

mutual aid

AN INTRODUCTION

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A NOTE: I made this zine for absolute beginners, including people perhaps without fully-worked-out political or theoretical commitments. The intention is not to give people a full education, nor to nail down what mutual aid 'is'. Rather, I wanted to provide some small tools that can get people started with the practice of mutual aid. Doing is the best political education! Comrades and long-term organisers will no doubt find much to criticise in this necessarily limited & partial account. I wouldn't have it any other way! Thanks so much to all readers. In love and solidarity,

josie sparrow

“I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people.”

Eduardo Galeano

what is mutual aid?

Mutual aid is...

**COMMUNITY
SUPPORT**

**FOR
EVERY
BODY**

**FOR ALL
KINDS OF
SUPPORT**

**FREE, NON-
HIERARCHICAL,
AUTONOMOUS**

**SOLIDARITY
NOT
CHARITY!**

**ALREADY
HAPPENING
ALL AROUND US**

Because...

**WE ARE ALL CONNECTED
and
THERE'S ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE!**

basic principles

- ♥ **Nobody is disposable. Every life is precious. Everybody deserves love, care, and access to the means of survival.**
- ♥ **We are the experts on our own lives. Through mutual aid, we support and empower one another to create the lives we want to live and the world we want to see, right now.**
- ♥ **We share what we have with whoever needs it, rather than accumulating unnecessary extra things for ourselves.**
- ♥ **We build relationships with those around us based on mutual trust, respect, and shared need.**
- ♥ **We value all contributions and recognise that people have different abilities, skills, and needs. From tech support to emotional support, from childcare to food provision—*everybody* has something to contribute.**
- ♥ **We are radically inclusive and meet each other where we are. Charities and government institutions set up means-tests and barriers to access; mutual aid is open to all and based on deep trust.**
- ♥ **We offer our help freely, without conditions or obligations.**

getting started

A good way of figuring out how to start this off is to do an exercise called *podmapping*.

Podmapping was devised in 2014 by the US-based Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective.

