

# SHIFT

Working Artists  
in a Time of Crisis



# Dear artists,

This is what we train for.

Our present moment is a health crisis, a brutal one.

It is also a crisis of meaning. It is a crisis of connection, of story. It is a crisis of who we are to each other and the agreements that hold us together. And those are things we artists know how to work on.

The script for how we will be together in this time has not been written. Artists will have a huge impact on that story.

Your skills are sorely needed. If you mostly hang out with artists, you might think your skills as an artist are normal. They are not. Few people have the range, depth of practice, and follow-through to discover and manifest new visions.

**Artists navigate the unknown.** We go in our studios and ask new questions, pushing away from shore and into uncertainty. In this time of roiling uncertainty, we know how to stay awake and responsive, and how to help others do the same.

**Artists build possible futures.** This moment desperately needs futures beyond the sobering medical news and the jarring contortions of policies and markets.

**We are connectors, conveners, community builders.**

**We understand rhythm, flow, and negative space.** Not everything we do right now needs to be *doing*. Silence is a way of telling. Stillness is movement.

**We use what we have to build what we need.** We make sculptures from discarded materials, dances out of everyday gestures, music from found sounds. At a time when many are lamenting what is being taken away, we know how to begin with what we have.

**We create the images and songs and dances and stories that are needed,** that comfort and challenge and inspire and bear witness, that return us to our deeper selves or urge us forward into transformation.

**We build alternative economies** based in collaboration, barter, D.I.Y. resourcefulness, and repurposing what others do not value.

**We challenge assumptions and reframe the world.** How we see this current emergency and how we see ourselves within it will determine how we emerge from it. Artists look past the noise to deeper, more radical possibilities.

I don't know what your art is. I don't know your connections to community. But wherever you are, I call on you to unleash your practice as an artist and maker and re-imaginer. In this crisis of meaning, you are first responders.

You don't need to save the world. You need only carry your gifts and skills into this present challenge.

—Andrew Simonet, 3.19.20

THIS IS WHAT  
WE TRAIN FOR.

## About this workbook

This is an evolving, collaborative toolkit. It is here so we artists can stabilize our lives and then take action, creating what is needed in our communities and our world. New art, new structures, new connections and futures.

Let us do what artists have always done: **Use what we have to build what we need.**

## How to use this workbook

First and foremost, use it however you want. You are the expert on your own practice and life. If a tool here seems useful, pick it up; if not, leave it.

That said, I recommend forming a SHIFT Working Group with artists in your network. Doing this work in dialogue with others—even one other artist—will deepen it and generate shared ideas and resources you could never come up with alone. The SHIFT Working Group structure and resources are on our website.

This workbook is roughly in order of urgency. First, we stabilize our physical health and mental health. Then we work on our finances. Then we begin to make things. If a section is not relevant to your present situation, skip it and do the next.

This workbook is printable. Consider printing it and working offline. Writing by hand—mark making—is powerful, as we artists know.

There are ongoing online SHIFT workshops (and recordings of them) that will give context: [artistsu.org](http://artistsu.org)

# SHIFT Principles

**Artists have crucial tools and skills to address this crisis of meaning and connection in our culture.**

**Moving fluidly through uncertainty is an artist's strength.**

**Artists also have tools and skills for surviving and thriving in marginal situations.**

We know how to assemble a hybrid life and living. We know how to repurpose and reuse, how to create and share resources, and how to collaborate. We know how to use what we have to build what we need. Let's use those skills and model them for others.

**Coming together builds hope and strength.**

We can learn from and support each other.

**This is a long game. Pace yourself.**

You can only sprint for so long. Take a breath. Plan your week. Then take another breath.

**Strategic means less.**

Being strategic means doing fewer things and doing them well, with the full resources they require.

**If we are replacing things that are going away (income, structures, ways of working), let's replace them with things that nourish us and that are grounded in our values.**



## PHYSICAL + MENTAL HEALTH

Conditions and precautions change over time in this pandemic. It is important to specify and update how you stay physically safe and healthy.

