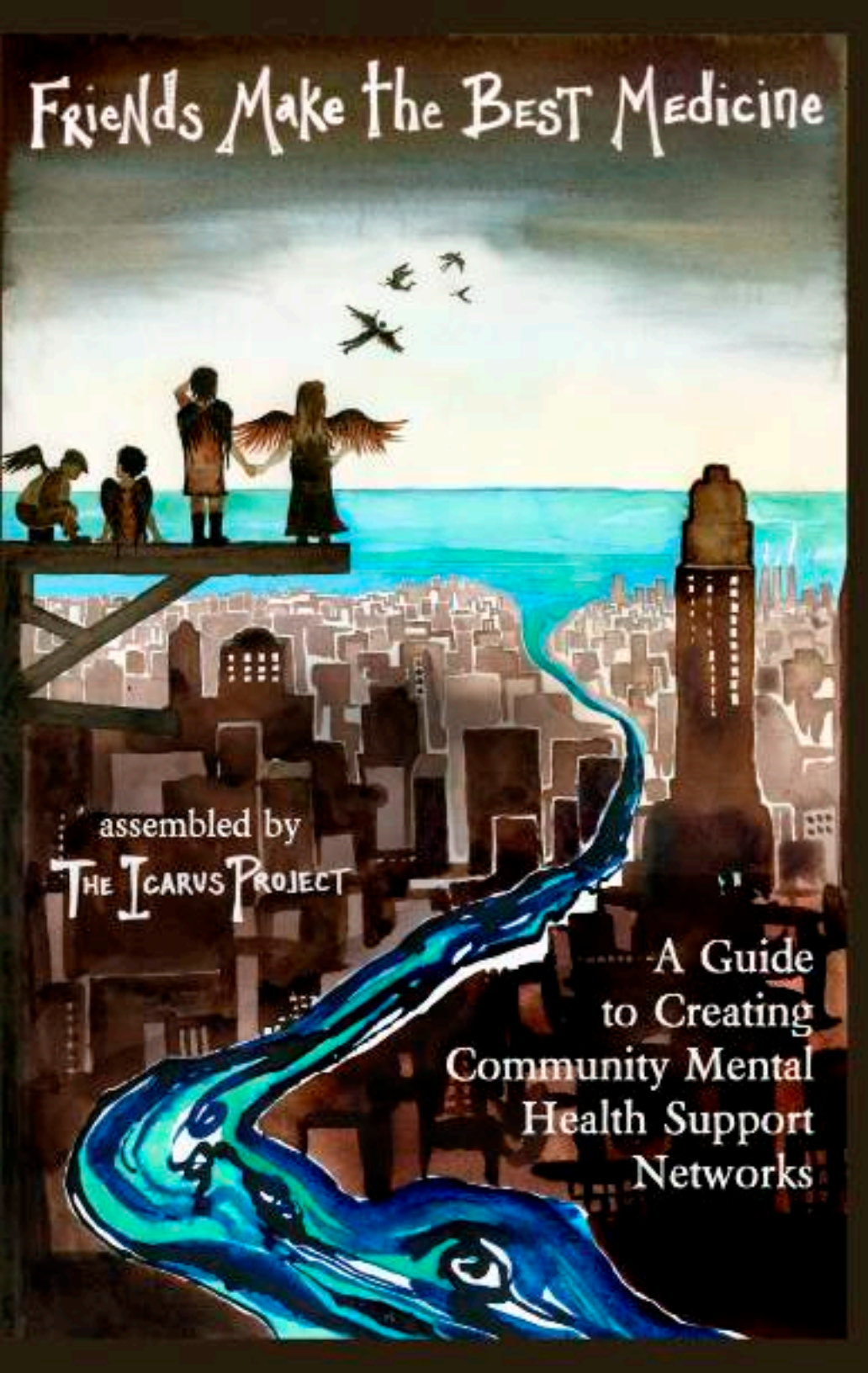


# Friends Make the BEST Medicine



assembled by  
**THE ICARUS PROJECT**

A Guide  
to Creating  
Community Mental  
Health Support  
Networks

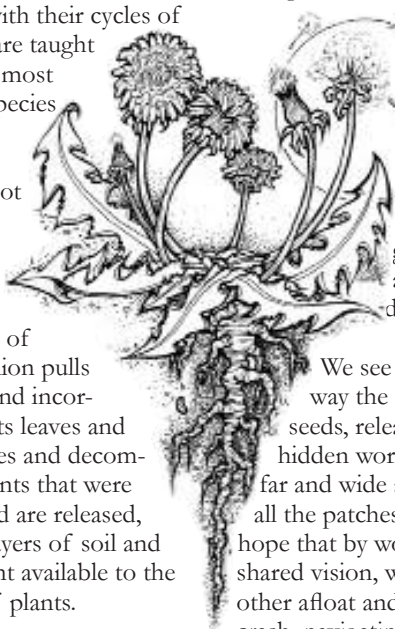


## Dandelion Visions and Wind-Borne Seeds

Bare ground does not stay bare. Tenacious plants called pioneer species find ways to spread and extend roots deep into the earth, providing homes for all kinds of other creatures, and enriching the soil with their cycles of life and death. We are taught to see many of the most common pioneer species as “weeds;” plants like the dandelion, whose strong taproot extends far below depleted topsoil to reach the minerals hidden in deep, underground layers of subsoil. The dandelion pulls these minerals up and incorporates them into its leaves and flowers. When it dies and decomposes, all the nutrients that were locked underground are released, joining the upper layers of soil and making nourishment available to the next generations of plants.

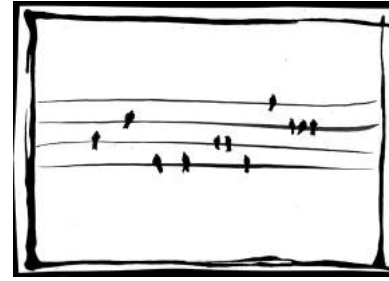
This guidebook is for anyone who wants to start groups inspired by the Icarus Project vision. We imagine Icarus groups as wild and unpredictable dandelions: nourishing the depleted soil of

corporate dominated society, reaching into the fertile underground darkness of madness, and breaking through with new inspiration and movements for change.



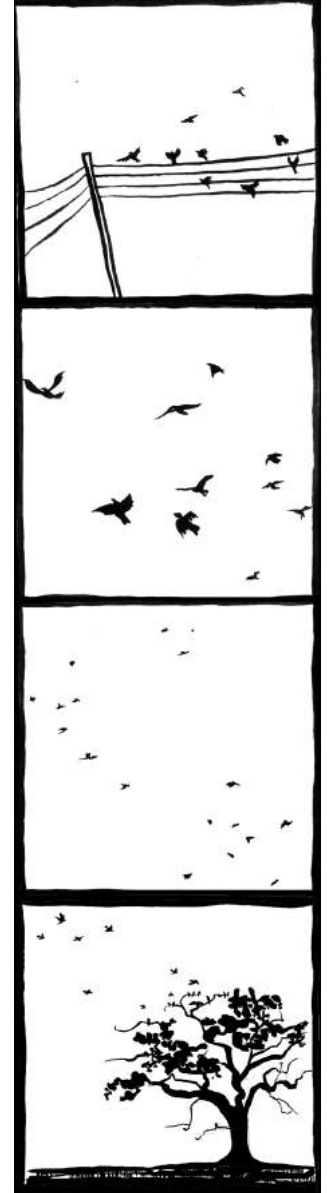
Pioneer plants create swarms of tiny lightweight seeds, with fine hairs that act like parachutes to prevent them from succumbing too quickly to gravity, and to keep them afloat as they travel great distances in the wind.

We see this little book as one way the Icarus Project is sharing seeds, releasing messages from hidden worlds that just might travel far and wide and to reach and nourish all the patches of damaged soil. We hope that by working together with a shared vision, we can help keep each other afloat and a little less likely to crash, navigating that space between brilliance and madness. We hope that our hard-fought truths and visions catch the wind, and plant little seeds of revolution and community all over the world...