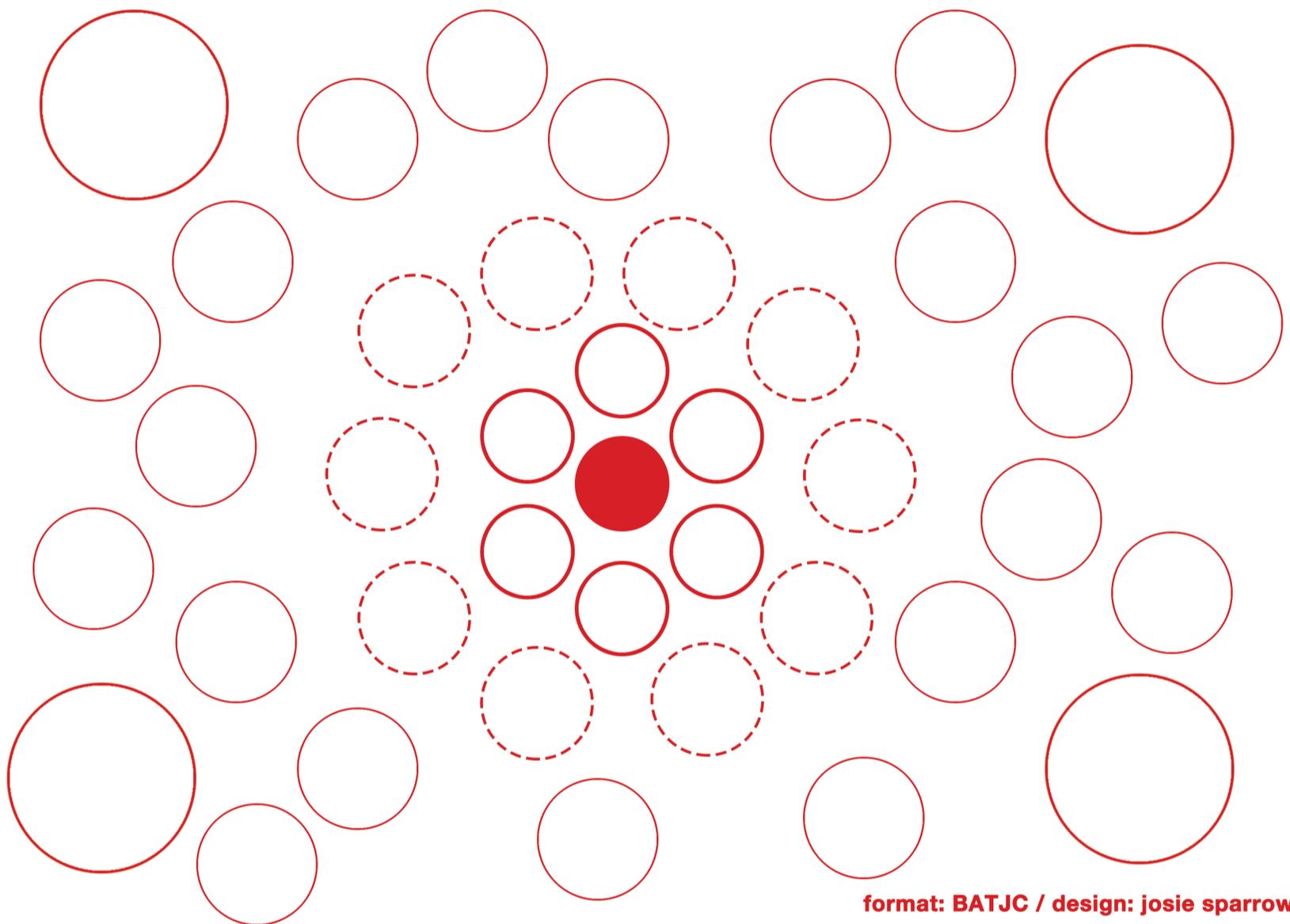
Our ‘pods’ are made up of people we trust, and to whom we can turn for support. Maybe you have a friend who gives really good advice, and another who gives really good haircuts. Or perhaps there’s a colleague who’s always advocating for her co-workers, or a parent at the school gates who offers to do pick-ups and childcare.

Then there are the friends of friends; people who seem really great but you don’t know well enough yet.

And outside of that, there are the institutions, groups, and wider networks that offer useful resources and support.

Podmapping is the process of mapping out those connections and relationships, and figuring out what’s around you.

podmapping



format: BATJC / design: josie sparrow

HOW TO USE THIS DIAGRAM.

1. Draw your own, or print one out from peachtreepeartree.com/resources
2. Write your name in the red circle in the centre.
3. The bold-outlined circles are your 'pod': the people you know you can rely on and trust. Be as specific as you can: what are their names? Their skills?
4. The dotted-outline circles are people you don't know well yet, but who could become part of your 'pod' if you build connections and relationships with them.
5. The outer circles, big and small, are the institutions, organisations, networks, and groups that can provide resources and support for you.

what next?

Once you have your connections mapped out, you can think about how to start putting them into practice! Did you notice the way your podmap started with you and then moved outwards? That's precisely the way this works. Begin closest to home: work out **what you need** and **what you can offer**.

Then talk to your **closest connections**. You might find that you're already doing this sort of mutual aid practice—lots of friends do, and these relationships are a great basis for building a wider mutual aid network.

You might also find that you only have one or two people in your closest 'pod'. Perhaps you don't have any. That's okay! Lots of us are in this situation, and building new relationships is an important part of mutual aid practice. We'll talk a bit more about this later. For now, just know that **you don't need to fill in all the circles**.

Next, look at the **circles with dotted outlines**. Are there **people you would like to get to know better**? Figure out how to connect with those people!

Again, it doesn't matter if you haven't filled in all the circles—having **space to grow** is a good thing!

