words, while at the same time revealing a captivating story on the challenges of inmates trying to redeem themselves from inside the walls.”

“The Epictetus Club is one of the best books that I have read in A LONG time. I am not much of a reader, BUT this book caught my attention and kept me hooked the whole time. It teaches a great lesson that a person can use throughout a lifetime: no matter what you are dealt in life make the best of it.”
This discussion guide is designed to help teachers, youth leaders, counselors, ministers, librarians, corrections staff, mentors, literacy tutors, and even carefully selected inmates facilitate an interesting and informative discussion about the book. The guide features several methods to help facilitate the discussion:

**Reading aloud:** By taking turns reading *The Epictetus Club* aloud, the group members share in the experience of the book and each member contributes to the group. It also provides an opportunity for those working on improving their reading skills to practice reading, and for members with more severe reading difficulties to listen to the others while still following along and having an opportunity to learn and discuss the topics. Just because someone may not be able to read does not mean that they cannot offer positive contributions to the group discussions and gain valuable insights into their own behavior.

**Attention/comprehension questions:** These are brief questions requiring a factual answer about the chapter that was just completed. It helps the facilitator determine if everyone is paying attention and understanding the story line.

**Discussions:** These usually are based on excerpts from the text and require more in-depth thinking than the attention questions. It is good practice for developing reasoning skills and applying the concepts to real life.

**Activities:** These range from puzzles to role-playing to positive rapping, and deepen the concepts even further.

The group can range in size from two to an entire classroom, and can be part of a regular class or an extracurricular activity. A general rule of thumb is to allow four to five hours total time (100 seconds per page) for the actual reading portion of the program, not including the discussion and activities. For example, if you meet ten times for 50 minutes each session, you could roughly plan for 30 minutes of reading and 20 minutes of discussion. Be flexible on this, however, as some sessions you might want to devote more or less time to the reading or discussions. Choose any or all of the suggested activities and discussions in this guide, or select other passages from the book to discuss, depending on the needs of your particular group, setting, and time.

**Promoting your Discussion Group:** You will find a reproducible poster at the end of this discussion guide. Just copy it and post to promote the discussion group within your facility.
And Now, Let the Discussion Begin!

**Group Rules for Members**

You might want to lay down some ground rules at the start of the group. Here are some you can share with your group, or you can develop your own: “Respect for each other is the number one rule. Respect each other’s abilities and also each other’s limitations. For example, if someone is uncomfortable reading aloud, the members can offer encouragement and assistance, but also respect their decision to pass if they so choose. Pay attention when others are speaking, and offer your own insights and opinions. Your ideas are valuable and may be helpful to others. You do not have to agree with each idea, but do not ridicule or put someone down because you disagree. Being on time to the group meetings is another way to show respect to the others.”

**Introducing the Book**

The facilitator shares the group rules, passes out the books, and introduces the book by reading the front and back covers and the preface to the group. (Epictetus is pronounced “eh-pic-TEE-tus.”) Providing each member with a personal copy of the book will allow him or her to read and review the material as needed and to highlight personally relevant passages. The book will also serve as a valuable reference for the members long after the group is finished, and for some this might be the first book they have ever owned.

**Epictetus Rap (Optional)**

**Activity:** As a fun and engaging activity, you might want to consider having someone who is an aspiring rapper volunteer to read the “Epictetus Rap” found at the beginning of the book after the dedication page. The rap is an overview of the thinking skills that the group will be learning, and sets a tone that this will not be just a boring old lecture class. You can also suggest having a contest for the best performance of the Epictetus Rap at the final graduation session. As the members practice their performances, they are also memorizing the key concepts of the book.

**Chapter One (p.1-3)**

Have the members of the group take turns reading paragraphs aloud. At the end of the chapter, ask the following questions:

**Attention/comprehension questions:**
1. Who are the two main characters that we meet in this chapter? (Jeff and Zeno)
2. Where does this chapter take place? (Ohio Penitentiary)
3. What is the penitentiary’s nickname? (The Walls)
4. Why is it called that? (Because of the stone wall that surrounds the prison)
Ask the group for any questions or comments about the chapter before moving on to the next one.

