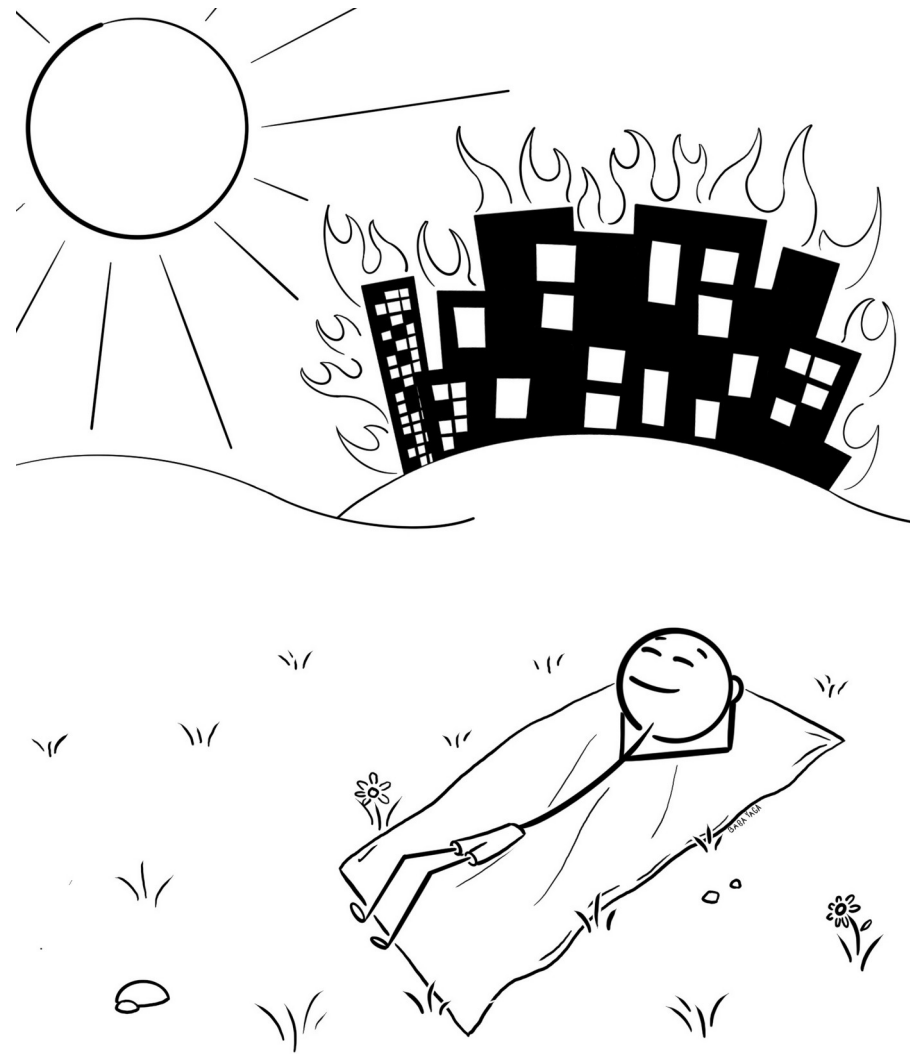


*...to stare into the abyss and see the absence of meaning not as a tragedy but as an opportunity. To consider it a space to fill with your own values, to define how you want to be in the world and what you believe to be true. An active nihilist isn't intimidated by chaos, they recognise it as a chance to create something new and better.*

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## How To Be a Happy Nihilist



## **How To Be a Happy Nihilist**

*Exhausted by the modern pressure to squeeze meaning out of every moment? Here's a radical way to reset your priorities!*

**Written by Wendy Syfret**

knowledge that even the greatest achievements in human history will eventually be lost to time? Are the issues, people or situations that cause you stress or pain actually worth the worry when you remember that no one will ever remember or really be impacted by them?

The only real impact these earthly concerns have is on what they take you away from: things that may not ‘matter’, but at least bring you joy.

Focusing on the scale of your own life, and how insignificant it is, also allows you to ask: OK, if I don’t matter, and neither do the issues that take up so much of my time, how does the world show itself differently? If I’m no longer the centre of my own universe, what takes that space?

You might start wondering what you want to last after you’ve gone, and what needs to be protected and treasured.

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### About the author

Wendy Syfret is a Melbourne-based writer. She is the author of *The Sunny Nihilist: How a Meaningless Life Can Make You Truly Happy* (2021) and *How to Think Like an Activist* (2021). Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *British Vogue* and *The Guardian*, among others.

