A year-long pandemic has claimed millions, entrenched inequalities, and set fire to certainties. We face enormous questions about how to rebuild, reset, lift up the most vulnerable and protect our fragile planet. Every bit of this challenge is huge. Put together it can feel overwhelming.

To be an activist in this world is to step into a spot of light that flickers frequently. Not so long ago I felt as though all the lights had gone out. This is how I worked out how to put them back on again.

By 2018 I’d been a campaigner for years, first lobbying for autism support as mother to an autistic girl failed by many of the systems that should have supported her. Then, impatient with unwilling politicians who would stroke their chins at the mention of women’s equality but leap enthusiastically into the next conflict, I helped build a feminist political party: Britain’s Women’s Equality Party. The papers called me ‘the next Emmeline Pankhurst’ and one of the ‘New Suffragettes.’ The hope was enormous. The movement started to take shape.

Then the landscape changed.

The EU referendum happened, when Britons were polled for their opinion on our continuing membership of the European Union. A discussion about identity and community turned into a bitterly divisive fight in which xenophobia and fake news were wielded by establishment chancers masquerading as ‘men of the people.’ A diligent and thoughtful female MP, Jo Cox, was murdered. Donald Trump was elected and racism, sexism and misogyny were not just celebrated but presented as something one could actively vote for. Britain marked ten years of austerity budgets – cuts to government spending on those most in need of support. I stood for Parliament and heard from voters in big, comfortable houses that the cuts weren’t yet deep enough. I lost my deposit, polling tiny numbers against a winning candidate who had suggested that disabled people should be paid less for their work.

I continued, and so did thousands more women seeking representation and rights in a violently male space. We called for affordable childcare, an end to violence against women, equal pay, equal representation and reproductive rights. As party leader, I was frequently invited to debate these things as one side of an argument that could plausibly be challenged by a nicely-turned-out misogynist. I was abused on social media, in my inbox, to my face. People told me I was a shit feminist and an amateur politician. (The latter was certainly true.) It seemed like nothing I did was good enough. I had walked a long way to a better understanding of intersectionality and could see that my white, middle-class feminist perspective was only one particular perspective, a crack between curtains that needed to be pulled wide apart so all the light of our lives could be seen. I concluded that the only decent thing to do was get out of the way. So I stopped.

I spent the following months watching TV with the curtains drawn, then re-reading old books. But my brain was still trying to work out how to be an activist. I realised that activism was a philosophy, not a series of pitched battles. And that to sustain myself and others I needed to work out the rules that together would sustain such a philosophy.

The first rule I figured out was to ***defeat despair*** by not ignoring feelings of sadness but instead looking into them. In Middlemarch, these lines by George Eliot leapt out at me: “What we call our despair is often only the painful eagerness of unfed hope.” In other words: when you recognise how daunted you are by state of the world, you are simultaneously recognising that you do want more. That’s your first step forward.

The process of connecting to how you really feel about the world’s unfairness can often result in feelings of anger. Tuning into our anger is challenging, particularly for women. When we reveal our rage we are described too often by those who benefit from the status quo as ‘hysterical’. But your anger has information for you. Collaborate with it. It will show you what matters to you. Rule two: ***channel your anger,*** in order to make something better with that energy.

A lot of people don’t like angry feminists. But I tell you what they find a whole lot more alarming: an optimistic feminist. And so I worked out Rule three: ***wield hope as power.***

Women are told they are problematic in so many ways. Yet it isn’t our ‘hysteria’ or the fact that we ‘nag’ about wanting ‘more equality’ that’s most problematic. What so unsettles those who rail against the ‘feminazis’ is the hope that women bring into the world as a group of people discriminated against by systems and structures built largely by and for men. Hope isn’t an easy thing, and it’s not soft. It requires discipline and endurance. It requires you get out of bed every morning and reset your determination to make things better no matter what setbacks you face. Hope is an action. And it’s the ultimate act of defiance.

Now you have to find your people. Collaboration is key to successful activism: Change happens when you build a movement. Offering your idea to be considered by others is hard to do. I’ve seen many good ideas wither because a person couldn’t share them, or felt personally attacked by criticism. Because so many of us bring our personal experiences into activism, disagreement can feel like a personal attack. But activism isn’t therapy. And agreeing the work requires respectful, rigorous debate. ***Compassionate collaboration***is the fourth rule of rebellion.

Rule five is about looking after yourself and others. Activism is tough. Campaigning is mostly losing. You have to make your case over and over again. You have to break down a vision of hope into daily actions and do those actions with purpose. This is ***practising perseverance.***

Activism is trust that the world can be a better place and love for the people who are taking this leap of faith with you. It’s the most rebellious thing you can do. And we’ve never needed more rebels. So here’s my hand - .