

If You Can't Meditate, Bake Bread

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The act of making something every day can be a powerful form of anxiety relief



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A [recent comic](#) by Luke McGarry shows a man in an apocalyptic hellscape, trying to get past a pair of armed and intimidating gatekeepers. "Please — grant me safe passage," the man says. "I can trade medicine and precious metals." To which the gatekeepers reply: "Ha! Fool! Don't you know the currency of the future is homemade sourdough?"

You're not just imagining it. Everyone is baking bread right now.

The search terms "[bread](#)," and "[baking bread](#)," have spiked to a 14-year high on Google Trends. You probably know a [Bread Guy](#) (or Bread Gal), and may even be one yourself.

But why have so many people suddenly become pursuers of the perfect olive loaf or French baguette during this pandemic? One explanation is that making bread can be an existentially healing endeavor. Stephen S. Jones, director of [Washington State University's Bread Lab](#), tells [Wired](#) that, over the years, he has received handwritten letters from three

different people who, after visiting his lab, turned to breadmaking to cope with the grief of losing a child. He believes that baking bread is akin to a spiritual experience. “Bread is alive” and “you become one with this thing,” he suggests.

To lessen our anxiety and improve our well-being, we’re often prescribed mindfulness-cultivating practices, like yoga and meditation. But another option is to make something every day. You may choose to bake a loaf of bread or pick up an old hobby, or you could try a completely new creative pursuit altogether. Your daily creative task might be to write a poem or sketch a picture, or to fold origami.

In this thread on Hacker News, the user Internetvin writes about how the emotional overload of his father-in-law passing away within days of his son’s birth led him to make a song every day. The healing effect of a creative outlet inspired him to build Futureland, a project network for people to record their progress of making something every day.

Similarly, as a means of coping in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the designer Michael Bierut started drawing something every day. This practice led him to start The 100 Day Project with his students at Yale. The project eventually found its way online, where participants have shared more than 1.4 million Instagram posts (and counting) of their projects to date. This year’s 100 Day Project starts on April 7.

The goal of making something during times of hardship isn’t to be “productive,” or to even achieve anything specific. Rather, the aim is to tap into your creativity to make meaning from the situation — or to find an outlet for your energy that makes it easier to maintain a calm, positive attitude.

Your daily creative practice can be as short as 20 to 60 seconds. The key is just to pick something you can do every day. For example, one of Bierut’s students, the art director Zak Klauck, set out to design a poster every day in under 60 seconds. Internetvin has tweeted about setting himself the goal to write just a single line of code within 20 seconds. And the artist Mike Winkelmann has so far followed through on his mandate to draw something every day for nearly 5,000 days straight, even on the day his daughter was born.

If you’re interested in setting up a daily creative practice, but have no idea how to get started, here’s some advice:

- **Make your practice as simple as flossing.** In the *#The100DayProject Interview Series* podcast, Bierut recommends picking something where you don’t need to come up with a new idea every single day. For example, in 2002, he picked a photo in the *New York Times* and made a new interpretive drawing from the same image every day that year.

- **Build your creative practice around something you already own**, recommends the author and artist Elle Luna, a former facilitator of the 100 Day Project. Obvious ideas include a camera, a pen, or an instrument. “Or it could be less obvious, like your great dance moves, paint chips, a wooden chair, or strangers,” she writes. You can also build your practice around a location (maybe a specific wall in your room), an action (like speaking), or a specific passion to focus on.
- **Don’t give up if you miss a day or two**. Even the photographer Noah Kalina, famous for his 20 years of daily self portraits, missed a few days along the way. It still counts!
- **Keep track of your progress**. For example, I make eight note cards per day. I don’t post them on social media, but I do keep a running tally of the cards I do every day. I want to keep the streak alive.
- **If you share your progress publicly, aim for acceptable, not perfect**. For example, Jones, who runs the Bread Lab, notices that some people think that if they can’t bake Instagram-worthy bread, they’re failing at baking. He says, “It’s part of this notion that your bread has to look perfect to be good, right? People should take pressure off themselves in that way.”
- **When in doubt, throw all these pointers out and just get started**. You can always simplify your daily practice later. When they were his students, Bierut had reservations about Jessica Svendson’s project to do a different variation of the same poster, and Ely Kim’s dancing, but they turned out to be some of his favorite projects.

Whatever you pick, you don’t have to do it for 100 days — even 10 days will suffice. Much like mustering the energy for physical exercise through this pandemic, you will thank yourself for exerting the effort.

Instead of seeing this isolation as time that’s lost, you can decide to do something with it. And who knows, maybe you can even make something that you love. Once this is all over, you may look back on your daily creative practice as the one thing that made your isolation bearable.