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### Cover artwork by

Baba Yaga

Instagram  
@chooktoedhut

In theory, the pursuit of a meaningful life is noble. Foundational concepts of community, ethics, logic, morality, consciousness and equality were born from the investigation of meaning. From Aristotle and Plato to the entire oeuvre of John Hughes, the urge to wrestle with the point of it all has inspired great works of art, literature and film. But today something’s gone awry and the pursuit of meaning inspires more angst than awe. The search has moved from a private pursuit to a marketable product.

### The rise of meaningless meaning

Let me demonstrate with a game, ‘spot the meaningless meaning’. Next time you’re at the supermarket, pharmacy or really any non-enlightened space of commerce, pay attention to what the products are attempting to offer. One might expect a barrage of quality and utility assurances: ‘these chickpeas are low sodium’, ‘this facemask is non-irritating’. But, increasingly, aspirations are higher. A chocolate bar isn’t skim (skimmed) milk powder and sugar, it’s a chance to create an intergenerational family moment. A lipstick isn’t a bullet of colour to light up a drawn face, but a weapon of radical self-expression.

Rather than informing a population of philosophically fulfilled, elevated beings, the ubiquity of all this bite-sized meaning has had an adverse effect, fuelling our familiar, modern malaise of dissatisfaction, disconnection and burnout.

The fixation with making all areas of existence generically meaningful has created exhausting realities where everything suddenly really, really *matters*. Daily newsletters flood our inboxes, prescribing never-ending tasks and goals to meditate over and mark as complete. In the shower, we listen to podcasts about making this day *count*, then towel off and cram in a few minutes of mindful journalling about what we managed to meaningfully achieve the day before.

But as meaning moves from a long-term exploration to a daily metric, it’s creating new problems. When we’re not immediately able to locate meaning in our actions, jobs, relationships and consumer products, we’re left feeling like anxious, empty failures. The once-noble pursuit that built culture and helped us carve out rewarding existences becomes just another task on the endless checklist of a ‘good life’ that we’re never quite able to tick off.

### Nihilism as a solution

So what’s the alternative? Is the answer to embrace a state of pointless, nihilistic chaos? Yeah, pretty much. At least that’s what’s worked for me.

For the past few years, I’ve been consumed by nihilism. Reading that, it would

be fair to assume things haven't been peachy. But my descent into the controversial philosophy hasn't been a grim road of despair and hopelessness. Quite the opposite. It's become one of the most illuminating and fortifying parts of my life.

Rejecting the urge to seek and denote meaning to all things has changed the way I assign value and spend time. It has challenged what I focus on and, most importantly, what I disregard. I've found that a kind of optimistic or 'sunny' nihilism highlights the delicate beauty of existence, the absurdity of life, and the exciting chaos of the everyday. But I'm getting ahead of myself. To understand the power of sunny nihilism, it's necessary to begin with the philosophy itself.

The broadest explanation of nihilism argues that life is meaningless and the systems to which we subscribe to give us a sense of purpose – such as religion, politics, traditional family structures or even the notion of absolute truth itself – are fantastical human constructs; inventions to make the randomness of existence feel a little more orderly. Or, as nihilism's poster boy Friedrich Nietzsche put it: 'Every belief, every considering something true, is necessarily false because there is simply no true world.'

Breaking it down further, the American philosopher Donald Crosby divides nihilism into four main forms: moral, epistemological, cosmic and, perhaps the best-known, existential. Moral nihilism rejects fundamental ideas of right and wrong; epistemological nihilism takes issue with absolute truth; cosmic nihilism considers nature to be inherently indifferent and hostile; and finally we reach existential nihilism, in many ways the culmination of all these considerations, which probably keeps most people up at night – the basic idea being that there is no meaning to life, everything is pointless.

Reading all that, it's fair to argue that nihilism is kind of a bummer. These ideas do pose the risk of curdling into a kind of toxic nihilism that leaves the individual feeling despondent and overwhelmed. What's the point of doing anything if nothing matters? If there is no inherent understanding of good and bad, why try to lead a moral life? If everything is pointless, why even get out of bed?

### **The cleansing power of sunny nihilism**

While I'll admit that the message that nothing matters – not your job, god, universe, certainly not what type of canned goods you buy – is an overwhelming thought, it doesn't have to be. Set against this never-ending obsession with locating (or, too often, purchasing) meaning, it can be liberating.

Moondog doesn't care about anything, he lives for pleasure. Towards the end of the film, he outlines his life's mantra to a reporter: 'We're here to have a good time.' For all this destruction, and clear disregard for rules, values and consequences, Moondog isn't punished. By the end of the film, he has been awarded a Pulitzer Prize and several million dollars. Although, true to form, he shows they're meaningless too (I won't spoil the finale).

Moondog's embrace of nihilism demonstrates that, when you stop focusing on a greater point, you're able to ask simpler but more rewarding questions: what does happiness look like right now? What would give me pleasure today? How can I achieve a sense of satisfaction in this moment? Most of the time, the answers aren't complex. They're small delights already at hand – time spent with loved ones, a delicious meal, a walk in nature, a cup of coffee. Or, in Moondog's case, a lot of booze and parties.

