

Make the world a better place than it would have been without you.

In mid-2018, I became convinced that the world was going to end. I was terrified of a future that I thought held nothing but fascism, terror, and environmental disaster. Over the last year and a half I've found ways to deal with that sense of despair, and realised that while there are some bad things in the world right now, it's not as if all is lost. The future is *always* unknown, and as long as people are working to make the world a better place, there's reason to believe the future will be better.

This is a zine about how to stop despair from taking over your life so that you choose action instead of paralysis, and take part in the work to make the world a better place.

Avery Flinders, February 2020
<https://against-despair-zine.neocities.org>
<https://chickencollective.storenvy.com>

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Against Despair

A zine about taking your fears for the future and turning them into actions for the future you'd rather see.

Notes

There have always been big, scary things in the world, and sometimes it seems that all we can do is try to keep from letting despair take us over. This zine isn't going to tell you that everything is okay - there are a lot of shitty national and global political things going on, and it's normal to be disturbed by it.

This is, instead, a guide to working with your feelings so that they don't eat your whole life, and how to turn those feelings into positive action.

For the latter half of 2018, I was depressed in a way I'd never experienced before. I was paralysed by the conviction that the world was ending and it was my fault somehow. Nothing got through it; everything seemed to make me panic and feel ill. But I have, haltingly, found my way through it. Now, at the start of 2020, I see a lot of people in the same kind of mental place that I was in a year and a half ago, whether it's about climate change or fascism or both. So here's how I got through that paralysing terror to keep functioning and remember that there is a future.¹

My goal in life used to be to leave the world better than I've found it, but I've realised that that goal is too big, and too far out of my control. But I want to leave the world a better place than it would have been without me. These are the steps I'm using to get there - I hope they can be of use to you, too.

¹ My recovery also involved medication and therapy, and those should be a part of your plan if you're experiencing major depression and anxiety along with your feelings about the future.

Things I read while making this zine

Environmental activist Xiye Bastida says "Ok Doomers"

<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/environmental-activist-xiye-bastida-says-ok-doomers>

Top 10 Most Exciting Environmental Stories From 2019

<https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/top-10-most-exciting-environmental-stories-from-2019/>

Climate Anxiety Support on Tumblr

<https://climatesupport.tumblr.com/>

Hope For The Planet on Tumblr

<https://hope-for-the-planet.tumblr.com>

20 Reasons Why 2019 Gave Us Climate Hope

<https://climateresearchproject.org/blog/20-reasons-why-2019-gave-us-climate-hope>

Making Stuff and Doing Things: DIY Guides To Just About Everything, edited by Kyle Bravo, Microcosm Publishing 2003

This zine is also designed to be copied and redistributed with any additions that YOU want to make. These are just the ways I approach despair - you probably already have your own. Add them. Photocopy. Pass it on to the next person. We need awareness of the problems, sure, but there's a lot of that going around. We need way more awareness of how to make it better.

How to share this zine:

- Go to <http://against-despair-zine.neocities.org>
- Print out the PDF version of this zine
- Write your own ideas in the spaces and the blank pages at the end, and if parts aren't relevant to where you live, paste some blank paper over that text and write over it.
- If you live on colonised land, then please add an acknowledgement to the traditional owners of that land underneath the acknowledgement on the next page.

Acknowledgement

This zine was made on lands stolen from the peoples of the Kulin nation including Wurundjeri and Wathaurung peoples, and the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. The sovereignty of these peoples was never ceded and as a resident of these lands I am part of the work that still needs to be done towards justice.

Final thoughts

This zine is, above all, just a starting point when it comes to action and activism. The more you do, the more you'll find to learn - and the more you'll feel like there's hope. The best thing I can suggest is to talk to other people who care about what you care about and are doing something about it. Listen, learn, and pass it on. Including passing on this zine. Even I have only begun to put together all the further reading links that are relevant to this project. Keep adding to it. Print your own copy. Make your own zine.