# Table of Contents

- i Dandelion Visions
- 2 Underground Roots: Visions for Resisting Monoculture and Building Community
- 6 Breaking Down The Walls Around Madness and Mental Illness: A Guide to Organizing Icarus Groups and Workshops
- 13 Organizing Public Events
- 18 Mutual Aid Groups and Listening Spaces
- 25 Icarus Toolkit
- 29 Icarus Project Vision Statement
- 30 Icarus Gathering Preramble
- 32 A Glimpse of Icarus Now
- 33 Contact Icarus



# Underground Roots: Visions for Resisting Monoculture and Building Community

You can see it all from the highway: enormous monocrops of identical corn plants that reach for miles bordered by an endless sea of strip malls, parking lots, and tract housing. You can see it on our

kitchen counters and in our classrooms: the same can of soda on the table in Cairo and Kentucky, the same definitions of 'progress' and 'freedom' in textbooks around the world. Monoculture — the practice of replicating a single plant, product or idea over a huge area — is about

the most unstable, unsustainable, unimaginative form of organization that exists, but in the short term it keeps the system running smoothly and keeps the power in the hands of a small number of people.

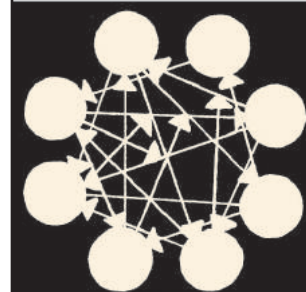
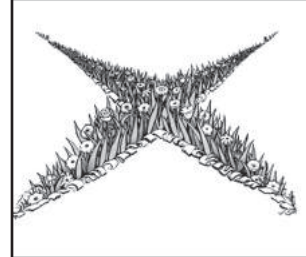
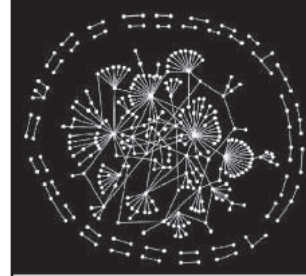
In the logic of our modern world, whether it's in the farmer's field or in the high school classroom, diversity is inefficient and hard to manage. Powerful people figured out awhile time ago that it's a lot easier to control things if everyone's eating the same foods, listening to the same music, reading the same books, watching the same TV shows, and speaking the same language. This is what we call the monocult, and while everyone is supposedly more and more connected

by this new "global culture," we're more and more isolated from each other. Things feel more and more empty, and so many of us end up lonely and rootless, wondering why everything feels so wrong.



Out in the wild things are very different. In old forests everything is connected, from the moss and lichens to the ferns and brambles to the birds and beetles. In our human minds we separate all the parts of the forest into separate pieces when a lot of the time it can be more helpful to view the

forest as one giant organism with separate parts all working together. The trees of a forest intertwine their roots and actually communicate with each other underground. You see it most visibly along ravines and creek beds where a cut-away hillside reveals totally asymmetrical tangle of roots that no scientist could ever have imagined or planned out with all his laws of physics. Something in that tangle explains how those trees can lean out at all kinds of gravity-defying angles and hang their necks into the strongest winds and still survive, bending but not breaking, adapting with unpredictable curves and angles to the way the world breathes and shines and



rains and burns. Concrete can't do that. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the way life evolves and gets stronger in the wild. Something about the living architecture of chaos and time, multi-tiered forests and microscopic algae, outlasts any of the straight lines and square institutions we're told to believe in.

**We believe that people do not belong in grids and boxes of rootless lonely monocultures.**

Humans are adaptable creatures, and while a lot of people learn to adapt, some of us can't handle the modern world no matter how many psych drugs or years of school or behavior modification programs we've been put through. Any realistic model of mental health has to begin by accepting that there is no standard model for a mind and that none of us are single units designed for convenience and efficiency. No matter how alienated you are by the world around you, no matter how out of step or depressed and disconnected you might feel: you are not alone. Your life is supported by the lives of countless other beings, from the microbes in your eyelashes to the men who paved your street. The world is so much more complicated and beautiful than it appears on the surface.

There are so many of us out here who feel the world with thin skin and heavy hearts, who get called crazy because we're too full of fire and pain, who know that other worlds exist and aren't comfortable in this version of reality.

We've been busting up out of sidewalks and blooming all kind of misfit flowers for as long as people have been walking on this Earth. So many of us have access to secret layers of consciousness — you could think of us like dandelion roots that gather minerals from hidden layers of the soil that other plants don't reach. If we're lucky we share them with everyone on the surface — because we feel things stronger than the other people around us, a lot of us have visions about how things could be different, why they need to be different, and it's painful to keep them silent. Sometimes we get called sick and sometimes we get called sacred, but no matter how they name us we are a vital part of making this planet whole.

It's time we connect our underground roots and tell our buried stories, grow up strong and scatter our visions all over the patches of scarred and damaged soil in a society that is so desperately in need of change.

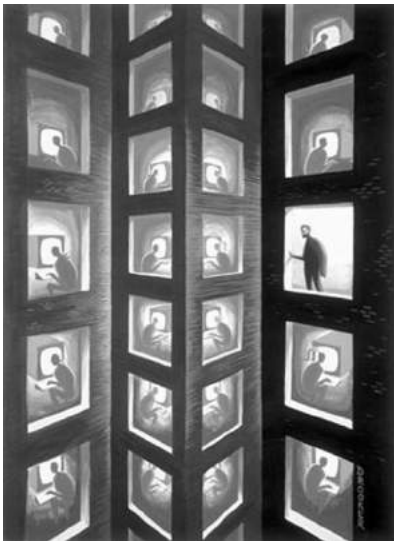
Language is a place to begin. Words can be powerful seeds. The medical authorities offer us all kinds of words to talk about ourselves and the troubles we have, words like "depression" and "psychosis." Sometimes these words help us look back on our lives with a new way of understanding what the hell was going on, but too often these words end up putting us in sad, separate boxes where we feel like there's something wrong with us and we can't connect to anyone else.

Language is powerful. It can open the world up like sunrise and it can block out the sky like prison walls.

Language is Magic. Back in the days before mass media, techno culture, and fluorescent light - when it got dark at night and people sat around fires and told stories or sat alone and wrote by candlelight - there was a respect for the spoken and written word, for the story, for myths passed down through generations and adapted through time.

Whether we realize it or not we cast spells with our words. These days

we're supposed to believe science has explained away any need for supernatural powers, but spells are being cast around us constantly: spells are in the billboards whose messages eat their way into our minds; they're in the television's hypnotic glare making us forget our own dreams and replacing them with infomercials advertising convenience and apocalypse; they're in the books explaining one side of history at school and in the pop-up windows overtaking our computer screens.



We have other people's language in our heads and on our tongues. Words like "disorder" and "disease" offer us one set of metaphors for understanding the way it feels to experience our lives through our particularly volatile minds and souls, but it is such a limited view. Metaphors are very powerful. We think in language, constantly filtering all our perceptions through the available structures of words and metaphors in our brain - in many senses the available metaphors create our reality.

Looking around these days it's pretty clear we are experiencing a serious lack of imagination. It's like we're under the spell of the Monocult - a spell of numbed out distraction from the fact that things could be so much better and beautiful. The spell controls how we articulate our dreams and understand our bodies and minds. It controls how we feel about ourselves and whether we connect with other people. It leaves us

with strange words in our mouths and on our tongues and horrible catchy commercial jingles and stereotypes about our neighbors implanted in our minds.

Perhaps if we can change the metaphors that shape our minds, we can change the reality around us.

We need to start talking and networking - finding common ground and common language with the other people around us. We need to get together in groups and find language for our stories that make sense to us and leave us feeling good about ourselves. Unlearn social conditioning about what it means to be 'sick' and 'healthy'. We need to reclaim our dreams and scheme up ways to make them happen. We need to share everything we've figured out about how to be a human being. We need to love ourselves as we are - crooked and intense, powerful and frightening, unruly and prone to mess around in the dirt - and understand that weeds are simply plants who refuse to be domesticated and displayed. We need to write new maps of the universes we share in common and find ways to heal together. We need to summon up everything we've got to create social webs and lasting support networks for ourselves and the people who will follow us.