**There is no perfect information about this complex and evolving situation.** We make choices based on what we can understand.

**Updating your practices is smart, but constantly revisiting decisions is stressful and can make our choices worse.** Set your policy for getting groceries and necessities; don't rethink it every time you need something.

**Given the current conditions, what specifically do you and your household need this week to secure your physical health?**

Set your policy for going out into the world for necessities. (Don't reassess daily.)

- How often and where?
- What do you wear and do to keep yourself safe?
- Can you get things delivered?

Beyond COVID-19, are there other health challenges you need to address?

# Mental Health

In addition to the medical crisis, there is a looming mental health crisis. Isolation, anxiety about the pandemic, and financial stress are all potent challenges to our well-being. **Set up a daily rhythm that sustains you and your household before you reach a breaking point.**

**Be unconditionally generous with yourself.** Most of us massively overestimate what we can get done in a day or a week. Remember that simply sustaining ourselves in this crisis is a heavy burden.

**Living almost entirely at home gives us more control over our schedule. Claim that control.** Prioritize balance. Schedule breaks. Set timers. Use internet blockers to stay focused on non-digital tasks. More than ever, intention about how we spend our days will be the difference between spinning our wheels and moving forward, between stress and breath.

**We cannot sprint through this.** Many of us started rushing when this crisis hit: moving work online, preparing for weeks of isolation, dealing with children whose schools are closed. We cannot hustle our way through this emergency. It's a long game, and we need to set up our lives and days sustainably.

**Be specific about what sustains you. Put numbers on it.** “Get exercise” is a hope. “One 30-minute workout per day” is a goal. “Make art” is vague; “One hour a day drawing” is doable.



## What specifically do you and your household need this week to maintain your emotional and mental well-being?

- **Your body:** sleep, exercise, nourishing food, touch, meditation.
- **Your art practice:** time and materials for creating.
- **Social connections:** who you want to be in touch with, how often, and through what platforms.
- **Counseling:** many therapists are offering free or sliding scale online sessions.
- **What you watch and listen to:** art, books, films, music. Netflix is great, but there is so much brilliant and beautiful work you can find online, especially now.

# Your Home

We are living almost entirely at home now. Most of our homes are not set up for this. Shift your space to nourish your current way living. Some things you might consider:

**Set aside a space for art making.** It could be a room, or just a table, or even half a table. Put your materials there and tell everyone: This is my studio.

**If you are working remotely, set up your office.** Put everything you need there. Make a list of equipment you need to work well and comfortably: maybe a good set of headphones, a comfortable chair, a standing desk, better lighting.

**Make a space for children to do schoolwork.** Put all their books and materials there.

**Are there any underused spaces you can repurpose temporarily?** Make a basement play space or turn your guest room into an art studio.

**If your home includes access to the outdoors, make that space as intentional and welcoming as the inside of your home.**

**Are there any organizing or cleaning projects you now have time for?** Being gentle and reasonable, think of things your household could work on to improve your home life.

What specifically would make your home better support your present way of living?

# SHIFT Working Group Meeting: Physical + Mental Health

## Assignment

Do SHIFT One: Physical and Mental Health, p. 6-11 in the SHIFT Workbook.

## Checkin (15 minutes). Because this is the first meeting, do brief intros:

**Introduce yourself (if you don't know everyone):**

- where you are
- what you do artistically
- one project (artistic or otherwise) you are particularly proud of.

**Share something that is nourishing you this week.**

## Topic: Physical + Mental Health (30-40 minutes)

**What did you discover from the writing prompts?**

**What steps will you take this week to secure your well-being?**

**If you are facing a challenge or need some brainstorming, say so. "I could use some thoughts on..." or "Has anyone else figured out..."**

## Check-out (5 minutes)

**HOST SHARES:** Writing prompts for next week.

**ALL SHARE:** One thing you are going to work on in the next week.



## Financial Health

**This is an unprecedented economic disruption.** Most people face a significant loss of income and uncertainty about their financial future.