Keep fighting despair, keep hoping, and above all, keep doing.

How to put on your oxygen mask

I think we should all be trying to make the world better - and I think we all have things we can do to make that happen. It's hard to *do* that, though, if you're filled with despair.

Despair is, above everything else, a feeling. That doesn't mean it's not a real feeling and you can just wish it away. It does mean you should question it, pull at the edges and look at the things it's not telling you as well as the things it is.

Despair is a reaction to what you're reading and seeing and hearing about the world. What you're reading and seeing and hearing is *not the whole picture*. You're probably seeing headlines and the things people are most angry about and other people's strong emotional reactions to the news. That's never the whole picture.

People who tell you that something is inevitable are telling you to give up and stop fighting. Why do they want you to do that? What do they have to lose if you keep fighting? How powerful must your fighting be, if people want to stop you?

Despair tells you that everything is hopeless, that nothing you can do can make things better, and you should give up. *These are not facts*. These are lies, just as

much as "everything is fine" is a lie. What's more, saying that all is lost is kind of letting yourself off the hook. If you give up, you don't have to do any of the work of making things better. Refusing to act, and refusing to believe that there is any use in acting, has the same end result as climate denial.

The way forward is to sit between the extremes of "all is lost" and "everything is fine", the complicated reality that some things are changed forever but we can still make choices that affect the way forward. It is much harder. It feels so much better.

We don't know what the future will hold. That's the scariest thing in the world, and one of the most hopeful. There is a difference between the future looking different to what you thought it would and not having a future. You can't put the world back the way it was, but you can make today better than yesterday, and tomorrow better than today.

Sisters Inside

Supporting women and girls in prison, and keeping Aboriginal women out of prison by paying their fines.
<https://sistersinside.com.au/>
<https://www.gofundme.com/f/bfvnvt-freethepeople>

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

A co-operative legal service aimed at better justice for Aboriginal people and fighting the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system.
<https://vals.org.au>

Get Up!

These guys support all kinds of progressive causes - I like them mainly because their emails are always like "Here's what you can do about the problem!" and then I can just do it.
<https://www.getup.org.au/>

Amazon Frontlines

Fighting for indigenous ownership and control of the Amazon rainforests.
<https://www.amazonfrontlines.org/>

Project Drawdown

Research into new ways to reduce global greenhouse gases
<https://www.drawdown.org/>

Conservation International

Research and implementation of a broad range of environmental conservation projects.
<https://www.conservation.org>

You may also find it useful to look into Effective Altruism, the idea of evaluating how to do the most good per dollar and putting your money towards those causes. I don't entirely follow the idea myself, but it has informed the way I think. www.givingwhatwecan.org is a good place to start.

Some organisations I support

If you're redistributing this zine, feel free to add your own - or substitute them entirely!

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

Support and opportunities for asylum seekers in Australia

<https://www.asrc.org.au/>

RISE: Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees

An organisation run and governed by refugees, asylum seekers and ex-detainees in Australia, to support these groups and fight for change.

<http://riserefugee.org/>

Refugee Legal Aid

Pro-bono legal support for refugees

<https://refugeelegal.org.au>

Choose what to read

Managing despair is not all about thinking your way out of it. You'll be fighting a constant uphill battle if you don't also take some control of the messages you receive and the information you're reacting to.

- Decide how much of your day you want to spend on the news and *no more*. People use social media for spreading awareness of problems, often with lots of guilt tripping about how THIS IS IMPORTANT and DON'T LOOK AWAY that can make it feel like you *have* to read every update, and spend all day reading the same bad news headline. You don't! Once is enough! Pick a time of day that's News Time, the way people used to read the newspaper in the morning or watch the evening news on TV, and ignore it the rest of the day.
- Mute people on social media who post a lot of news. I mostly do this by turning off retweets on twitter, but it will depend on your preferred platform. You could make a separate list or set of bookmarks for these accounts, too, and only check it at News Time.
- Find news sources you trust, who present news in a way that is truthful but also works for you. If you can, send them some money. Some of the reason that the world feels like such a stinking mess is that the way we live online is devaluing good journalism and it's harder for people to do

good reporting. Support good reporting with money when you can.