Chapter Two (p.4-6)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. Where does Zeno live? (in the Death House)
2. What is the most eerie feature of the room? (the framed photos of the condemned men and women who died in the electric chair)
3. What was Zeno’s crime? (murder)
4. How does he feel about it? (He regrets it every day)

Discussion of p. 5, third paragraph:
“You see a Death House, but I see a hermitage. I have the only private quarters in the penitentiary, and I appreciate my privacy and time to read and study in solitude. I’ve learned that it is our view of things, rather than the things themselves, that upsets us. We can stop and try to see things from another angle, from a point that is more beneficial for us.” What are some ways to view this class? Which of these is the most productive?

Do you have any questions or comments before we move on to the next chapter?

Chapter Three (p.7-10)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What happened to Jeff when he was driving home after work? (Road rage incident)
2. What did Zeno do before coming to prison? (Professional boxer)
3. Zeno said, “Thinking skills and _______ skills are very similar.” (boxing)
4. What is the name of the group of inmates who meet each week with Zeno to improve their thinking skills? (Epictetus Club)

Discussion p. 9, paragraphs 2-5.
Thinking well is not a question of intelligence, but a matter of skill and bravery. What do you think of this? Of these three things – intelligence, skill, and bravery - one is not up to us, but two of them are. Which two are up to us? How do you develop a skill, whether it is playing basketball or playing the piano? How do you build up courage and bravery? Is courage built up when things are easy or when they are hard? We need adversity to make us stronger, just like we need weights to build up our muscles.
Activity: The chapter starts with one of the most powerful things ever said: “People are not upset by things themselves, but by what they tell themselves about those things.” Zeno said Jeff would be a good boxer because of how he handled the road rage incident. Let’s see how good of a boxer we are. Think of a situation where you became upset or angry. Now picture yourself in the same situation, but see if you can become calm or only mildly irritated instead of getting upset and angry. Take a few moments to do this. Could you do it? If so, how did you do it? What did you tell yourself this time that was different than the first time? If you couldn’t do it this time, don’t worry about it – we will be learning more about this as we go through the book.

Are there any questions or comments?

Chapter Four (p.11-13)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. Who was Epictetus? (Ancient Greek philosopher who lived 2,000 years ago)
2. Was he born a prince or a slave? (He was a slave who studied and became free.)
3. What did he teach people? (How to live a good life through good thinking.)
4. Who were some of the people who admired and studied Epictetus? (Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Frederick the Great, Vietnam war fighter pilots)

Do you have any questions or comments?

Chapter Five (p.14-20)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. Zeno told Jeff there was no meeting of the Epictetus Club that night. Why not? (Penitentiary was closing and there was no staff advisor)
2. How did Zeno react to losing the club? (Disappointed but calm and courteous.)
3. Who became the new staff advisor? (Jeff)
4. Where will the Epictetus Club hold its meetings now? (Death House)

Discussion of p. 16, paragraph 2: Zeno said that one of the ways he stays calm and focused instead of getting rattled is by remembering a quotation of Epictetus, “Some things are up to us, and some things are not up to us.” What are some things that are up to us? (my own response to the situation, my own attitude, and my own thoughts) What are some things that are not up to us? (What others do or think, genetics, our height, body type, parents, where we are born, etc.) What happens if we don’t sort these things very well? How will we feel? (Angry and frustrated, waste time and energy, etc.)

Do you have any questions or comments?
Chapter Six (p.21-28)

Read aloud up to page 24 to the nine-dot diagram, then pause for the activity.

Activity: Hand out paper and have the group members try to solve the nine-dot diagram. While they work on this, the leader continues reading aloud the text from the diagram to the bottom of page 25. Before turning the page, ask if anyone solved the puzzle.

Have the members continue reading aloud to the end of the chapter.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What are the three group rules of the Epictetus Club? (Respect others by paying attention, one person speaks at a time, what is said in the meeting stays in the meeting)
2. How did Zeno discover the teachings of Epictetus? (In a little book under his mattress in his new cell)
3. In Animal’s story, what happened to the frog’s head when he saw the ocean? (It exploded)

Discussion p.23, end of third paragraph:
“You can make your life a prison or a palace just by how you think.” What do you think that means? What are some ways to make it a prison? A palace?