### **Nihilism doesn't have to spiral into selfishness**

Moondog's experience sounds great to me, but it leads to a second concern surrounding nihilism. It might not make you miserable, but what about everyone who has to hang out with you? If nothing matters, you're not part of some larger plan and you're not held accountable by any rulebook. Motivated only by what feels good in the moment, what's stopping you acting only for your own interests?

Nietzsche was mindful of these pain points, writing in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): 'He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.'

Nihilism asks us to toss out meaning and gaze into the void that's left in its place. But rather than being a simple, terrifying black hole, a void can prompt reflection. It's a space to be filled with whatever you want. In that way, nihilism can serve as a funhouse mirror, reflecting and distorting your own beliefs. Approach it with pain and fear, and those feelings will be magnified. Go to it looking for a way to excuse gross behaviour, and you'll find it.

### **Stare into the abyss**

Give it a go yourself. Take a moment to truly submit to your own smallness in the Universe. To admit you are meaningless. That you don't matter. That your name, ego, reputation, family, friends and loves will soon be gone.

This needn't be a destructive experience. Once the discomfort passes, and your ego abates, stop to consider – how has your understanding of your own time and energy changed? Is your job really so important when coupled with the

I hope that the young people browsing these products are resilient enough to not fall into such narratives; that they're able to pause to ask what these cheap exchanges are calling on them to invest emotionally or financially. Will this purchase make them happy, or is it an example of what Heffernan cautioned against when she said we were out to make 'the dreariest possible lives sound heroic'?

### Recognise the happy side of nihilism

When promoting nihilism as the antidote to the commercialisation of meaning, I tend to meet the same repeated questions: if there's no point, then why do anything? Why get out of bed? Wash your hair? Treat another person with kindness? Not fall into a quivering heap?

I'm reminded of an episode of the Netflix sitcom *The Good Place* (2016-20). Chidi – a character who happens to be a moral philosopher – has the kind of existential crisis that inspires these queries. During his breakdown, he walks a classroom of philosophy students down the major paths where humanity has attempted to locate meaning and understand how to live an 'ethical life'. After cycling through the arguments of virtue ethics, consequentialism and deontology, he finally declares that all these pathways to meaning lead nowhere (it's worth watching the show to hear Chidi explain why) before concluding that nihilism is the only logical philosophical view – at which point he has a full meltdown.

While I love Chidi, I find the scene frustrating for how narrowly it presents this cause and effect. Such a response has always puzzled me. After all, did you get out of bed this morning to search for the meaning of life or for a cup of coffee? Again, are such grand questions really bringing such grand comforts?

In contrast to Chidi, another pop-culture figure shows how nihilism can inspire greater happiness. In the film *The Beach Bum* (2019), Matthew McConaughey plays Moondog, an epicurean, once-iconic, Florida-based writer. His is a woozy and colourful tale of excess and hedonism that involves a lot of drinking, drugs, avoided responsibility, and sex. All of which are indulged in with few consequences.

Watching *The Beach Bum*, you feel you've seen this movie before, you know to wait for the fall, when Moondog will collapse under the weight of his shirked responsibilities and the system will catch up to him. Except the fall never comes. After seeing it at South by Southwest film festival, the critic Hazem Fahmy wrote: 'Rather than simply not address these issues, the film goes out of its way to remind us that nothing in this strange dimension truly matters.'

When I contemplate life's pointlessness, I begin by remembering that, in the scope of all human history, I really matter very little (a rather cosmic approach). My issues and concerns are moot. My successes and failures will all be forgotten. As will the achievements and stumbles of everyone around me (existential nihilism at its finest).

While I may feel dwarfed by the scope of endless and apathetic time, the smallest elements of my life begin to expand. If nothing matters long-term, my focus shifts to *this* moment. I understand that the present, however mundane, is as fleeting, temporal, fragile and forgettable as the greatest events in human history.

Nihilism makes me wonder about what I do and don't pay attention to. Is what another person thinks of me imbued with greater meaning (or meaninglessness) as compared with a brush of jasmine tumbling over a neighbour's fence? Not really. So why am I consumed by one while ignoring the other?

By his own description, Nietzsche 'philosophise[d] with a hammer', breaking open large ideas and challenging his readers to see what could be reformed with the pieces. In this way nihilism, like all philosophies, is a tool to explore parts of our lives. As with any tool, it can be picked up and put down, used to create or destroy; outcomes and executions are dependent on the user's intent. It is up to you to decide if you will fall into the destructive grooves of toxic nihilism, or opt for something a little lighter. You may not have a purpose, but you do have agency. It's this reading of nihilism that I think about when considering a life without meaning.