Think of this manual in your hands as a book of magic spells. It could help you conjure up the world you want to see. We've outlined a bunch of ideas gathered from all over the place, pulled up from the underground layers of our culture and consciousness. We hope they spark you to start talking, yelling, screaming, dancing, making art, and collaborating on changing the world around you. We hope you make it a little less gray and lonely and cold. We hope you teach people about all the plants in the garden, not just the ones that are in books. We hope you find words for all the pieces of you, even the jagged ones full of scars, and we hope you can put them together with the community around you and discover that you are not actually alone. There are so many of us out here and we're waiting for you to join us in all your crooked beauty and madness.

# Breaking Down The Walls

Around Madness and Mental Illness

## A Guide to Organizing Icarus Groups

### Introduction

Society puts up walls around “mental illness.” Labels and language, fear and shame isolate us from each other. Without a voice of our own and spaces for ourselves, we rely on authorities and the media to define who we are. The Icarus Project’s goal is to break down mainstream culture’s walls and concrete and reclaim our experiences, so that a new vision of who we are and what we can become will take root and flourish

We can organize events filled with inspiration and creativity, plan actions that demand change, educate our allies, share skills and resources, and help each other feel less alone. It is up to us to define what we experience in words that make sense, and to create support that meets our needs. In this laboratory of resistance we discover new ways of thinking and relating, and begin to participate in our own liberation.

Because we struggle with the extremes of madness, we often have intense empathy and sensitivity towards others: the gift of a big heart and a lot to give. Living through the “damaged dysfunctional psych patient” can also mean you become the Wounded Healer: a person who’s survived the fi e and comes out the other side with stories to tell and skills to share. If we can get past our fears and anxieties, it is us, not the psychiatrists and professionals, who have the knowledge and ability to connect and communicate with each other through our pain.

### Starting a Group from Scratch

People are incredibly hungry for creative, empowering discussions and story-sharing and around mental health from a non-mainstream view. We are continually amazed by the tremendous response every time we hold an Icarus Project group or event. Once you take the first step and spread the word, people will come. Don’t let fear or inexperience stop you. By taking the initiative, other people will be encouraged to

get involved because it will touch their lives and reach through their isolation. Even if you’ve never organized a public event or discussion before, you can still start an Icarus group in your community!

There are two basic ways to start a group from scratch:

If you already know people who are interested in working together, such as a group of friends or Icarus website users in your area you’ve met online, call an open gathering at someone’s house or a coffeshop to talk about your hopes and interests. Decide where you want to put your energy first Some folks decide to form an emotional support group; others begin by hosting an event like a movie night or a mental health skillshare, or take on specific projects, like an activist campaign, creating a radical mental health library or teaching a class (see ideas, below). Go with the idea that has the most excitement and passion around it, and be willing to accommodate more than one project if people are inspired in more than one direction and you have enough people to do the work. At this first vision gathering, decide on a regular time and place to meet again, and your group is underway.

If you don’t know anyone who wants to start a group and you can’t find anyone through the website, begin with a simple seed event. This is a public gathering such as a movie night, open discussion on a specific topic, or a presentation inviting someone from out of town. A seed event is like a call out into the darkness, a way to tell the world you’re here and attract people to find you. When people show up, announce that you want to start an ongoing group. Then circulate a contact list for people’s names, emails and/or phone numbers, pick a meeting time and place, and schedule the first meeting to hear about hopes interests and possibilities.

Once your group is started, you’ll want to pick a name that expresses your purpose and identity (feel free to use “Icarus” or any other name that inspires you). Post a report on the Icarus website Local Organizing and Meetups forums to let everyone know what you’re doing, and list yourself in the Icarus local contact directory so people can find ou.

Remember, you are part of an international network and people are eager and ready to help your local efforts! Feel free to ask people on the website forums if you need help or ideas, or email the Icarus collective at [support@theicarusproject.net](mailto:support@theicarusproject.net). Once you’ve learned how to do things locally, your help is needed in advising and supporting others as they learn how to do it. The more we communicate and learn from each other, the stronger our movement becomes.

Now you’re ready to prepare and facilitate regular gatherings to plan and implement your activities.





group, describe it and encourage the group to work.

**Clarify The Confidentiality Policy.** In the beginning of each meeting, help create a safe space for participants by clarifying the importance of group confidentiality. When people feel their personal information won't leave the room, they may be more comfortable sharing it with others. Take a look at the section on confidentiality later in the guide.

**Have Someone Take Notes.** It can be really helpful to record the group's discussion and decisions and then e-mail these notes out to everyone later. It also keeps people up-to-date when they miss a meeting, and helps new people get up to speed. Make sure to respect confidentiality in any notes: just record group decisions and plans and main points of discussion. Don't focus on people's names.

**Introduce The Icarus Project** if you want. You can read

### The Icarus Preamble: A Tool for Opening Meetings

We've compiled a little document that you can choose to read at the beginning of meetings to help introduce The Icarus Project and create a safe, open listening space for your group. We've included an easily reproducible version of the preamble on p. 30 of this book!

### A Sample Agenda for a first meeting

Welcome and Meeting  
Overview: 5 min.

Personal Introductions /  
Check-in: 5 - 10 minutes

About The Icarus Project: 5  
minutes

What are our needs and desires  
as people struggling with  
madness? What projects are we  
inspired to do? 15 minutes

Brainstorm ways to meet these  
needs: 15 minutes

Decide what needs to be done  
before the next meeting: Pick  
tasks, delegate responsibilities,  
agree on next meeting time and  
place: 10 minutes

Check-out: 5-10 minutes

Circulate contact list, pass the  
hat for donations if needed, dis-  
tribute literature, close meeting:  
5 minutes

the Icarus preamble, a piece of Icarus Project writing, like the mission statement or a story that's touched you, or talk about how you found the project and what you get out of it.

**Keep it personal and share stories.** Try to get your ego out of the way and keep everyone's needs, not just your own, foremost. Don't be an expert or an authority. Share your experience. It's a gift to have space to connect with each other in a society where we're all so alienated. Make use of this time.

**The Agenda:** A pre-planned agenda is good if you are focusing on specific goals in a limited amount of time, but it's also helpful to have the group decide the agenda collaboratively, especially if this is your first meeting. Brainstorm what you want to see discussed, then prioritize from there.

### Holding Successful Gatherings: Opening And Closing

In any gathering, how we open and close focuses our intention, shapes the connections we make, and strengthens the sense of meaning for everyone. If your group is small enough, consider starting your meeting with a brief check-in and check-out to open and close the group.

**To check-in,** let everyone take a few minutes without interruption to describe where they are at emotionally, how their day is going, where they are in their lives. Checking-in slows us down, reminds us our existence is much bigger than the meeting at hand, and encourages us to bring more of our whole selves to the practical tasks before us. Remember that no one is obligated to speak, and passing on your turn is welcome.

**To check-out,** go around again to everyone at the end, and this time invite people speak to how the group's time together felt to them, and what they got out of it. Without interrupting or necessarily having a discussion, this can also be a time to acknowledge what worked in the meeting and what might need improvement for future gatherings.

### Holding Successful Gatherings: Follow Up

**Talk to People.** Make time to hang around and chat with folks informally after the meeting. Make personal contact with newcomers, especially people who were quiet. Often people won't feel comfortable speaking in the public group but one-on-one will have a lot of questions or comments. Encourage people to share phone numbers and meet outside the group.

**Thank People for Coming.** If you see people around in the community, tell them you were glad to see them at the meeting. Try to remember people's names. Ask how folks are doing, and make a connection. The most important support is the network of caring we create between meetings.

**Prepare for the future.** Send out meeting notes. Post fliers for the next meeting. Plan another event. Keep publicizing. Keep talking. Post a message on The Icarus Project website local groups forum letting everyone know how it went and what you learned.