Do you have any questions or comments?

Chapter Seven (p.29-34)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What did Zeno do with the picture frames that used to hang on the wall in the Death House? (Used them for posters)
2. In the ABCs of Inner boxing, what do the A, B, and C stand for? (Attacking thought, blocking the attacking thought, and counterpunching it.)
3. Who did Zeno say is our most formidable opponent? (ourselves)
4. Bonus points: What do the letters F.A.I.L. stand for? (Fear, apathy, inertia, lack of purpose)

Discussion p. 31, first paragraph:
“If you really want to prove yourself, take on your own thoughts instead of blaming someone else for your emotions. That is being a real warrior instead of a playground bully. Getting into a physical fight or throwing a verbal punch at someone else means that you have already lost the main bout – the one with yourself. Everything else is just the undercard.” What do you think that means?

Discussion p. 33, second paragraph:
“When you make frog soup, if you put a frog in hot water it will jump out, but if you put a frog in cold water and slowly turn up the heat you can cook it. The frog gradually adapts to the increasing temperatures until it is cooked – and it sounds like you are saying that we do the same thing.” Can you relate to this story? What do you get from this story?

**Discussion of p. 34, first paragraph:**
“You are today where your thoughts have brought you, and you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you – one thought at a time. If you want to know what your past thinking has been, look at your present circumstances. If you want to know what your future circumstances will be, look at your present thinking.” What do you want in the future? What kind of thoughts will it take to get there?

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Eight (p.35-40)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**

1. Why did Jeff send a pass for Zeno? (to talk about furlough)
2. Had Zeno applied for furlough? (no)
3. Why had Zeno not applied for furlough? (he said it wasn’t the right time- he still had a purpose to fulfill)

**Discussion p. 38, paragraph five:**
“When a dog charges you, call for him.” How did Zeno use this saying with his prison sentence? (He took responsibility for his incarceration instead of fighting it and blaming others.) How did he feel when he looked at it this way? (more in control of his own life, more responsible for himself)

**Activity:**
Complete this sentence: “I have to ……. (go to school, come to this class, learn to read better, etc.)

Using the same answer as before, complete this sentence: “I choose to…… (go to school, come to class, learn to read better, etc.) How did that feel compared to the first sentence?

Instead of thinking, “I have to get my GED because my probation officer is making me”, you could think instead, “I am choosing to get my GED so I can get a better job or go to college.” Then you are taking responsibility for your actions, and the probation officer is working for you by helping keep you on track. The “I have to” sentences were the “dog charging” sentences; the “I choose to” sentences were the “calling for the dog” sentences.

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?
Chapter Nine (p.41-51)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud, but stop at the end of the second paragraph on page 46 to do the activity.

Activity:
Do the circle diagram as a group with a relevant self-defeating behavior (such as “not trying”) in the first circle, then have the group suggest the prices for this behavior as the leader fills in the diagram on the board.

Have the group continue reading aloud to the end of the first paragraph on page 49.

Activity (cont.):
Put some fears of changing the self-defeating behavior on the board, then “weigh” them against the circles already filled in. Is this a good trade off, paying all these prices to not face this fear?

Continue reading to the end of the chapter.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. Whose thoughts were displayed in the frame for Round Two? (Shakes)
2. What was A? (It can’t be done.)
3. What were the answers to B? (No, giving up, no)
4. What was C, the counterpunch? (Think outside the box, see the problem from another angle.)

Discussion last paragraph p.50:
“Those who pursue a better life must be prepared to be ridiculed or criticized by their former associates. Many people who have progressively lowered their personal standards in order to win acceptance from others will bitterly resent those who seek to better themselves. Never live your life in reaction to those poor souls. Be compassionate toward them, and at the same time hold to what you know is good. It is your job to carry yourself with quiet dignity and to stick to your ideals and goals. Cling to what you know in your heart is best. If you are steadfast, those very ones who ridiculed you will come to admire you.” This was said by Epictetus 2,000 years ago. Is it still true today? Have you experienced anything like this? Why do you think it’s like this?