**You are not alone.**

**You have done nothing wrong to arrive where you are.**

**If you have been living as an artist, you are, in my opinion, massively successful financially.** Making a life as an artist require great financial skill. We live in a world where support for The Arts rarely extends to artists. We manage multiple revenue streams and multiple artistic activities. We know how to barter, repurpose, recycle, and collaborate. We are, compared with most people, well equipped to function in shifting economic conditions.

The current economic situation calls for new levels of resourcefulness and creativity, but **these are muscles artists already have.** Let's be realistic about the challenges before us and acknowledge that our skills and communities are robust and resilient.

**This is a long game.** First, stabilize your finances for the week and the month. Then, when you are ready, begin thinking long-term: six months, twelve months. Many of us hope that everything will back to normal soon, but that is unlikely. Be strategic now and your future self will thank you.

Specific things you  
can do to stabilize  
your finances:

**Write down your numbers**

**Access benefits and safety nets**

**Lower expenses**

**Raise revenue**

**Manage debt and assets**

**Build shared resources**

## Write down your numbers

The best way to combat financial anxiety is to put numbers on your situation. Personal finance comes down to a bunch of numbers. Write them down. Thinking about finances without numbers attached only provokes panic and dread.

What are your current non-optional monthly household expenses? If you have a partner or shared household economy, do this together.

**EXPENSE**

**AMOUNT**



**TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENSE**

What do you anticipate will be your household income this month?

INCOME SOURCE

AMOUNT



TOTAL MONTHLY INCOME

YOUR MONTHLY GAP

If your income is at or above what you need, that's great. Think about building up a reserve fund if possible, and offering resources to others in your community who are struggling.

If your income is below what you need, don't panic. Many, many people are in this situation, through no fault of their own. Knowing specifically how many dollars you are short will allow you to take steps to stabilize.

## Reduce Expenses

**Most artists don't have expense problems, we have revenue problems.** But knowing where your money is going allows to make decisions.

**Look at your bank statement and credit card statement for recurring charges you can cancel (cable, online platforms).**

**Ask your internet provider if they have free or reduced cost service,** especially if your income situation has shifted.

**Look into Obamacare or Medicaid based in your new financial reality.**

**Be ethical and thoughtful.** If you are going to stop paying someone—a babysitter, for example—consider continuing some version of payment if you can afford it and the person needs it. This could include prepaying for future work (put it in writing).

**Stop going out to eat all the time.** Oh, you already did that. Good job!

**Keeping in mind your mental and physical health needs, are there expenses you can eliminate, reduce or postpone?**



# Increase Revenue

Based on your current income and expenses, set a specific number.

## My goal is to increase my income by

**CAVEAT: Every artist is different.** Every community is different. And during this crisis, opportunities and conditions shift rapidly. Below are general questions and prompts; you are the expert on your own practice and capacities.

**CAVEAT: Generating revenue takes time and effort.** Knowing what people can pay you for is an important step. Putting it in a format people can find and understand is another. Actually reaching those people and getting hired are further steps. Be realistic with your timelines.

### Are there ways you can use your skills to work remotely?

A confession: I don't love working digitally. I am a choreographer by training, so presence, breath, and the body are central to my practice. That carried into my work with Artists U, which always emphasized in-person conversations and community building. Then the current crisis began, and on the first weekend of lockdown, I had a six-hour workshop scheduled with a dozen artists, Presenting Your Art, which became an online workshop. We watched each artist's presentation, and discussed their work samples and language. It was powerful. By the end—did we really last six hours? yes—we all felt grateful for our time together. There are many ways to provide valuable, rich experiences remotely. Even curmudgeons like me can do it. Live events, recorded events, “asynchronous” work (people complete assignments or prompts on their own time), ongoing discussion platforms, group conversations, one-on-ones, and combinations of all of these.