Think about what you share

- If you're going to share bad news stories, try to also share something people can do about it. Share action, not blank despair.
- FACT CHECK. I see a lot of left-wing people make the mistake of spreading misinformation because they don't read a full article or think about whether a source is one they should trust.
- When you read someone's bigoted hot take online, it's fine to be mad and share that you're mad about it, but consider whether you really need to share their hateful words as well.
- Share good news stories too! Being bombarded by bad news is depressing. Doing good work, and succeeding, and seeing people ignore it, is also really demotivating. People really are working hard all over the world to make things better.
- I'm fond of The Happy Broadcast (<https://www.thehappybroadcast.com>), also on Facebook and Instagram) because it shares good news stories about *structural* problems. A lot of good news sources can be all cute animals and good deeds by individuals to their neighbours, which is great, but doesn't get at tackling the bigger problems. Sites like The Happy Broadcast show you that people are working on changing the world and succeeding.

On donating money

Donating money to causes is simultaneously one of the most powerful ways an individual can help, and often one of the least satisfying. It only takes a moment and it feels like you just move some numbers. But it is often very effective, and it especially helps when you're worried about something you can't help with directly.

Many of us make donations *reactively* - we see a campaign by an organisation, or a disaster, and make a one off donation of whatever we have at the moment. There's nothing wrong with this! But personally I find it more satisfying and sustainable to set aside a portion of my income for donations, and set up the bulk of that as monthly donations to organisations I support. This also helps support organisations in a more sustainable way so they don't have to spend so much energy on fundraising.

Most of the reason I do it, though, is because I find it a good reaction to the causes that I would otherwise feel frustrated and helpless about. I can't do any kind of direct action for the Amazon Rainforest, but I can donate to Amazon Frontlines to help keep more of the rainforest in indigenous hands. And I often feel defeated by the way I've spent nearly two decades advocating for refugee rights in Australia and made no legislative progress, but donating to Refugee Legal Aid means that some refugees get representation and better outcomes.

- Find out how to fix something instead of replacing it
- Repair your clothes instead of buying new ones
- Learn organisation skills - how to run a meeting, how to mediate and negotiate
- Build a mini solar generator!
<https://www.instructables.com/id/Building-a-micro-solar-generator/>
- Work on building resources in your local community - this post has some ideas
<https://hater-of-terfs.tumblr.com/post/177535585355> Local councils in Australia often have initiatives that you can link into at community centres and other council-owned spaces.

But what can people do about it? SO MANY THINGS.

ACTION

A quick note: I'm sure you think you don't need to hear the "we all have different abilities and that's okay" speech again, but this is a topic that inspires a lot of guilt about the things people can't do. So allow me to recap: of the actions in this section, EVERYONE WILL HAVE THINGS THEY CAN AND CAN'T DO.

I live a long way from any city centres, so it's hard for me to take part in in-person protests; you may be struggling for money and can't afford to donate. Neither of us need to feel guilty; I can donate money and this hypothetical other person can go to protests. Adapt to the other ideas as applicable. Don't beat yourself up if one of these ideas makes you feel guilty for not being able to, but don't wallow in it either - put it aside and look for things that work for you.

(And please don't give other people a hard time for the things they can and can't do. Yes, it's good to eat less meat; no, it's not practical for everyone. Let's focus on what we can do instead of shaming what we can't.)

How to talk to politicians

Who you gonna call?