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

Chapter Ten (p.52-63)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What goal did Shakes set for himself? (to be a better father, to earn a good conduct visit)
2. How many shots did it take for Jeff to hit his target? (one)
3. Jeff called it “beginner's luck.” Zeno called it “beginner’s _____.” (mind)

There are several possible discussion topics from this chapter, and you might want to choose one or more of these:

**Discussion (p. 52):**
What does the eye of the fish story mean to you? On page 53, it says, “Epictetus also taught that it was purpose that gave our life meaning, strengthened our will and gave our life coherence. He taught that if we were lazy, forgetful, or distracted and took our eye off of the target, our lives would come to misery and pain.” What is the eye of the fish for you? What are some distractions you have to watch out for?

**Discussion:** On p. 54, Manny talked about the Native American ritual of a vision quest, and said, “Being away from familiar things and the people who know you helps you see in a new way, with new eyes. That newness and openness allows for the new vision to happen. One day I realized that my time in this penitentiary, surrounded by these walls of stone, could be my own personal vision quest – I am away from familiar things and people and have time to pray and look at myself and my life with new eyes. This prison can be whatever you make it – and I’m making it a vision quest for myself. That is one of the reasons I come to this group.” Can what you are doing now be like a vision quest for you?

**Discussion:** On p. 57, paragraph 2: “Epictetus taught that ‘the natural instinct of man is self-preservation and self-interest, yet men are so constituted that the individual cannot secure his own interest unless he contributes to the common welfare.’ That means that purely selfish desires and actions do not constitute one’s purpose, so you must consider the effects on others when you seek your purpose.” Why do you think this is? What would happen to society if everyone just did what they wanted, such as stealing a car when they wanted one? Who would be left to make cars?

**Discussion:** On page 59, “Having a vision of what is possible allows us to see opportunities when they arise. If you have no goal or purpose, when something comes up you won’t see how it can be of benefit to you and others. With a positive vision in your mind, you will see opportunities arise and have more enthusiasm to pursue them. You will find that you may become suddenly ‘luckier’, but all it is is seeing things that help you reach your goal and vision.” How much does luck play into things? Can you make your odds better for luck to happen to you?

**Activity:**
On page 57-58, the group did a positive circle exercise, creating a “target” for themselves to work toward and increasing their motivation by seeing the rewards of such actions. You can do this exercise with your group by putting “learning to read,” “staying in school,” “finishing this program,” etc. in the first circle then having the members add the
rewards while the leader fills them in on the board or large paper. Then ask, ‘How does this feel to see all of these benefits? Eye of the fish!’

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Eleven (p.64-67)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**
1. Who called Jeff in the middle of the night? (Associate Warden Cochran)
2. Why did he call? (Inmate “Crime Wave” had escaped)
3. What did Jeff remember from the group that helped him face the situation? (Prayer of Epictetus, being focused on his purpose)

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Twelve (p.68-74)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**
1. Zeno said that simply doing what is a way to blow a gasket and lose our power to change? (making excuses)
2. What activity did the guys do to challenge their excuses? (counterpunched them like working on a speed bag)
3. Did the guys in the group feel better or worse after they counterpunched their excuses? (better - stronger, more hopeful, more in control)

**Discussion p. 68 bottom:** “A half-hearted spirit has no power, according to Epictetus. And power is a very important part of change. We can have good intentions, but without any power to carry out our plans we will not succeed.” Can you think of some ways to power up to move toward your goals? (Keep the benefits in your mind, have a plan, take small steps each day, reward yourself for taking a step, etc.)

**Discussion p. 73, fifth paragraph:** Sometimes people make excuses because they feel guilty, but Zeno said that guilt can be a healthy emotion. How can guilt be a healthy emotion? What is the difference between healthy guilt and unhealthy guilt?