### Holding Successful Gatherings Keep People Coming Back

**Hold Regular Meetings.** Make sure people know where and when they can find the group. Email or call everyone a few days in advance to remind people about the meeting. Try to be consistent and repetitive when scheduling meeting time and place. Delegating one person or a phone tree system to remind or check-up by phone with each other prior to meetings is good.

**Be Welcoming and Inclusive to New Members.** Be sure to greet people, offer to answer questions, share literature, and encourage them to come back. Regulars should talk with

newcomers after the meeting and ask them how it went and what they might be looking for in a group.

**Get Everyone Involved.** Don't let the same people take responsibility for all tasks. Make sure everyone who wants to get involved can, even if tasks are small, like bringing food, hanging posters, sending out an e-mail. Have a new member do tasks with an old member.

**Share Skills with Each Other.** Even if one or a few people are really good at most tasks, take the time to share knowledge and help everyone learn new skills. Building community is the whole point -- if we just focus on being "efficient" we lose sight of our bigger goals.

**Share Food.** Make your meeting into an event. Have a potluck. When we share food, it shows nurturing for each other, gives conversation a context and builds trust and knowledge.

**Diversify Your Group.** Reach out to people from different backgrounds. If you make your commitment to anti-oppression vocal and known, people who are oppressed by the dominant culture will feel more welcome.

**Keep in Touch.** Use your contact list. Send out e-mails. Check in on people by phone.

**Create a Phone Tree.** Many groups, like 12 step groups and support groups, circulate a list where people who are willing to offer support between meetings can write down their phone number as a resource for other people in the group. Let people define for themselves what they are able to offer and their availability.

**Make Plans Before Breaks.** If people are taking off for holidays, vacations, or school breaks, make a plan to keep meeting when everyone is back in town. Send out e-mails and updates while people are away or if any changes need to happen.

**Organize Compelling Events.** Attract new members and energize current members by organizing events outside the regular meeting time.

## Organizing Public Events

Your group might want to organize events for the larger public, and the possibilities are endless, from workshops, panels, speak-outs and lectures to art making, film screenings, live music, art shows, and potlucks. If you don't know where to start, take a look at the following questions. Then consider the following list of types of events.

### Why are you organizing an event?

- To dialogue about "mental illness" and what it means in a world that's obviously insane?
- To create a safe space for people to tell their stories and find common ground?
- To get people to discuss a particular topic, like suicide prevention or psych drugs?
- To share experiences and information about holistic health care and alternatives to drugs?
- To talk about activist burnout, stress, and trauma?
- To share information about treatments and coping skills?
- To create networks for better mental health support because the ones that exist are inadequate?
- To educate the public about the problems with the mainstream system and treatments and propose alternatives?
- To protest human rights abuses and demand changes in the system? To make changes in the power structures of your school or local government?
- To offer information and referrals for resources and programs in the community? To raise awareness about The Icarus Project or another specific project?
- To inspire people and share art/music/dance/writing with your community?
- To offer advocacy help for people dealing with legal issues, benefits or services?

### Different Kinds of Events

**Open-Mic/Story Swap.** Open up a space where people can read pieces of their writing or share some of their personal stories in a more informal way. This kind of event is good for involving a lot of people, and it doesn't rely on the personality and confidence of "presenters." Sometimes an event like this is also presented as a "speak-out," where people are encouraged to come speak their truths in opposition to the words and representations of "mental illness" that surround us. Try to make

What Do  
You Hope To  
Inspire?

Dialogue?

Activism?

Support?

Regular  
Gatherings?

Community?

Resource  
Sharing?

Projects?

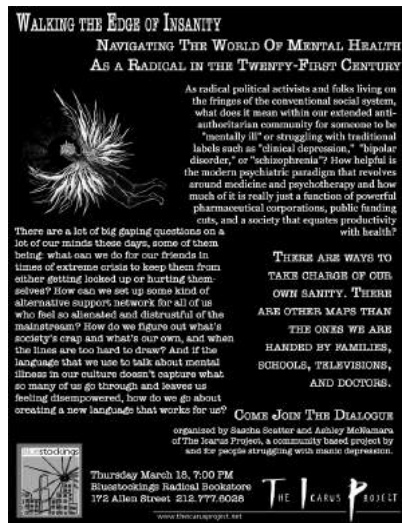
Creativity?

Change?

room for as many people as possible to share by making it clear up front that each person will get a certain amount of time based on how many folks want to talk or read. For example, if you have 10 people and one hour to share stories, you could give each person 6 minutes.

**Support Group.** A workshop or regular meeting specifically for emotional support can be a great and empowering alternative to professional and mainstream group therapy. Check out the section in this guide on Listening Spaces.

**Skillshare.** Skillshares are powerful events where people can share and learn skills without anyone acting like an authority or expert. All you have to do is find people who are interested in facilitating workshops, secure a space and a date, make a schedule, and advertise the event. A mental health skillshare could include workshops topics like: mental health and creativity; herbs and supplements; understanding psych meds; suicide prevention; journaling; zine-making; navigating the system; peer-counseling; shamanism/mysticism and "mental illness;" dealing with crisis; educating friends and family; spoken word; recovering from abuse and trauma; race, class, gender and mental health; activism and mental health... Use your imagination. The possibilities are endless.



**Stress, Burnout, and Trauma for Activists.** Facing the police at demonstrations and organizing urgent campaigns for social justice leads to burnout, stress, and trauma. Hold a discussion about how people can better take care of themselves and each other, including preventive wellness practices, how to recover from burnout, and how to heal trauma.

**Movie Night/Film Screening.** Screen a film or video related to mental health and open up a discussion afterwards. Some suggested movies: Tarnation, Blade Runner, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Waking Life, A Beautiful Mind, Girl Interrupted, Ordinary People, American Beauty, But I'm A Cheerleader, Man Facing Southeast, Affliction, Leaving Las Vegas, Gattaca, Blue Sky, Fearless...

**Panel Discussion.** Invite 3 - 5 people to present their personal stories or speak about a specific topic, like abuses in the mental health system or holistic health. Give each panelist 5 - 20 minutes to speak, then open the space up for questions.

**Presentation/Lecture.** Invite someone with public speaking experience or research on a specific topic to make a presentation, such as an author, a national activist or health professional. Be sure to make room for participation and questions.

**Have a Party!** Yes, it is possible to have a party with people where mental health is a focus. We don't have to cry all the time. Organize a potluck first and then have a discussion and music. Have a specific theme -- like making crafts or making masks for an upcoming demonstration -- and create side by side with each other. Have a mental health dance night cause it's really good for our brains if we move our bodies.

**Music/Concert/Show.** Get bands with group members to perform. Have someone talk a little about The Icarus Project and/or your local group. Make the show a benefit and charge a small entrance fee so you can raise some money to support your local group's costs (such as photocopies costs or room-usage fees). Or have an open-mic night where people can perform their music.

**Art Show.** So many of us labeled with "mental illness" are highly creative. Solicit art from your friends and community, find a space, hang the work, and inspire each other. Check out info about past Icarus art shows on the website.

**Book Reading or Discussion.** If people in your group have been writing about mental health, organize a reading at a local bookstore or café. If some fascinating or controversial new book

has been published, organize a night to discuss it.



**Table at Local Events.** Set up an Icarus Project table at local concerts, festivals, conferences, student activity fairs, demonstrations, rallies, bookfairs, zine symposiums, and other events. Display Icarus Project literature, art or writing by members of your local group, info about your group's upcoming meetings

and events, or photocopies of info you've gathered on mental health topics. Hang colorful banners and posters, smile, and answer people's questions. Have a contact list ready for people to sign to get involved with your group.

**Free Mental Health Class/Discussion Group.** Set up an ongoing discussion on specific topics related to mental health. If your town has a freeschool, network with them to promote the class. If not, reserve a space, make fliers and do it yourself.

**Icarus Project Workshops.** Contact local schools, community centers, conferences, gatherings, bookstores, activist centers, clinics, libraries, festivals, freeschools, collectives, or infoshops and ask if you can come do an Icarus Project workshop to start discussion and raise awareness around mental health issues. For more info on how to do a workshop, check out the next section.