But how does one go about picking up such a tool and using it in a positive way? This Guide will help you embrace sunny nihilism and avoid its toxic alternative.

### Key points

1. **The rise of meaningless meaning.** The search for meaning used to be a noble pursuit, but it's become commercialised and now inspires more angst than awe.
2. **Nihilism as a solution.** This is the philosophy that says life is meaningless. Handled with care, it can be liberating.
3. **The cleansing power of sunny nihilism.** This is a kind of optimistic nihilism that highlights the delicate beauty of existence, the absurdity of life, and the exciting chaos of the everyday.
4. **Understand the difference between passive and active forms of nihilism.** Passive nihilists scramble to fill the void with anything to

hand; active nihilists are undaunted, and fill the space with their own values.

5. **Stay alert to meaningless meaning.** To avoid passive or toxic nihilism, it pays to be vigilant of, and guard against, the ways the world is trying to convince you that you're partaking in a sacred act.
6. **Recognise the happy side of nihilism.** When you stop focusing on a greater point, you'll find you can ask simpler but more rewarding questions, such as: what does happiness look like right now?
7. **Nihilism doesn't have to spiral into selfishness.** When you stare into the abyss, it reframes your attention to things you hope will last for a little longer than yourself.
8. **Try a light meditation on death.** I can report that this is a terrifying exercise. But when you imagine each breath to be your last, each breath becomes a gift on arrival.
9. **Remember pointless pleasures.** From the smell of fresh basil to an excellent joke, start a 'nice things' list. Meaningless, sure. Precious, absolutely.

## Think it through

### Understand the difference between passive and active forms of nihilism

The challenges posed by nihilism weren't lost on Nietzsche, who had an elegant way of explaining how the philosophy can serve as a destructive or constructive force. According to him, *passive nihilists* absorb the messages of meaninglessness and are threatened. They fear the void so scramble to fill it by indulging in any offering of it. As Nolen Gertz wrote in *Aeon* in 2020, this form of blind self-protection is a 'dangerous form of self-destruction'.

He added: 'To believe just for the sake of believing in something can lead to a superficial existence, to the complacent acceptance of believing anything believed by others, because believing in *something* (even if it turns out to be nothing worth believing in) will be seen by the passive nihilist as preferable to taking the risk of not believing in *anything* ...'

Which is how we end up back in the trap of meaningless meaning. Or standing in the supermarket aisle, trying to convince ourselves that a can of chickpeas really *does* matter.

As a more constructive alternative, Nietzsche ushered individuals to evolve into *active nihilists*. That is, to stare into the abyss and see the absence of meaning not as a tragedy but as an opportunity. To consider it a space to fill with your

own values, to define how you want to be in the world and what you believe to be true. An active nihilist isn't intimidated by chaos, they recognise it as a chance to create something new and better.

In my own journey toward sunny nihilism, I landed somewhere in the middle. I wasn't horrified by a lack of absolute truth, but I also didn't rush to write my own. Rather, I chose to pause, stare into the void, and consider the freedom of nothingness.

### Stay alert to meaningless meaning

Whereas nihilism can prompt reflection and widen your view on existence, the commercial hijacking of meaning plays into the vulnerabilities of the passive nihilist, contributing to our era's epidemic of self-obsessed selfishness. It not only encourages you to centre every action around yourself, but it deceptively presents this as a noble act. When you embrace this kind of personal mythmaking, you give yourself permission to spend a lot of time thinking about your own life, actions and experiences.

Speaking to *Politico* magazine in 2020, Virginia Heffernan, the author of *Magic and Loss: The Internet as Art* (2016), said: 'the recent fantasy of "optimising" a life – for peak performance, productivity, efficiency – has created a cottage industry that tries to make the dreariest possible lives sound heroic.'

To help you avoid this decadent trap, it is worth being vigilant of, and guarding against, the ways the world is trying to convince you that you're partaking in a sacred act – by positioning every brand, product or service as somehow meaningful.

Are those period undies really a symbol of rebellion, or just a convenient sanitary product? Does the bottle of hot sauce in my fridge truly mark me as an iconoclastic thrill-seeker, or just indicate a robust gut flora? Is my bank really helping me invest in family values and community, or do I just appreciate the low fees if I deposit a set amount each month?

While writing this article, I was conveniently served an advert for 'Florence by Mills', the new teen skincare range from the actress Millie Bobby Brown (I appreciate the algorithm recognising my youthful spirit). The entire range is clad in the familiar pastel colours and toothless message of 'empowering young people through something something' of so many personal care products. But the 'Feed Your Soul Love U a Latte' mask stood out in particular. Turns out it's never too young to preach that enlightenment can be achieved in a 15-minute topical treatment.