

# A darn good idea

WILLIAM VERITY looks at the concept of Repair Cafés – where you can have a jacket or juicer repaired over a cuppa and a chat.



Bike repairs at a repair cafe in Palo Alto (US).

Keeping old skills alive.



Repair Café founder Martine Postma.

The 21st century solution seems to be to chuck anything broken or damaged out immediately, or store it under the house for a couple of years – and then chuck it out. And even if we want to get something fixed, the cost can often be higher than buying new. Built-in obsolescence has become the norm and an ongoing frustration for those who want things to last.

Not so fast, says former Dutch journalist and environmentalist Martine Postma, who spent years reporting on waste disposal and became shocked at what people were throwing out. Her answer? In 2009, she set up the world's first Repair Café in her hometown of Amsterdam.

The concept of the Repair Café is to offer a free meeting place where people with old-style skills and the ability to fix things could be put in touch with those who saw the value (financial, environmental, emotional and even spiritual) in repairing and keeping the pre-loved over replacing it with something brand spanking new. Its goal is not just to reduce landfill and waste, but to make people more

resourceful and change their mindset.

“The trouble is, lots of people have forgotten that they can repair things themselves, or they no longer know how,” reports the Repair Café ([repaircafe.org](http://repaircafe.org)).

Postma's seemingly simple concept caught on quickly, prompting her to set up the Repair Café Foundation less than a year later. It aims to help start up satellite Repair Cafés all over Holland – and the world – with the aid of a \$525,000 grant from the Dutch government.

Toasters, tables, toys and tops  
Pretty much anything can be fixed at the Repair Cafés: electrical appliances, clothing, furniture, crockery, house wares, bicycles, toys. Each of the cafes is equipped with the necessary tools and materials to help you repair and mend your wares. If you need expert advice, that's there too, with volunteer repair specialists such as electricians, seamstresses, carpenters and bicycle mechanics.

However, organisers stress that they are not in competition with existing professional repairers. They

won't go to people's homes to do work, nor will they collect items. The emphasis is more on providing a central meeting place for people to come together and fix things and share ideas. It is also a great way to keep repair skills alive with people encouraged to participate in the repair and learn for themselves.

Up until earlier this year, all advice and repairs were free of charge. However, due to an overwhelming worldwide response, the cafes now request a small donation, which helps cover material costs and keep them viable.

There are dozens of repair cafes in Holland but so far only about 20 in other countries, the UK, Germany, the US and Canada among them. Australia, is yet to open one officially, although there are small groups beginning to latch onto the idea. The Men's Shed movement has similarities in bringing people together to share skills and just hang out.

The Repair Café Foundation supports local groups wanting to start their own cafe, providing a starter pack and manual at a small cost. So if some savvy Aussies with an appreciation for workmanship and old wares get inspired, we, too, could be heading to the local cafe for a little respite and restoration!

More information:

♣ [repaircafe.org](http://repaircafe.org)

♣ [mensshed.org](http://mensshed.org); 1300 550 009 **OG**