## Organizing an Icarus Project Workshop

The first Icarus Project workshops were a humble response to a heartbreaking tragedy. An amazing friend and activist named Sera Bilizikian flew too close to the sun and committed suicide in early 2002. It became really clear to a lot of people in our community that starting an open dialogue about mental health issues and how they affect all of us was way overdue.

That Winter Sascha, one of the founders of The Icaurs Project, drove across the country in an old pick-up truck and held informal workshops with titles like “Walking the Edge of Insanity: Navigating the World of Mental Health as a Radical in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” at community centers and in people’s living rooms. 15 to 30 people would usually show up and talk for hours. He had never done anything like this, or even heard of anyone doing anything like this, but it was a big success. A year and a half later Sascha and Jacks published the Icarus Project reader, *Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness*, and went on the road to start Icarus Project discussions at places ranging from their old schools and collective houses to waiting rooms in Wyoming and activist spaces in Detroit. It was incredibly powerful to discover that sharing the most difficult intimate, scary, inspiring parts of our lives could help hundreds of people. It was incredibly powerful for the people who showed up to realize that they are not alone.

The key to the success of our early workshops seemed to be a whole lot of honesty about the hardest things. Invariably, the discussions that took off for hours were the ones where we opened up in the very beginning about our personal experiences with the darkest and most paradoxical parts of our psyches. When we talked about hearing voices, enduring unbearable agitation, feeling terrified we were insane, still wondering if we had lost a chance at enlightenment, or being convinced there was no option but suicide -- and getting through it all -- other people felt free to open up about their huge questions and complicated histories. We encourage you to be as open with your own experiences as you can. It will encourage people to trust you.

### Basic Format for an Icarus Project Workshop:

- As much as possible, set chairs up in a circle so people can see each other.
- Welcome people.
- Go around for introductions if the group is small enough.
- Describe the Icarus Project vision, perhaps by reading the mission statement.
- Start with a story of how your personal experience has led you to be interested in these issues.
- Facilitate a discussion based on people’s responses, stories, and problems, or on a series of open-ended discussion questions.
- Encourage people to circulate a contact list and continue meeting after the workshop.

## Discussion Questions for Workshops and Groups

Having a series of questions can be a great way to focus a workshop discussion into deep and meaningful directions. Brainstorm ideas beforehand, potentially including:

- What does it mean to be “mentally ill?”
- What are the implications of being labeled sick by a society that is obviously sick?
- How do we figure out what’s society’s madness, and what’s our own, and when the lines are too hard to draw?
- Is madness a continuum rather than a set of definitions and diagnosis
- What does it mean to see our madness as a potentially dangerous gift?
- What alternative frameworks exist for interpreting our mental health struggles?
- Can we look at the role of race, class, gender, and other aspects of our identities in shaping our struggles while still taking responsibility for ourselves?
- Can diagnostic labels help us see patterns without putting us in a box or becoming self-fulfilling prophecies?
- When does behavior become “dysfunctional”?
- Can we define for ourselves what an appropriate level of functioning looks and feels like?
- What kinds of healing and wellness practices have helped us to get better?
- What are our ‘early warning signs’ that we need to focus more on our wellness and health?
- How do we take care of each other and ourselves?
- How can we respect decisions to take psych medication but still be honest about the risks of these drugs?
- How can we respect decisions to try alternative treatments and/or reject conventional medical treatment?
- How can we respect choices to use recreational drugs when they seem self-destructive?
- What are our options when we or someone we know seems to be going into crisis?
- What topics aren’t being discussed in our communities that we want to see discussed?
- What are people struggling with and how can we find better ways to talk about it?

# Creating Mutual Aid Groups and Listening Spaces

Wildness has no walls. Sand mixes with saltwater, leaves drift into streams, rain seeps through stone. When we lose ourselves in the pain of madness it is really the walls of isolation that make us suffer. We want someone to understand, someone to see us, someone to be with. Like tenacious green tendrils that reach their way across any barrier and through any fence, our wild emotional selves are seeking a way to find others. Breaking through the walls and making a connection can mean all the difference in the world.

Mutual aid and support groups are a way to bring down the walls that isolate us. No one in the group is above anyone else: mutual aid means we listen to and support each other as a community of equals, without paid professionals or staff to define who we are or get in our way. Each of us is an expert on our own experience, and each of us is the center for our decisions -- and we are not alone.

When we gather together with people who've been through what we've been through, people who share some of the mysteries and suffering that get labeled 'mental illness,' we discover new maps through crisis, learn new tools to stay healthy, and weave communities of solidarity to change the world. We discover something at the heart of the dangerous gift of madness: caring for others is often the best way to care for ourselves.



## Listening Spaces

There is a wide diversity of group models to draw on, and we encourage you to experiment to find the best fit for you. All these approaches, however, share the same essential principle: create a space for listening.

In nature, stillness, silence and sky create a vast container for what is essential to emerge.

Step into wilderness and you encounter a hushed patience and gentle holding rare in the noisy, sped-up, clash and clamor of our urban lives.

Corporate monocropped culture suppresses true listening and imposes labels, rigid habits, and preconceived notions. Real support and caring means breaking down habitual ways of interacting, and meeting each other in spaces of true, effective listening.



## Key elements of listening spaces:

- Don't talk over others or interrupt. If someone interrupts, gently ask him or her to stop. Take turns. Raise hands, or go in order.
- Don't rush through or go too fast. Create a calm, quiet space without interruptions or distractions.
- Allow periods of silence while we find what to say.
- Let the person decide when they are done. Don't jump in. If time is an issue, the group should decide on what's fair and stick to it.
- Don't react or speak up automatically. Watch how your reactions to what others say reflect our own experience, not the person speaking. Give yourself time to respond from a deeper place.
- Ask permission before giving advice or responding directly to what someone said. Sometimes people just want to be listened to.
- When someone responds to you or gives advice, allow yourself to take what is helpful from options presented, and leave the rest, rather than defending yourself if you disagree.
- Listen as a receiver, not as a critic. Imagine different perspectives and experiences, rather than assuming they're just like yours.

## Facilitation and Self-facilitation

With their roots in effective listening, groups can nurture healing and community through facilitation. Facilitators help the group listen more effectively, and pay specific attention to the overall needs and direction of everyone involved, not just their own individual needs. The facilitator should avoid bias, and if they are too involved with a particular group topic then someone else might be better in the role. It helps when two people facilitate and when facilitators reflect group diversity such as gender, age, and race. It is also good to pair more experienced and less experienced facilitators, and to offer new people a chance to learn facilitation skills.

Importantly, everyone should keep overall group needs in mind, and everyone can assist the group through self-facilitation.

### Key elements of facilitation and self-facilitation:

- Create a clear agenda or plan on how to spend your time together.
- Keep track of time so people can "wrap up" their feelings without feeling cut off or not heard. Closing the meeting respectfully is as important as beginning it.
- Remind everyone to respect group confidentiality, so sensitive information does not leave the room.
- Step up and intervene if someone is dominating the conversation, or using op-

pressive language and judgments that are triggering to other group members. Do not sit by and allow racism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and other -isms to make members feel unsafe. Be an ally. Don't rely on people from targeted and marginalized groups to educate other members who are newer to anti-oppression ideas. If someone needs some schooling on white supremacy, and you're a white member who's spent some time unpacking these concepts for yourself, offer to work with that person outside the meeting, and suggest educational resources to learn from.

