

Why and how we need to become a Larger Us



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Alex Evans is the founder and Executive Director of Larger Us; a community of change-makers who share the aim of using psychology for good – to bridge divides, build broader coalitions and bring people together. He is a Visiting Professor in Practice at Newcastle University's School of Arts and Cultures, a Senior Fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, and the author of *The Myth Gap: What Happens When Evidence and Arguments Aren't Enough?* (Penguin, 2017), a book about the power of deep stories to unlock systemic social and political change and how to address a world of increasing them-and-us identity.

It's a hundred years since the poet WB Yeats wrote "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."⁹⁴

He might have been talking about today. In too many places around the world, we're succumbing to polarisation, tribalism and sectarian thinking, as authoritarianism and populism surge.

And this erosion of common ground is hampering us from responding to some of the toughest and most urgent challenges we've ever faced, like climate breakdown, hyper inequality and mass extinction.

I started thinking about this a lot back in 2018, when I was running a national campaign in the UK to oppose and try to prevent Brexit.

I was acutely aware of how my work might be contributing to the intense polarisation that had erupted on the issue, and of how conventional wisdom in the change-making world believes that the most effective campaigns usually pit a good 'us' against a bad 'them'.

I was also working to try to counter the influence of Cambridge Analytica⁹⁵ and became fascinated by how it sought to use psychology as a way to amplify division – and how it might be possible to inoculate citizens, communities or even whole societies against this kind of mass trolling.

All of these questions led me to found Larger Us,⁹⁶ a non-profit organisation that works with change-makers and activists to explore ways to use psychology to bridge divides, build broader coalitions and bring people together.

At the heart of our work is the recognition that our states of mind and the state of the world are intimately connected – and that we all need to get better at both recognising and acting on that fact.

We usually think of the problems we're facing in the real world – climate breakdown, mass extinction, inequality, poverty – in a different category from our crises of mental health, like our epidemics of depression, loneliness, anxiety and self-harm, especially among the young.

But, actually, our inner and outer crises *aren't* separate.

Take depression or anxiety. We used to think that they are caused by imbalances in brain chemistry, and that

the way to treat them is simply to take drugs to redress the imbalance.

Increasingly, though, we're realising that they have deep roots in how our ways of living fail to meet the psychological needs of many – and maybe most – of us.⁹⁷

And if the state of the world 'out there' affects our inner states of mind, our states of mind have tangible impacts on the state of the world too.

Why? Because whether we feel hopeful or fearful, calm or furious, in control or overwhelmed, all of it shapes how we show up as citizens, whether online, in our communities, or in polling booths at election time.

So it turns out that, ultimately, both our mental health *and* the health of the democracies we're part of depend on our ability to manage our mental and emotional states, especially during our 'polycrisis' of intensifying turbulence and uncertainty.

What then can we do to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem? Here are six suggestions for ways we can be the change we want to see in the world.

1. Steady yourself. Our automatic fight-flight-freeze mode is great for keeping us safe from physical danger, but *terrible* for political events. We get overwhelmed. Less empathetic. Worse at critical or imaginative thinking. More aggressive. Locked into our in-groups.

So, while it's natural to feel grief, anger and fear at the state of the world, we need to process these feelings as healthily as we can and then do our best to come to steadiness. With practice, we can build our ability to make conscious choices about how to respond to things we find threatening.⁹⁸

2. Curate your media diet. So many players in our information environment have both the motive and the means to keep us in a fight-flight-freeze state. Populist politicians. Terrorists. Conspiracy theorists. Social media or news media companies wanting to monetise our attention.

When we make intentional choices⁹⁹ about the sources and stories we use to make sense of the world, it has both personal and political impact. Do your best to avoid doomscrolling. Try to get out of your echo chamber and find thoughtful voices who challenge you.

3. Change your perspective. In-group bias is hardwired into all of us: whenever we see ourselves as part of a group, we view it more favourably. That's fine

in lots of contexts, but it tends to be disastrous where anything political is concerned because it only gives us half the picture.

Perspective taking¹⁰⁰ – being able to see a situation through someone else's eyes and empathise with what they're thinking and feeling – is fundamental if we want to help bridge divides and build broader coalitions.

4. Listen before you speak. All of us reach for the megaphone when we feel passionate. But if we make people feel judged or talked at, then the chances of any kind of real encounter evaporate – because, as the writer Amanda Ripley says, "humans need to be heard before they will listen".

Instead, ask open-ended questions – and listen to the answers. Having 'curious conversations', where both sides are open to an encounter in which they change their mind, is a profoundly hopeful act. It's one that can drive deep political change, too.¹⁰¹

5. Call in, don't call out. As great as it feels to shame people for things they've said or shared, it usually makes them dig into their positions (which may well be unconscious or performative) and it can also ignite 'mutual radicalisation', where each side acts contemptuously or threateningly towards the other, steadily widening the divide.

We'll usually find we can change more if we call people in¹⁰² rather than out. Take a breath – then do it privately, gently and respectfully.

6. Tell different stories. The stories we use to make sense of crises can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies when we believe them and then behave accordingly. Think of what happens during a bank run, when a sudden surge of people withdrawing money through fear that it *may* fail can cause it to collapse, even if it was stable before the panic withdrawals.

But there's also deep power in moral imagination that creates different stories of more hopeful futures. Refusing the extremists' call to see the world as a 'them-and-us' and instead telling stories of a 'larger us' – where 'us' is defined by what we share, not who's excluded – can have big effects, as campaigns like Radical Love¹⁰³ in Istanbul in 2019 show spectacularly.

Driving change in ways that bring people together rather than dividing them isn't just possible, it's also necessary if we want to achieve victories that last. The good news is that a growing number of change-makers are showing how it's done.