Finally (for now), look at the **outer circles**. Do some research here—what are the **organisations and institutions** that might **help you**, **offer resources**, or **need your help**? These could be local community kitchens or housing action groups, food banks, informal support networks for childcare or other kinds of care, reading groups, trade unions or other workplace advocates, local environmental or community groups, political or activist collectives, faith and cultural groups, social, activism and support groups for people with specific needs (e.g. women, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, refugees and migrants, elderly people, etc.)... be creative and think about **why**, **how** and **with whom** you want to be connected. Then get involved however you can! The people you meet through these networks may end up moving further into your 'pod' as time goes by.

Remember that **this is a process**—the idea is that you can keep coming back to your map as it grows and changes. Some people even do several maps for different areas of their life. **There's no wrong way to do this**—it's not a set of rules to be followed. The point of this exercise is to get you thinking about (and writing down) what support you already have, what you need and want, and how everything connects.

doing mutual aid

There are people and organisations who practice certain forms of mutual aid without calling it by that name. We should pay attention to these moments of everyday mutual aid—there is so much to learn from them! They also offer a basis for extending the practice into other areas of the community, empowering people to build the kind of street, neighbourhood, and world that they want to live in—*right now*. If something is happening that looks like mutual aid (and it probably is happening), join in, listen, learn, and share.

Mutual aid will look slightly different from charitable work or the work that social services do. Mutual aid is *us*, doing things *with and for each other*, in a way that is unselfish, and that recognises that we all depend on one another in various ways. When we practice mutual aid, we see others as precious equals who deserve support and happiness, not as ‘charity cases’ in need of pity, rescuing, or punishment.

Mutual aid is not a series of transactions. Through being realistic and clear with ourselves about what we need and what we can manage, we offer only what we are able to give freely, and without conditions. Remember the basic principles on page 4, and do your best to put them into practice.

The point of mutual aid is that it responds to the needs and abilities of the people who are doing it. This means it will look different for everyone. However, some examples of mutual aid in practice might be:

- ♥ making and sharing food—e.g. community meals
- ♥ sharing legal advice with people undergoing difficulties at work, or with the immigration system
- ♥ fixing somebody’s bike
- ♥ collecting prescriptions or shopping for neighbours
- ♥ helping people fill in benefit forms or write letters
- ♥ translating information into community languages
- ♥ accompanying people at risk of homelessness to housing appointments
- ♥ providing emotional support
- ♥ organising community childcare

Think about what skills and capacities you have, and put them to use! (For example, I’m making this zine!)

on alienation

We are encouraged to isolate ourselves from the people around us. Newspaper headlines and social media rumours create and reinforce the sense that everybody is out to get us—that there is a secret army of ‘scammers’ waiting to take advantage of us the moment we let our guard down. We’re told that we should be suspicious and afraid of others, and this point is hammered home by the creation of various fictitious characters: the “benefits cheat”; the “healthcare tourist”; the “gang member”. It can be so hard to see through these stereotypes and catch a glimpse of the real person underneath. That “benefits cheat” may actually be somebody who struggles with poverty and loneliness, and who treasures the rare days when they can make it out of doors without their mobility aid. The “healthcare tourist” could be a person who has survived unspeakable horrors, who misses their homeland every day, and who didn't even know about the NHS until they settled here. And that “gang member” is more likely to be a confused kid struggling to navigate a world that wants to write them off before their life has truly begun.

Without doubt, there are a handful of people out there who do seek to exploit the trust and goodness of others. But they are in the minority, and following certain basic safety practices can reduce the risk still further. The wager of mutual aid is that it’s worth taking that risk—that the rewards are not only far greater, but far more likely! For example, a 2013 survey by Ipsos Mori found that while the public believed that 24% of benefits were claimed fraudulently, the actual figure was 1.1%. According to the Government’s own figures, in 2016/17 12.5% of benefits went unclaimed. You’re more likely to know somebody who is too afraid to claim what they’re entitled to than to know somebody who is committing fraud.

Through engaging with one another as people, rather than stereotypes or through a helper/helped relationship, we can dissolve this isolation and alienation, and build strong community friendships that will support us not only in times of crisis, but at all times.