- Check in with the group's energy level and focus, and re-direct the conversation if it is becoming scattered or bogged down. Suggest breaks, exercises, games, or agenda and time revisions when necessary. If conversation is lagging, ask questions, tell a story, or get up and do some stretching. Sometimes if the group is stuck, the facilitator can ask a clarifying question, reframe an issue, or connect points to earlier discussion.
- Offer choices, especially if people want feedback or not after they speak.
- Consider using "I" statements when speaking, such as "I feel" and "I want," to stay focused on your own feelings and needs. Talking about other people or gossiping takes focus away from your own experience.
- Encourage defining problems within the concept of "dangerous gifts" and unique mysterious talents rather than seeing ourselves as flawed or diseased.
- Use a common vocabulary and minimize jargon.
- Reflect upon the political dimension of personal problems, and reframe problems within a framework of a crazy-making society instead of blaming the person suffering.
- Hold people accountable for behaviors but don't criticize who they are as people.
- Focus on the things we can control and let go of things we can't, but don't give up on visions of change and revolution!
- Keep an experimental attitude and a willingness to explore new perspectives and options.
- Remember that the group is not a promise that problems will be solved, but a space to address problems safely.
- And finally: know when to bust out! Nature isn't always neat and orderly. Sometimes wild conversation, spontaneity, and 'breaking all the rules of facilitation' is exactly what the group needs in the moment. A skilled facilitator and skilled participants can feel when the chaos and cacophony that erupt are refreshing and true to the group spirit, and when to go with it. Then comes the time to reel it all back in and return to the basic structure of taking turns and listening carefully.

## Inclusion and Self-Determination

The Icarus Project is a space for people who understand bipolar and other mental health diagnoses from outside the mainstream view of disorders, illness, and conformity. Groups need to be welcoming and inclusive, where diverse perspectives and life choices are respected and honored according to the principles of harm reduction and self-determination. For example, people who take psychiatric drugs and people who don't take them are welcome. People who use diagnosis categories like "bipolar" to describe themselves, as well as people who define themselves differently, are also welcome.

### Ways to create group inclusion:

- Invite newcomers to introduce themselves if they want to.
- Begin with introductions that include name, preferred gender pronoun (for people who identify as trans or otherwise gender non-conforming), and access needs (such as speaking up because someone is hard of hearing, or turning off fluorescent lights).
- Practice "stepping up, stepping back" so we can each contribute to equal participation. Give priority to people who haven't yet spoken.
- Be careful to not dominate the discussion, speak in capital letters, restate what others say, or speak for others.
- If you disagree with someone, ask questions to understand their point of view better. This is not a time for arguments or trying to convince others you're right.
- Respect different views and choices, such as diagnosis, medication, recreational drugs, nutrition, medical care, holistic health, exercise, spirituality, lifestyle, and other decisions. Change is difficult! People grow at their own pace, and you may not really know what is best for another person, because you are not them.
- If it is possible to offer food or childcare, this will make the meeting accessible to more people.
- Accommodate limitations and access needs, such as wheelchair accessibility and deaf interpretation. Be aware of how choices of where to hold meetings might affect people, such as institutional settings like clinics or health centers that can trigger painful memories, or places with toxic substances (fresh paint, new furniture or carpets) that people might be chemically sensitive to.
- Identify and discuss how power and privilege play out by understanding how white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression affect each of us and impact our participation in the group.
- Notice who tends to be in leadership roles in your group, and rotate if possible. If your group is often organized and facilitated by folks of a certain race and class background, see what you can do to invite other members to step into leadership roles and help shape what happens in the group. If men dominate the conversation, see what techniques you can use to make space for women and gender non-conforming people. Sometimes you need to shift from a structure where people get called on if they raise their hands to a go-around where everyone has a turn to speak.

## Mutual Aid and Advocacy

When we listen to each other effectively, we begin to understand our needs and how to meet them. Icarus groups can become places to nurture community networks of mutual aid and advocacy, help each other through crisis, deal with the mental health system, and learn about new options and resources.

### Mutual Aid Means:

- Ensure people can make their own best decisions by having solid facts about the drugs they take, their diagnosis, and options. Psychiatric drugs are toxic and have huge dangers pharmaceutical companies don't talk about, and diagnostic labels are often misleading and disempowering. At the same time, holistic health doesn't work for everyone, and going off drugs can be risky. Share lists of books, websites, and articles that have information correcting mainstream misinformation.



- Compare experiences with herbs and holistic health, medications that are helpful, and different treatments.
- Share advice and knowledge on how to reduce and go off medication safely if people want to.
- Put together a resource list of area low-cost/sliding scale health care practitioners who are open to non-mainstream views of mental health and recovery: use the Icarus Provider Guidelines and listing.
- Help people advocate for themselves with their doctors and health care practitioners; accompany them to appointments.

- Advocate for people struggling for justice: publicize human rights violations, connect people to patients advocate organizations, visit hospitals, contact area media, write letters to the editor.
- Connect each other with legal aid resources, housing, community gardens, free food and other needs.
- If a person is disruptive or needs a lot of attention, consider pairing them up with someone one on one, so they can get the focus they need and the rest of the group can continue.
- Set aside issues or conflicts taking a lot of group time to deal with outside of the group. Sometimes interpersonal mediation one-on-one is better than a group trying to solve a problem between two people.
- Share info about activism, community events, and recreation so people can meet outside the group.
- Learn ways to help people when things start to come crashing down. Consider creating a crisis plan where people name their early warning signs and describe the support they want if they start to go into crisis.

## Different Forms of Peer Counseling Groups

With the principle of listening as the foundation, groups can take many forms. Once weekly, once a month? Is it a drop-in group, or are people committed for a series? Is it open to anyone or does the group select its members? Looking at and learning from different group models can give you a broader sense of what is possible and how to structure your group.

- 12-Step Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Group members tell their stories drawing on years of shared wisdom, and follow a stages model of recovery through specific personal and spiritual goals. More experienced members coach newer ones through one-on-one sponsorship. Timers divide up speaking time equally.
- Council Process ("Talking Stick" model). Members take turns speaking on a theme or topic without interrupting or responding.
- Co-Counseling Dyads: People take turns with equal time in pairs, where one person is the speaker and the other just listens, then they switch.
- Skill-share, Resource Sharing - Such as Medicine-Specific, Holistic-Specific, or Advocate-Specific.

- Reading / discussion group. The group chooses an article or book to discuss each meeting.
- Emotional Support Groups: participants gather because they share a particular problem/theme, such as chronic pain, being a veteran, or suffering grief and loss.
- Hearing Voices groups: Small gatherings across England and Europe where people discuss the experience of hearing voices and share ways to cope in a non-judgmental atmosphere.



Empower yourselves to explore different options and create your group the way that works best for everyone



## Confidentiality

Revealing intimate information makes people vulnerable. Groups build trust when this vulnerability is respected and cared for. Your group should agree to a confidentiality policy and make sure to practice it.

Some options are:

- **General Experience Only:** Members may discuss what they and others say and do with people outside the group, but only generally, without any names, details, or clues about the specific people or events. This is a common policy, used in the NYC Icarus group and Freedom Center: it supports discussion of sensitive topics such as abuse, criminal behavior, and suicide, while allowing participants to take what they learn to the rest of the world.

- **Personal Experience Only:** "What's said here stays here." Participants may discuss what they themselves say and do with people outside the group, but may not talk about, or even refer generally, to what others say or do. This is a more restrictive policy used for groups, such as 12-step groups, that focus specifically on difficult topics such as addiction and abuse.

- **Full Disclosure:** Group participants are free to talk about anything that happened in the group. While common for activist organizations and public events that want to get the word out freely, this approach should be weighed carefully for groups providing mutual emotional support.

- **Total Non-Disclosure:** Anything said or done is not repeated, or even alluded to generally, to anyone outside the group. This can be useful for a closed group focused on a very sensitive topic, where participants want to go very deeply into personal issues over time.

- Every group has different needs, so while General Experience Only is the most common support group policy, the group should set its own policy. Make sure to explain the confidentiality policy at the beginning of meetings, perhaps as part of the preamble.

## Icarus Project Skillshares, Learning Circles, and Trainings

The Icarus Project collective began when Jacks and Sascha met and started touring, sharing their experiences and sparking dialogue about mental health. Today the Icarus collective staff travels around the country and even internationally to help out at community speaking events and discussions, as well as offering skillshares, learning circles, and trainings.

We have years of experience with such topics as group facilitation, community organizing, dealing with emotional crisis and extreme states of consciousness, providing effective emotional support, and conflict resolution. We're also skilled with computers, grantwriting, music, and wellness tools such as yoga, nutrition, and acupuncture. If you want to invite us to your community, we work on an ability to pay basis, which means that whether you haven't got any money at all or whether you're part of a funded organization or school that can afford to pay, we'll work something out and help in any way we're able. Get in touch with us at [support@theicarusproject.net](mailto:support@theicarusproject.net).