The first thing to do is to figure out which politician you want to address your concerns to. You can address

<http://kogo.org.au>

Animal Rescue Craft Guild is a group of crafters that craft the kind of materials that are needed in animal wildlife. In Australia, especially, this means lots of sewn, knitted and crocheted pouches for orphaned marsupials, but it also includes blankets and mittens and all kinds of things. Their facebook group includes all the patterns you need, updates on what items are most needed at any given time, and also organises collections and transport. **Even if you don't craft, you can help get the items to where they need to go!**

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/arfnrcrafts/about/>

Fundraise

There are so many ways to fundraise for a cause! Get some friends together and have a bake sale! Pass a collection around at your office! Run a sausage sizzle! Auction off your skills like Writers For Fireys!

Get self-sufficient and DIY

Even if it's not immediately contributing to The Greater Good, every skill you learn gets you a little more self-empowered and a little less beholden to capitalism. Here is a list of suggestions that is JUST THE BEGINNING!

- Learn how to build furniture

give you heaps of information on growing sustainable and organic gardens: <https://www.diggers.com.au>

Knit something

Recently I've found that one way to deal with nervous energy is to Do Stuff with my hands, which has led to knitting. Which has led to enthusiasm about new patterns, and a to-make list so long that it was pointless my wife and I having this many hats. What am I going to do with all these hats, I asked? And she said, donate them.

Knit One, Give One is an organisation that distributes hand-made clothing from volunteers to people in need. They have some simple patterns on their website to get you started, but you can make any garment pattern you want.

This is one of those things that makes me ask, would simply donating money to ASRC or a homelessness charity be more effective, in the sense of doing more good for my buck? In a purely utilitarian sense, probably. But it's not always about how to maximise bang for your buck. Donating handmade clothes takes some small part of clothing production out of the mass production system which exploits workers and contributes to environmental degradation, *and* it means someone out there is going to get a beautiful, lovingly-made piece of winter clothing from me. Giving something handmade is doing more than just keeping someone warm, it's saying, *You are valued, and you are cared for.*

things to the Minister in charge of the issue, but you will also have multiple other members of Parliament who are elected to represent *you*, specifically, based on where you live. There will be members who are part of the government (the party in power) the opposition (the second largest party) and the crossbench (minor parties and independents).

They are all worth talking to.

It may seem like it's only worth contacting the government members, but the opposition are always looking to cast themselves as an alternative government at the next election, and crossbenchers are in a position to influence both major parties.

How to phrase your issues

Whether you're writing or phoning your local member, some ways of communicating are more effective than others. Remember that many politicians' offices get a lot of calls and letters, and that most of them will be received by office staff. The most important thing to do is to be clear early on about why you're calling, your relationship to the politician, and what you want them to do.

Here's a simple script for phone contact:

Hello. I live in [your electorate or state] and I'm very concerned about [this issue]. Here is a short explanation of why it's wrong. I would like you to [withdraw the bill/vote

against the bill/reverse this decision/condemn this decision/insert your own].

The only part of a letter I have a strict script for is the opening line:

Dear X,

I am writing to you as one of your constituents in the electorate of [name] to urge you to [do the thing you want them to do].

From there it's up to you how you want to play it. If you're not sure, I'd suggest structuring your paragraphs in three-sentence form like this:

- what is happening
- what your opinion of it is, and why
- what should happen instead

Whether you're speaking on the phone or writing a letter, it's best to avoid personal attacks and swearing, but you don't have to mince words, either. "I am horrified and disgusted by this abhorrent proposal by the Government, and implore you to take a stance against this abuse of LGBTI Australians to suck up to the radical fringe of your own party" is great.

Finally, it doesn't have to be perfect. If you have a complete letter but you don't think it's good enough, or you're worried it hasn't followed my advice enough but you don't think you can look at it any more, send it anyway. I once sent Scott Morrison a letter that just said "I don't see why the Earth should suffocate just

Some small direct actions

Grow something

This is totally my bias because I love gardening, but: growing plants is good! Growing plants adds something, however little, to carbon storage/recycling, and it looks pretty. Growing your own food, however little or much you can manage, cuts down on the emissions from food transport costs. Growing bee-friendly flowers helps support bee populations and pollination.