**Activity p. 70:** “One of the signs of the dawning of self-mastery is the gradual elimination of blame.” Role-play being late to class, not doing homework, or other relevant situations using “your best excuses.” Then do it again, taking responsibility for your actions by admitting it, apologizing for it, acknowledging the harm done, and correcting it. What does a lot of blaming tell you about someone? What does a lack of blaming tell you about someone? Who appears more trustworthy?
Activity p. 71, third paragraph: Work on the speed bag: the leader can throw out excuses about a relevant topic (such as not doing homework, being late, etc.), and have the group members counterpunch them as quickly as possible. You can either go around the circle in order, or just have anyone call out the answer in rapid-fire fashion. Another variation is to have the members take turns offering sample excuses while the other members counterpunch them.

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

Chapter Thirteen (p.75-81)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. At the beginning of the chapter, Zeno was feeling despairing. Why? (not to be able to be a part of the main boxing event that was televised from the prison)
2. What does Zeno usually do when he’s feeling down? (he picks up Epictetus)
3. Zeno demonstrated three different boxing stances. What did they represent? (victim stance, survivor stance, and beneficiary stance)

Discussion p. 75-76:
Epictetus taught that “when an unwanted event happens to you, ask yourself, ‘How can I use this to my benefit? What strength or personal quality is this calling for? What opportunity for self-mastery is disguised in the form of this trial?’” What was the benefit of the dirt for the frog that was being buried alive? If the frog can do it, so can we. How can a bad grade be used to our benefit? Can you think of some difficult things that seemed bad at the time but made you stronger? Remember to ask yourself, “How can I use this to my benefit?”

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

Chapter Fourteen (p.82-90)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. Why was Shakes in danger of losing his good conduct visit? (he got a ticket for a rule infraction)
2. At the Rules Infraction Board, did Shakes lie or tell the truth? (he told the truth)
3. Did Shakes lose the visit or keep the visit? (he kept the visit)

Discussion p. 89 last paragraph: “The latest words of Epictetus framed on the wall of the Death House came back to me as I left the warden’s office: “Assume that all events happen to you for your good.”’ Have you ever had something that you thought was bad turn out to be for the best like it did for Shakes? Epictetus says to assume that all events
happen to you for your good. How would you feel and what would that lead to if you did?

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Fifteen (p.91-98)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**

1. Zeno pointed out that it is not usually one punch that takes out an opponent in boxing, but a combination. Our thinking is the same way. Victim stance is the set up for the next mental punch, which is ___________. (entitlement)
2. What are our real needs? (Food, shelter, water, clothing.)
3. There are two good counterpunches to entitlement, and the first one is ______. (gratitude)

**Discussion p. 96, second paragraph:**

“Has someone been given more privileges or better treatment than you? If these things are good, be glad for that person. If they are bad or could cause problems for that person, be glad they did not come to you. Remember that nothing is free, and everything has a price. Perhaps that person had to pay the price of groveling or praising someone they did not respect. Then they paid that price. You chose not to pay the price. So be it. Do not complain that they have received better things or better treatment – they bought it at a price you chose not to pay. To desire the same treatment without paying the price would be greedy and unfair.” Do you see what he’s saying? Paying the price might also mean going to school, or studying hard, working hard, or going without. You don’t always see what goes into people getting the things they have, but usually they have worked hard for it.

**Activity:**

Have the group members complete the sentence, “I wish I ………..” After they have all done this, have them complete this sentence: “I’m glad I ……….” How did that feel? What was the difference between the wishes and the glads? The first one focuses on lack, the second one on appreciation. Now take a moment to name three things you are grateful for. How does that feel?

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Sixteen (p.99-106)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**

1. How did Doc help save a woman’s life? (taught CPR to prison guards)
2. What does Mitakuye Oyasin mean? (“All my relatives/We are all related”)


3. Gratitude is the first counterpunch to entitlement. What is the second? (serving others)

**Discussion p. 102, second paragraph:**
Epictetus taught that ‘one cannot secure his own self-interest without contributing to the general welfare.’ He also said ‘the point is not to perform good deeds to win favor with the gods or the admiration of others, but to achieve inner serenity and thus enduring personal freedom.’ Can you think of something you have done to help someone else? How did it feel when you helped someone? Have you ever helped someone without them knowing it? Do you see any way that that also helped you? Remember the frog soup story? Doing good, being honest, caring for others builds up that kind of habit, one action at a time, and will bring good things to you in the long run.