## Icarus Toolkit

In the following pages you'll find sample graphics, flyers, info sheets, and a copy of our preamble that you can xerox, blow up, and use for your own gatherings!



Here's a Basic Template for an Icarus Project Workshop/  
Discussion Flyer.

**Taking Care of The Basics**

**eating well**

**sleep + rest**

**exercise**

**herbs, meds, etc.**

**having a schedule**

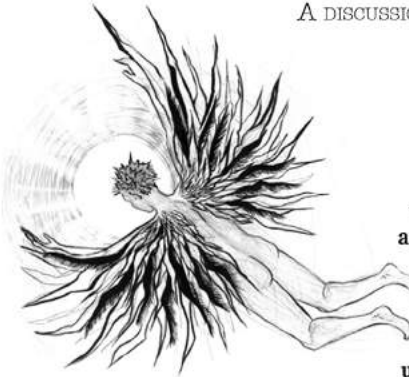
**The Icarus Project** [www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net)  
A Radical Mental Health Support Network  
by and for people struggling with dangerous gifts commonly labeled as mental illness

### Flyers and Graphics

Feel free to xerox, blow up, and use these graphics and posters just as they are to let people know about The Icarus Project and get them thinking about mental health, or you can make quick publicity fl ers by pasting over our words to add information about the meeting times and places for your local groups and events. The graphic on this page is designed to enlarge into an 8 1/2" x 11" fl er. The design on the previous page is designed to enlarge into an 11" x 17" poster. Feel free to xerox, cut, paste, swap images, and make your own creation!

## WALKING THE EDGE OF INSANITY NAVIGATING THE MYSTERY OF MENTAL HEALTH IN A WORLD GOING MAD

A DISCUSSION INSPIRED BY THE ICARUS PROJECT



As creative folks skeptical of the conventional social system, what does it mean within our extended community for someone to be "mentally ill" or struggling with traditional labels such as "clinical depression," "bipolar disorder," or "schizophrenia?" How helpful is the modern psychiatric paradigm that revolves around medicine and mental disorders and how much of it is really just a function of powerful pharmaceutical corporations, public funding cuts, and a society that equates productivity with health? Are there other frameworks for understanding what it means to be "crazy?" Are there alternative ways to heal? How do we begin the process?

Chances are pretty high that if you're reading this, you or someone you care about has been grappling with these questions for years. Come join an open discussion and learn more about The Icarus Project, a radical support network by and for people struggling with the dangerous gifts commonly labeled as mental illnesses. The Icarus Project envisions a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. By joining together as individuals and as a community, we hope to create space where the intertwined threads of madness and creativity can inspire hope and transformation in a repressed and damaged world.

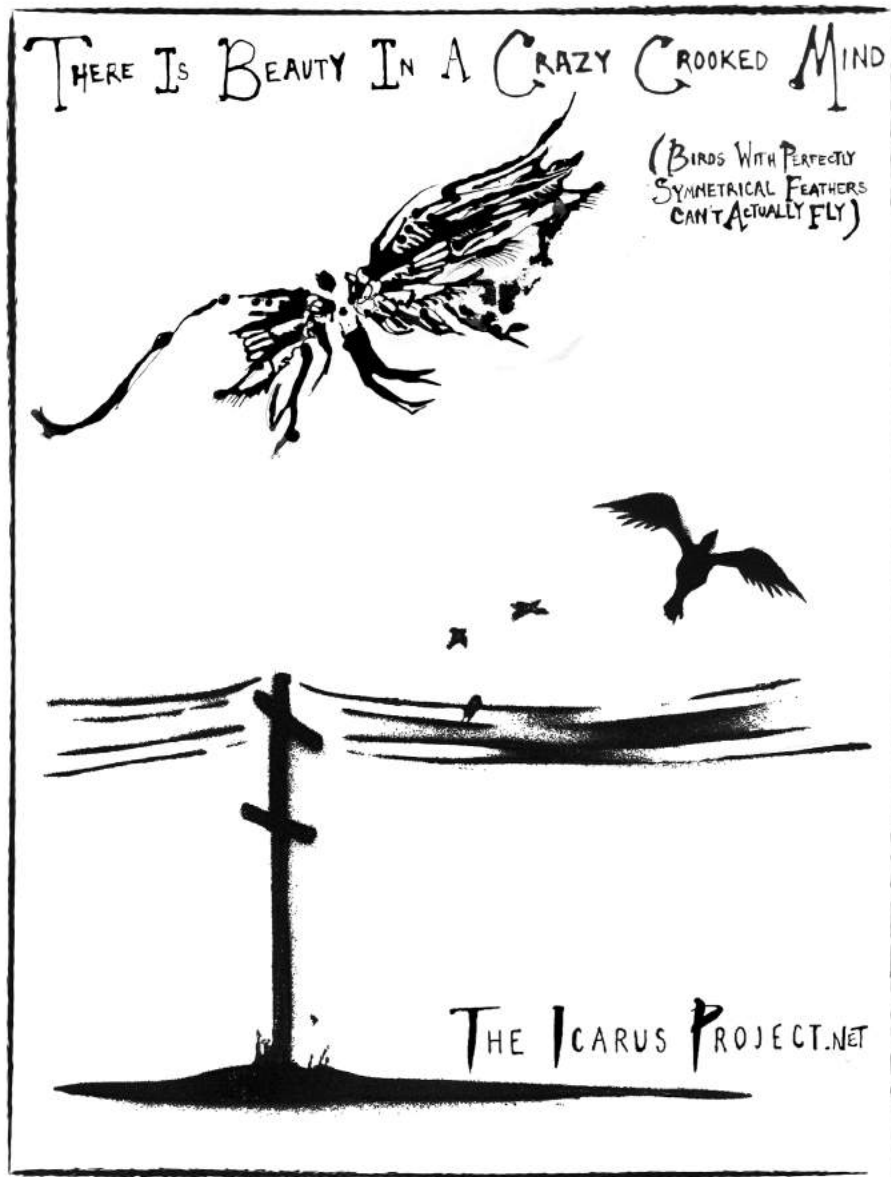
**THERE ARE WAYS TO  
TAKE CHARGE OF OUR  
OWN SANITY. THERE  
ARE OTHER MAPS THAN  
THE ONES WE ARE  
HANDED BY FAMILIES,  
SCHOOLS, TELEVISIONS,  
AND DOCTORS.**

**COME JOIN THE DIALOGUE**

THE ICARUS PROJECT

[www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net)

On the following pages you will find copies of our Preamble and Vision Statement. Please feel free to xerox and distribute these pages at your gatherings.



Feel free to add your group/event details to the flyer above.

Here's a whimsical little Icarus girl that you can use to make your own materials.



## Icarus Project Vision Statement

The Icarus Project is a radical mental health support network, online community, and alternative media project by and for people struggling with extreme emotional distress that often gets labeled as mental illness. We envision a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. We believe these experiences are dangerous gifts needing cultivation and care, rather than diseases or disorders. By joining together as individuals and as a community, the intertwined threads of madness, creativity, and collaboration can inspire hope and transformation in an oppressive and damaged world. Participation in The Icarus Project helps us overcome alienation and tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness.



The Icarus Project brings this vision to reality through an Icarus organizing collective and a grassroots network of autonomous local support groups. The Icarus organizing collective supports the Icarus vision and nourishes local groups by: facilitating a website community, distributing publications, educating the public, offering tools, sharing skills, creating art, engaging in advocacy, enhancing community capacities, and providing inspiration and solidarity. The grassroots mental health network gathers people locally for listening, dialogue, mutual aid, activism, access to alternatives, and any creative ventures they can dream up. Consistent with the Icarus vision, local groups respect diversity and embrace harm reduction and self-determination around treatment decisions, including whether to take psychiatric drugs or not and whether to use diagnostic categories or not. Everyone who shares the Icarus vision is welcome to join, and can choose "Icarus Project" or any other name for the independent efforts that inspire them.