Some guides to get you started:

- Bottle tower gardens for small spaces: <https://containergardening.wordpress.com/2011/09/07/bottle-tower-gardening-how-to-start-willem-van-cotthem/>
- Six low maintenance houseplants: <https://solarpunk-aesthetic.tumblr.com/post/166366532210>
- Indoor wall planters: <https://www.instructables.com/id/Flowers-on-the-Wall/>
- Edible plants you can grow indoors: <https://www.naturallivingideas.com/18-delicious-edibles-you-can-grow-indoors-all-winter/>

If you want to get really into it, join the Diggers Club Australia, who can sell you the materials you need and

to that feeling - if you're on the tram home and you start to feel uncomfortable carrying a sign or wearing pride gear, you can put them away and spend the rest of your journey in peace.

Joining a political party

Working for change as part of a political party can be frustrating, but it can also bring about great change. It's not all about running for a seat in parliament, although I won't tell you that you can't! But parties aren't just run by the people in parliament - ordinary branch members can influence policy direction, and are responsible for voting on who gets to run in an election. You could also make a big difference by helping to campaign for a candidate who supports your causes and getting them elected.

Each political party is different, so it's hard for me to give much further advice. If you're interested in this route, it's best to research your options and ask questions of the party directly.

because you have a hard-on for coal." That one did not get a response, but I still think it was better than not sending it.

How to fit it into your day

WHO'S GOT THE TIME, RIGHT? We all want to help but I have A Lot To Do. Capitalism wants to keep us too busy surviving to think about this stuff, and I don't want to minimize that.

Only here's the thing - if I don't act, I'm devoting a lot of my time to worrying, and stressing, and obsessing, and so forth. So it's *that* time that I turn into time to yell at politicians.

One of the simplest things you can do is save all your representatives' contact details somewhere easy to access. Next time you feel sad or angry about something happening in the world, you can tell your friends and your Twitter feed how sad and angry you are - and you can also pull up your local member's number/email address in your phone and tell *them*. This makes it fairly low energy, and it means communicating your negative feelings to someone whose job it is to bear the brunt of them, and to turn them into change at the highest level.

Big-A Activism

Thanks to Briar Rolfe (twitter: @briar_rolfe) for advice in this section.

Activist organisations want you! Yes, YOU! They want you to join and to come to protests and to help with campaigns even if you don't think you have any skills to bring. You could volunteer at a service or a phone line, paint banners, help organise volunteers - there are all kinds of work that organisations need.

Where to join

- Pick one area you care about and join one group. Trying to join an org for everything you care about leads to burnout. This is one place where it's important to focus hard on one thing and trust other people to focus on other causes.
- Look for organisations that really take a lead from indigenous people. Environmental politics can be prone to making it all about the beauty of nature, or making sweeping generalisations about how humans ruin everything. Only *some* humans have ruined everything, and nature isn't the only thing worth preserving! Indigenous people have valuable approaches to a whole range of problems and organisations that centre that knowledge will benefit from it.
- Look for how organisations approach other marginalised groups, too. For example, in the

past when I've supported homeless shelters and family violence support services, I look for services that are inclusive of LGBTQ people, and ESPECIALLY trans people.

Things to know about going to a protest

- Prepare for a day out - water to keep hydrated, good shoes for walking, snacks to keep your blood sugar up.
- Yell a lot! Join in with chants. It might feel silly at first but it's worth it.
- All protests should have marshals for information or keeping things on track, usually in fluoro vests. Watch out for them and let them know if there's a problem.
- If you feel unsafe at any time, step out and/or flag it with a marshal or police liaison.
- Take photos and share them! It's good documentation and advertising, and makes other people think about going along next time. It's also a reminder to yourself for later that so many other people care about the cause too.
- It's good to go with friends who understand your limitations, whether it's mobility, anxiety, sensory processing, or something else. If you can't go with friends, arrange to meet up with someone afterwards.
- When leaving, there's always a point where you have to ask yourself whether you still feel safe travelling in public as a protestor. Pay attention