

# Being unable to despair

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Content note: these next few posts are not going to be for the faint of heart.

Sometimes, when people see that their life is about to get a lot harder, they start buckling down. Other times, they start despairing, or complaining, or preparing excuses so that they can have one ready when the inevitable failure hits, or giving up entirely and then failing with abandon. These next few posts assume that you have the former demeanor, and they might not be helpful to people who are inclined to respond to new difficulties with despair. Remember the law of equal and opposite advice! (For every person who needs a certain piece of advice, there is someone else who needs the opposite advice.)

With that said, I'm going to spend a few words giving some tips about how to have the former demeanor, if you want to. The first piece of pertinent advice is that the way you respond to challenges is context dependent; even if you've already been known to respond to some problems by despairing, there are likely other problems that you respond to by buckling down.

There is a specific mindset that, in my experience, makes it much easier to adopt the "buckle down" demeanor. This is the mindset where "not doing anything" doesn't seem like an available option in the action-space. I've written a bit be-

fore about how I think many people think there is a default "rest state", and this is a related concept: many people seem to think that there is a privileged "don't do anything" action, that consists of something like curling up into a ball, staying in bed, and refusing to answer emails. It's much easier to adopt the "buckle down" demeanor when, instead, curling up in a ball and staying in bed feels like *just another action*. It's just another way to respond to the situation, which has some merits and some flaws.

So this is my second piece of advice, if you want to be the sort of person who buckles down in the face of hardship: see the world in terms of possible responses. See curling up in bed and ignoring the world as just *one possible response*, rather than an escape hatch. Dispel the illusion that some actions are labeled "do nothing," and notice that those, too, are responses. There is no privileged null choice.

(That's not to say that it's *bad* to curl up in a ball on your bed and ignore the world for a while. Sometimes this is exactly what you need to recover. Sometimes it's what the monkey is going to do regardless of what you decide. The point is that when nature offers you a choice, there is no "don't choose" option. There are only the options that nature offers, and all you can do is pick the best of them.)

My third piece of advice is to remember that you reside in the mortal realm. If you get new information or a new way of looking at the world and you start to feel despair, or hopelessness, or helpless, or impotent, then it is *perfectly OK*

to respond by curling up in a corner and feeling sad and scared and small for a little while. That's a fine response. It doesn't mean that you're not up to the task. Nor does it mean that you are condemned to despairing forever. You're allowed to feel small sometimes, and then get back up and keep going, without any need to pretend that things are fine. We're monkeys. Feeling helpless happens.

Rising to the challenge doesn't mean never feeling helpless. It means pushing on *anyway*, even if you feel helpless sometimes.

In my experience, tapping into internal drive often requires tapping into a deep desire to *make the world be different*, in a world that's very large and very hurting and very hard to change. When trying to do this, it can be easy to get overwhelmed by the odds stacked against you — regardless of their scale. (In fact, I have often found that the cards stacked against me personally — when I feel isolated, lonely, or friendless — induce as much despair as the cards stacked against anyone who tries to change the world at large.)

In the next few posts, I'm going to talk about tapping into that internal drive, and this will entail trying to see the situation for what it really is: which means owning up to everything stacked against you. If you aren't careful, this might cause you to buckle. But if you do it right, it can cause you to buckle down instead, and provide a source of drive.