**Activity p. 102, fourth paragraph:**
Manny then pointed out the similarities between Epictetus’s ancient Greek culture and his own Native American traditions. “Although these cultures were separated by thousands of miles, there is a similar concept in our teachings. It is called Mitakuye Oyasin, which means ‘all my relatives’ or ‘we are all related.’ You cannot harm someone else or something else without also harming yourself. Life is like a spider web, and if you harm one strand you hurt the whole web. But helping others strengthens all of the people.”

What happens if you throw a stone into a pond? (it creates ripples) How far do those ripples go? (clear to the edge of the pond) If you keep watching, what happens? (they return to the center) Have you ever heard the saying, “What goes around, comes around?” What does that mean? The leader can draw a small circle on the board, write “self” in the circle, then draw ever larger, concentric circles with who is hurt next, etc. Answers should include victim, victim’s family and children, your family, neighborhood, city, state, country, etc. How is each of these hurt? How are they helped by positive actions, like Animal’s bicycle project?

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Seventeen (p.107-108)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**
1. Who applied for furlough? (Manny)
2. Was he approved? (yes)
3. What challenge does he face? (making it through the final days of his incarceration)

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Chapter Eighteen (p.109-121)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.
Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What was the topic of the meeting? (dealing with provocation/insults)
2. Did Zeno think he was justified at the time he did his crime? (yes) Does he still think that? (no)
3. What are the three ways that Zeno taught the men to deal with insults? (like a rock, a founding father, or a comic)

Discussion p. 111, third paragraph:
Zeno said that he just wanted revenge. That is an important topic: is it better to kill an enemy or save a loved one? What did Zeno choose at the time? Do you think he was thinking clearly at the time? What did it cost him? Who else got hurt as a result? What does he think about it now?

Revenge is a never-ending series of dominoes that keep falling until someone is brave enough to step up and say, “Enough is enough. I am choosing to save my friend, my little brother, and my community by not retaliating. I am the domino that does not fall, that does not retaliate, that saves all the dominoes behind me. Otherwise, I may as well just turn around and shoot my little brother, since that is what is coming. I choose to be a quiet hero instead of just another corpse.”

Activity p. 116:
If the leader is comfortable with fielding insults like Zeno did on page 116, it makes an effective demonstration. First have the members insult you and then you react with exaggerated emotion, saying, “Stop that!! You can’t say that! No! Stop! That’s a lie! Stomp your feet, etc.” The insulter probably become bolder and bolder as a result of your reacting in this manner. Now do it again, but use the rock, founding father, and comic ways to deal with it. You can agree with the insults, thank the insulter for pointing out a flaw that you will work on in the future, smile, breathe, count to ten, etc. You will probably notice that the insulting dies down instead of increasing, showing that a skillful response by the insulted person can deescalate the situation. Then ask the members after the demonstration, “Who was really in charge of the situation?”

Discussion p. 118: The guys in the Epictetus Club talked about go-to thoughts. Do you know what a go-to guy is in basketball? Who is the Hornets’ go-to guy? (Chris Paul) We also need go-to thoughts in key moments. Have the group come up with some go-to thoughts of their own.

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

Chapter Nineteen (p.122-128)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What was the last line in the movie that the men watched for the holiday? (A man’s got to know his limitations.)
2. What did Zeno tell himself about his crime that made him feel like a good guy, like Saint Zeno? (He told himself he was protecting his girlfriend.)
3. What are the four magic words of freedom? (I will get caught.)

Discussion p. 123, fifth paragraph:
Zeno said, “The number one thought that brings people to prison: ‘I won’t get caught because I’m too slick.’ But the fact of the matter is we get caught every time.” What do you make of that? What is the difference between someone who has fallen off a building, flaps his arms, and says, “I’m flying!” and someone else who is flying in a plane? They both look like they’re flying. (The former will eventually smash into the ground with serious consequences, while the other won’t. The first one is like someone who has committed a crime and thinks he has gotten away with it – he just hasn’t gotten caught yet, he is in freefall. Don’t confuse freefall with flight – it can have nasty consequences! The best move – don’t jump off the building, or commit a crime that you have to worry about for years to come.