### What's the hardest problem you can solve for someone remotely?

The harder the problem, generally, the better the pay. “I can edit your organization's posts” is not a very hard problem, and one that many people can solve. “I can write your posts” solves a harder problem. “I can manage your communications” is harder still. “You're building community in a time of crisis? I can help you envision and implement a strategy.” Now there's a hard problem. You can imagine the relieved executive director who now has someone with vision and follow-through ready to tackle that.

### Make a skills resume.

A traditional “job resume” lists previous employment; a skills resume lists your skills and competencies. Many artists have skills that do not come across in an employment history. Many of us manage (and can be hired for) complex, high-level tasks. But the world doesn't see that. Do the skills resume structure on p. 51-55 of the free MAKING Workbook ([downloadable here](#)).

**Make it easy for people to pay you.** No one knows how to hire artists. Tell them. People cannot pay you until you tell them:

1. What specifically you can do for them
2. What is distinctive about it, what you bring to the work
3. How much it costs

**If you have existing contracts or gigs, make specific and imaginative proposals to your employers, organizations, or customers.** “I would love to do a virtual version of this workshop (or exhibit or residency), and here's how we'll do it.” Most organizations are extremely limited in their imagination. So imagine it for them. Use your skills as an artist to solve the impossible problem of an online dance residency or a socially distanced community mural. Give them something they can say yes to, programming they can offer at a time when most organizations have cancelled everything.

If you make objects to sell, can you set up ways for people to (easily) purchase your work? If you have existing platforms for online sales, can you update and promote them?

People have time to read, watch things, and learn things. Can you write, produce, or instruct?

Do you have deferred professional tasks that could help you build revenue and opportunities in the future? Get your work samples together, update your online presence, work on your artist statement.

**Fundraise from foundations and government sources.** There are many emergency grant programs as well as existing grants that are still taking applications. Grant writing is one thing we can definitely do from home. Check out [Secrets of the Grant](#) on our website.

**Fundraise from individuals** (especially if you have followers who have money at this moment.). Platforms like Kickstarter and GoFundMe allow you to raise money for specific projects. Patreon allows you to have regular monthly supporters who fund your work. Download Damian Sinclair's excellent guide for artists, [The Simple Art of Fundraising](#), from [artistsu.org](#)

**How can you bring in more income?** Brainstorm new revenue streams and ways to increase existing revenue streams.

# Access Safety Nets

There are many safety nets and emergency funding programs, public and private. Here are general thoughts on accessing these funds.

**Do your research (without getting overwhelmed).** Here's a great to-do list item: Spend one hour researching emergency funding. Do some online searching. Reach out to your network and to arts organizations and professionals (there are many who want to help). Then make a *curated and doable list* of relevant opportunities.

**Get it while you can.** There is a huge initial outpouring of grants and loans. That funding pool may get smaller and harder to access over time. Get on it now.

**Unemployment, if you qualify, can be one of the most sustaining safety nets.** A \$5,000 emergency grant is great, but a couple thousand dollars in unemployment every month adds up to a lot more money. And unlike grants, which are selective, if you qualify for unemployment, you get it. Many states are allowing freelancers to access unemployment, and each state will have its own policies. Do your research, and get your documentation together (last two years of W9s, 1099s, contracts, paystubs).

**Emergency funding.** Save all cancelled contracts and cancellation emails. Generate them if they don't exist. Think of yourself as a business that lost revenue. If you had an informal agreement or a recurring gig without a contract, work with the employer to document these cancelled opportunities.

**The worst number of grants to write is one.** If you are applying for an emergency grant, apply for several. These grants will be competitive, so increase your chances. Once you get one application together, you can mostly cut and paste for the next one.

**If you are owed a tax refund, file your taxes immediately.** If you will owe taxes, wait until the extended deadline. If you cannot pay everything you owe, pay what you can, and consider setting up a payment plan. For artists who pay quarterly estimated payments, that deadline has also been extended. And if your income has gone down, your quarterly payments will likely go down, too.