Find Out More at: [www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net)

## Icarus Gathering PreRamble

As a group of people inspired by the Icarus Project, we offer you this preamble as a tool for your gatherings. You can summarize or read the preamble out loud to begin your meeting, as a way to focus the purpose and keep the bigger vision in everyone's mind. As your group learns its own lessons and needs, feel free to revise and create your own version.

Welcome everyone  
to our Icarus Project  
local gathering!

The Icarus Project envisions a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences of 'mental illness' rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. We see our madness as a dangerous gift to be cultivated and taken care of, rather than as a disease or disorder needing to be "cured" or "overcome."

This is a space for people to come together and learn from each others' different views and experiences of madness. People who take psychiatric drugs are welcome here, as are people who don't take psychiatric drugs. People who use diagnosis categories to describe themselves are welcome, as are people who define themselves differently. The Icarus Project values self-determination and mutual support.

Find Out More at: [www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net)

## Meeting Agreements



This gathering has some basic agreements to ensure inclusion, safety, and open dialog:

- We 'listen like allies.' We respect a wide diversity of choices and perspectives, even when we disagree, and we don't judge or invalidate other people's experiences. We try not to interrupt. When it's our turn to speak, we can ask others for feedback and advice, or just have people listen without responding. All responses are in a positive spirit of support and respect.
- We also practice 'move up move back.' People who are quiet are encouraged to speak, and those who talk a lot are encouraged to give others a chance. We invite new people to introduce themselves if they want. And silence is also always ok.
- As a community, we try to use 'owl vision', the ability to listen closely to the speaker while also having a feeling for the needs of the whole group. Keep in mind that others might be waiting to speak, or when we all might need to take a break.
- We recognize that overcoming oppression helps everyone's liberation; it is the group's responsibility to challenge racism, classism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of prejudice. We educate each other in the spirit of solidarity, and hold others accountable for their behavior without criticizing who they are as people.
- We respect spiritual beliefs, altered states of consciousness, and definitions of reality that fall outside the mainstream material view.
- In order to be as clear as possible, we try to use "I statements" when speaking to the group. This helps us avoid misunderstandings, and invokes trust and sensitivity.
- To create trust we respect confidentiality. The group decides on what level of disclosure and openness outside the group we want.

This is a work in progress. We need everyone's feedback and ideas of how to improve our efforts and strengthen our group. **And as we meet, keep in mind that there are many other people gathering like this to build community support networks with a vision of a new world.**

# A Glimpse of The Icarus Project Now

Spring 2013

These days The Icarus Project is supported by a network of madfolks and allies all over the world. Last Fall we celebrated our tenth anniversary with art shows, performance nights, and skillshares on both North American coasts. Our publications have been translated into Spanish, French, German, Italian, Hebrew, and Croatian. People are using Icarus materials in college classrooms and hatching plans for Madness Studies as an academic discipline. Our posters and info sheets are handed out as materials to youth advocates and peer specialists around the country. There are local Icarus inspired groups in places as far flung as North Dakota, Argentina and India.

Over the years the organizational structure has taken different forms, from two excited kids to a collective working out of an office in Manhattan to a more decentralized network. One great thing about the Icarus Project is that caring for each other is our work too: we're a support group as well as an organizing effort, and we're focused on creating a new way of working together where 'productivity' does not have to eclipse 'vulnerability.' We can be fully human, with all our pain and crisis and suffering, while still forming part of a collective effort. We try to keep it timed so that at least two people are stable while others are on the mania-depression-schizocoaster, but occasionally the calendars don't sync and we all go down, or hit orbit, together.

We are currently focusing on creating a visioning/ advisory board to help provide guidance for the next decade of Icarus organizing. The board will be partly composed of long-term Icarus members, and partly composed of new people from different areas of social justice movements who will provide new eyes, ideas, and strategy. We hope to center the leadership of currently underrepresented communities, particularly people of color and economically marginalized folks, and to widen the number of people involved in decision-making. We want to make the tools and resources of Icarus available and relevant to whole a lot more people.

One great thing about the Icarus Project is that caring for each other is our work too: we're a support group as well as an organizing effort, and we're focused on creating a new way of working together where 'productivity' does not have to eclipse 'vulnerability.' We can be fully human, with all our pain and crisis and suffering, while still forming part of a collective effort.

## Get in Touch With The Icarus Project

Facing a problem with getting your group going, navigating some confusing territories or having a hard time knowing where to take the next step? Have questions or ideas about local organizing? The Icarus Project community is a network of people supporting each other. Get in touch!

### On the web

[www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net)  
check out our discussion forums for ongoing support and debate

### Join us on Facebook

Join our group on Facebook for lively discussion and postings of recent events in the world

of radical mental health

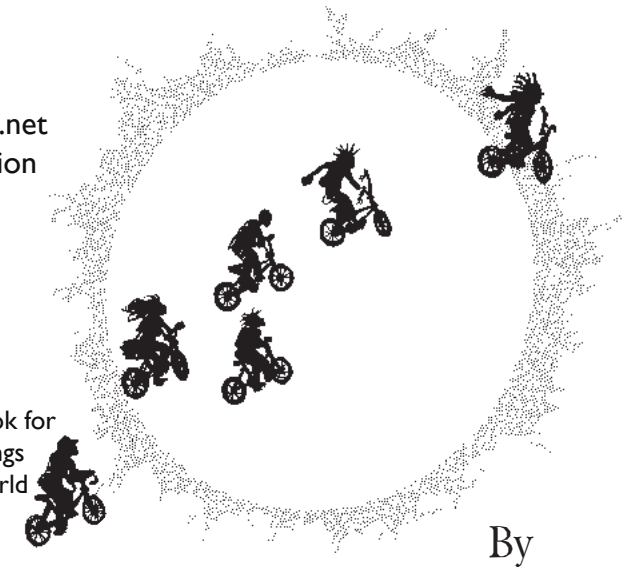
### e-mail

General inquiries: [info@theicarusproject.net](mailto:info@theicarusproject.net)

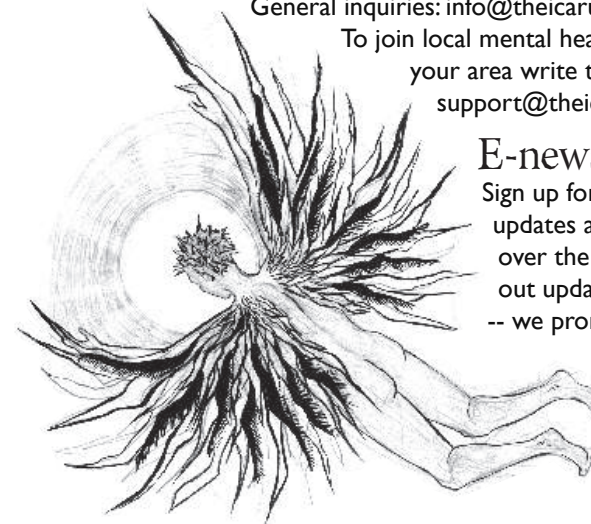
To join local mental health organizing projects in your area write to [support@theicarusproject.net](mailto:support@theicarusproject.net)

### E-newsletter

Sign up for our newsletter to get updates about Icarus activities all over the world. We usually send out updates about 4 times a year -- we promise not to flood our inbox!



By





Think of the gift in your hands as a book of magic spells.  
It could help you conjure up the world you want to see.

We've outlined a bunch of ideas to help you gather people together to start exploring all the brilliance and confusion we hold inside. We hope these suggestions spark you to start talking, yelling, screaming, dancing, making art, and collaborating on changing the world around you. We hope you make it a little less gray and lonely and cold. We hope you find words for all the pieces of you, even the jagged ones full of scars, and we hope you can put them together with the community around you and discover that you are not actually alone. There are so many of us out here and we're waiting for you to join us in all your crooked beauty and madness.

Published by The Icarus Project

**Reprinted & Distributed  
by True Leap Press**