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

Chapter Twenty (p.129-139)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. What are the first words in the Enchiridion? (some things are up to us, some things are not)
2. What does CALM stand for? (cognition, act, let it go, move on)
3. Zeno compares worry and concern to what? (an alarm clock)

Discussion p. 132, paragraphs 2-3: Milarepa and the Cave story. Resisting the inevitable is futile, but when we just surrender to it and let it be, we can sometimes relax and find better things to do with our time and energy. Have you ever experienced anything like that, where you just finally had to say “it is what it is?”

Activity p. 131-2: Use the CALM model on a relevant situation, such as getting an A on a test. (Tip for C: Studying and preparing is up to us, what grade the teacher gives us is not.)

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

Chapter Twenty-One (p.140-144)

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

Attention/comprehension questions:
1. Why did the warden want to speak to Jeff? (to stop taking furlough applications, pack up his office)
2. Why did Zeno want to speak to Jeff? (to apply for furlough)
3. What did Jeff remember to do with his thoughts when he got panicky? (think CALM)
4. What finally happened to Zeno and Jeff? (Zeno was furloughed to a halfway house, Jeff got a new job at another prison)
5. What did Jeff find in his box of stuff when he got home? (the framed Round Ten poster)

Are there any other comments or questions about this chapter?

**Epilogue (p.145-146)**

Take turns reading paragraphs aloud.

**Attention/comprehension questions:**
1. When does this chapter take place? (three decades/30 years later)
2. What has happened to the penitentiary? (it is being torn down)
3. What did the old man say who walked up to Jeff? (I guess it is like life, you can either make it a palace or a prison.)
4. Who do you think it was? (Zeno?)

Review the Fight Summary: Ten Rounds to Freedom p. 147-149

**Activity p. 153-155:** Take the Review Quiz in writing or orally as a group. You can divide the group into two teams and have a contest with each correct answer worth two points. If one team misses the question, the other team can answer it for one point and it is also their turn to answer the next question. The quiz answers are 1.b, 2.c, 3.b, 4.a, 5.b, 6.d, 7.a, 8.a, 9.a, 10.a, 11.b, 12.a, 13.b, 14.c, 15.d.

**Activity:** If you announced at the first session a contest for the best performance of the Epictetus Rap at the front of the book, this is the time for the performances. The group can judge the performers with applause at the end of the performances, or you can have some fun with it a la American Idol judging by a panel of judges.

After a wrap-up discussion and any additional questions or comments, you can present the members with official Epictetus Club Certificates (reproducible certificate available on request).
Nothing Stops a Bad Future Like Good Thinking!

The Epictetus Club
Discussion Group

Pump up your brain.
Work out with words.
Counterpunch bad thinking.
Learn the ABC’s of Inner Boxing.
Go the Ten Rounds to Self-Mastery.
Become the Heavyweight Champion of Your Life.

Next Discussion Group begins __________
About the Author

Jeff Traylor, M.A. has a wealth of corrections experience, ranging from implementing the furlough program at the maximum security Ohio Penitentiary to serving as the cognitive skills instructor at a community based correctional facility. His experience also includes substance abuse counseling and program development, and he has worked in the psychological and social services departments in Ohio prisons. He is the creator of the Shoplifting Diversion Program that earned a national award from the National Council of Community Mental Health Centers and was adopted in more than 30 U.S. cities. He has served on the faculty of the Michigan Judicial Institute and has trained hundreds of professionals ranging from parole officers to social workers. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees from The Ohio State University, and is a contributing author to Implementation and Innovation of the Self-Defeating Behavior Theory by Dr. Milt Cudney and others. He and his wife are also the authors of a series of Ohio travel books for cyclists and others called Life in the Slow Lane.

Ordering the Book

A PDF of the complete The Epictetus Club: Lessons from the Walls book is available at no charge upon request. For further information about the book, to order multiple print copies at a discount for an institution or agency, or to contact the author, email us at epictetusclub@aol.com.