**Be strategic with your US government \$1200 check.** At this moment, the most effective use of that money is probably not paying down debt. If possible, use this money to start or increase your emergency fund.

**Research other national and local safety nets.** Look into SNAP (food stamps), subsidized health insurance, and local food banks and subsidies. Towns, places of worship, schools, and civic associations are all working to distribute resources to those in need.

**Spread the word.** Share information and opportunities with people in your community. We are in this together.

Write your (curated and doable) list of emergency resources and safety nets.

# Manage Debt

**All debt is negotiable.** This is something wealthy people know that artists often don't. Call your creditors and lenders, tell them you've had a loss of income, ask them to write off a portion of your debt or lower your interest rate. There are people whose job it is, all day every day, to renegotiate the terms of your debt. *Make that phone call.* Ask them what they can do for you, and then, shut up. Stop talking. Don't apologize or backtrack. Let them talk.

**Call your landlord or mortgage lender and ask if you can miss or reduce your payments.**

**If you have high interest credit card debt, consider applying for a credit card offering zero interest for six months or a year.** If you feel comfortable managing it, you can transfer high interest debt to the new card and create some breathing room.

**For student loans, ask for a deferment or look into income-based repayment or debt forgiveness.**

**Get help by working (only) with a nonprofit credit counseling agency.** Nonprofits give advice and assistance but do not make money off of you, unlike for-profit credit counselors. They have pre-agreements with hundreds of creditors (credit card companies, health insurance companies, banks) to renegotiate terms. Often, they can consolidate multiple debt streams into one lower-interest payment. Check the [National Foundation for Credit Counseling](#) for an organization near you. I have worked with [CCCSMD](#) which has affiliates in several states and offers free services nationally. Note: If you get debt written off (rather than a lower interest rate), creditors usually report that as income for you (1099-C).

**Consider declaring bankruptcy.** It can be an effective remedy for an untenable financial situation.

**List your debts: student loans, credit cards, personal loans, car loans.**

TYPE OF DEBT

AMOUNT



# Manage Your Assets

If you own your home, consider a home equity loan, line of credit, or refinancing while taking cash out.

If you have access to a credit card, consider a cash advance if you need it. Make sure you know the terms.

Many credit unions and banks offer personal loans with better terms than credit cards.

Do you have financial assets you can use to stabilize other people in your community or network?

**List your assets: savings, investments, mortgage, retirement accounts.** For a mortgage, list how much you still owe and the approximate value of your home.

ASSET

AMOUNT

## Look for (and Create) Cooperative Structures

The most sustaining resource of all is community, our connections and networks.

Look around for mutual aid societies, faith-based networks, and other shared support systems. You may already be connected to one.

Barter your skills for things you need. Trade graphic design work for a virtual music lesson for your child (or vice versa).

Build structures that can carry through the pandemic and beyond. Taking turns virtually teaching each other's children could turn into a childcare network once social distancing ends. Taking turns picking up each other's groceries could turn into a meal co-op. I know families that have combined their risk pools (with clear written agreements about behavior) to provide each other with childcare and shared home schooling. Use your skills as a collaborator and project builder to create community supports.

What cooperative structures can you join, create, or imagine?

# SHIFT Working Group Meeting: Financial Health

## Assignment

Do SHIFT Two: Financial Health, p. 12-23 in the SHIFT Workbook.

## Checkin (10 minutes)

Share something that is nourishing you this week.

**Reiterate confidentiality:** This is a safe space, a judgment-free space. Feel free to share (or not) specifics about your finances.

## Topic: Financial Health (30-40 minutes)

Do you know your numbers? What did you learn from writing them down?

What steps are you taking this week to stabilize your finances?

Are there opportunities or resources you can share with the group?

If you are facing a challenge or need some brainstorming, say so. “I could use some thoughts on...” or “Has anyone else figured out...”

## Check-out (5 minutes)

Share one thing you are going to work on in the next week.