Another way that isolation can work is through the alienation of labour and the means of reproducing ourselves. In the same way that we have come to rely on industrial bakeries and supermarkets for our bread, or garment factories and global fast fashion chains for our clothes, we have also come to rely on ‘the authorities’ to help and support us and our communities. And in the same way that baking our own bread or making our own clothes (or doing these things for those of our friends and neighbours who can’t do them) can feel liberating, so can helping ourselves, right now, without asking permission. It can be a means of reconnecting us to all the endless possibilities that exist outside of what is currently offered to us. We can make a loaf that’s exactly to our taste, or a garment that fits us perfectly—so, too, can we begin to make the world we want to see, *with and for others*.

difficulties

Every situation, every community, and every person is different. They will bring their own positives and face their own challenges, and will respond to things in their own ways. For that reason, it's impossible to provide a comprehensive list of potential difficulties, and still more difficult to prescribe solutions for them. There's no one-size-fits-all! Instead, I've chosen to share a few words of advice and points of possible friction that it might be helpful to be aware of. Check the [resources](#) page for more ideas!

1. **Resist burnout and overwork.**

This is my number one tip! Remember it's impossible for you to do everything and help everybody. Don't overcommit. Maintain healthy boundaries around your mutual aid work. People will learn that you can't always be available! Remember the mutual aid principle of sharing *what you have*. Be realistic and clear about what you can manage.

2. **Understand why you don't work with 'the authorities' and be prepared to explain it again and again.**

Local councils can be useful sources of help, and one aspect of mutual aid work can involve trying to encourage them to fulfil their obligations to people in need. But because of their position (part of the state), they cannot, by definition, help everybody. Councils have no obligation, for example, to house anybody who isn't a UK or EU citizen, or to help anybody who doesn't meet certain criteria. They often require lots of paperwork and have inflexible procedures that mean they cannot meet people where they are. This means that local authorities are often incapable of helping people whose needs don't neatly fit into a particular box.

3. **Learn about and practice transformative justice.**

Transformative justice is an alternative to prison-focused, punitive, or police-based forms of justice. TJ aims to help us build strong networks of care and accountability that can support us when we've been harmed and help us repair when we've caused harm. See the [resources](#) page to learn more!

4. **Build frameworks that help you to organise transparently and collectively.**

It feels boring and bureaucratic at first, but trust me, having procedures and policies in place, however informally, will help you *so much* when conflict or confusion arises.

5. **Get comfortable with not being able to control everything.**

One of the most frequent queries I get is "how do you know this person is genuinely in need?" My standard answer is a bit like this: "Often I don't know for absolute, 100% certain—but I can usually tell, and I'm happy to take it on trust. I don't think most people would lie, and if somebody does choose to lie, I can't control that. I'm much more comfortable with being down a few tins of beans or an hour of my time than I am with the idea that I let somebody go hungry because I didn't trust them."

resources

Forming a group, building structures, etc.

CT Butler & Amy Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus: a handbook on Formal Consensus decision making* (<https://tinyurl.com/ConflictandConsensus>)

Big Door Brigade (<http://bigdoorbrigade.com>)

London Campaign Against Poverty, *Building Mutual Support*—a pamphlet that offers a great working example! (<https://tinyurl.com/LCAPpamphlet>)

Dean Spade, *What Do I Do Under Pressure?* A worksheet for self-reflection that's really useful in terms of building supportive structures that take account of how group members *actually are*. (<https://tinyurl.com/StressWorksheet>)

Transformative Justice.

Ejeris Dixon & Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (eds), *Beyond Survival: Stories and Strategies from the Transformative Justice Movement*. AK Press, 2020. (<https://www.akpress.org/beyond-survival.html>)

Mia Mingus/Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, *Podmapping for Transformative Justice* (<https://batjc.wordpress.com/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/>)

Other stuff.

Radical Mycology zine. What can we learn from observing mushrooms, and the ways in which they connect, organise, and share resources? (<https://we.riseup.net/assets/287443/radical+mycology.pdf>)

Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth—a mutual aid group in South London that offers both a great working example *and* some resources! (<https://housingactionsouthwarkandlambeth.wordpress.com>)

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