

## Dandelion Roots

*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.*



This zine is an excerpt (pgs 4 and 14-20) of **Mindful Occupation: Rising Up Without Burning Out** — [www.mindfuloccupation.org](http://www.mindfuloccupation.org)

— Printed for The Icarus Project organizing in Ottawa. —

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## What Is Radical Mental Health?

**Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispose and to malign. But, stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that dignity.**

**Chimamanda Adiche**

**R**adical mental health means conceiving of, and engaging with, "mental health" and "mental illness" from a new perspective. There are many ways to understand our psychic states, flows, and differences, and there is a rich tradition of groups and individuals that have been exploring the boundaries of these experiences for many years. What follows is a list of key principles that we find woven through this diverse movement; it is not intended to be exhaustive or universal, but more to offer an overall sense of who we are, what we do, and why.

**Radical mental health is about the grass roots and diversity.** For so long, our psychic differences have been defined by authority figures intent on fitting us into narrow versions of "normality." Radical mental health is a dynamic, creative term; one which empowers us to come up with our own understandings for how our psyches, souls, and hearts experience the world, rather than pour them into conventional medical frameworks. For example, the Icarus Project understands people's capacities for altered states as, "dangerous gifts" to be cultivated and taken care of, rather than a disease or disorder to be cured or eliminated. Indeed, by joining together as a community, they believe that, "the intertwined threads of madness and creativity can inspire hope and transformation in a repressed and damaged world." It follows that any realistic approach to well-being has to begin by accepting and valuing diversity. There is no single model for a "healthy mind," no matter how many years of drug treatment, schooling, or behavior modification programs we've been put through. And without differences, there can be no movement.

**Radical mental health is about interconnectedness.** While mainstream conceptions of mental health and illness reduce people's experiences

into brain chemicals or personal histories, radical mental health sees human experience as a holistic convergence of social, emotional, cultural, physical, spiritual, historical, and environmental elements. This interconnectedness also spirals outwards with the idea that we all share this planet together—humans, animals, insects, and plants—what happens in one world affects all other worlds. We don't have to see ourselves as separate beings, but rather in terms of relationships: a part of myself "overlaps" with a part of you; if you're hurt I can be hurt too. No matter how alienated we are by the world around us, no matter how out of step, depressed, and disconnected we might feel, We Are Not Alone. Our lives are supported by the lives of countless other beings, from the microbes in our eyelashes to the people who plant our strawberries. The world is so much more complicated and beautiful than it appears on the surface. A premise of radical mental health then, is not only that we are not left to deal with everything on our own, but that things that support our well-being can come in many different forms (they do not just have to be psychological or pharmaceutical).

**The growth and strength of individuals and communities comes from our interconnectedness—we struggle and celebrate together, always.**

**Radical mental health is about emotional/emodied expertise.** Although careful to not overly romanticize suffering or different mental states (obviously, some can be very painful and disruptive, or even fatal) we see the beauty and expertise in all of our feelings. Radical mental health is about survival—not "survival of the fittest" or survival through teeth-gritting, but survival through chaos and exploration. It means observing how others support themselves—things which might seem self-destructive from afar—with compassion and understanding. Radical mental health is about opening up doors for conversation; about taking shame out of the equation. It is not about trying to fit into narrow definitions of "normal," which are always wrong anyway, because every culture, every group, every place might have its own normal. Radical mental health is about using your lifetime to learn about yourself, your loved ones, and strangers too, and envisioning and moving towards societies and ways of living which better support us all. It is about making worlds that recognize "breaking down" as a meaningful, important part of life that must be attended to, tended,



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Printed in U.S.-occupied America

This guide is written in the spirit of mutual aid and peer support.

This is a living document! We encourage you to remix this material to suit your own local needs. There are important, relevant ideas absent from this booklet because of space, time, and our own limited perspectives. Please join the conversation online, in your communities, and within yourself.

First Edition, June 2012

Mindful Occupation  
c/o RVA Icarus  
P.O. Box 7019  
Richmond, VA 23221  
info@mindfuloccupation.org

You can also download a digital version of this guide at [mindfuloccupation.org](http://mindfuloccupation.org).

Please send corrections and typos to [errata@mindfuloccupation.org](mailto:errata@mindfuloccupation.org).

In addition, radical mental health is about imagining what could be. Our psychic experiences are seen as an important source of desire and possibility; a (sometimes distressing, sometimes delightful) place of learning and revolution that can be squashed or hardened when approached solely through a medical lens of fear, risk, or danger.

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.



**Radical mental health is about working within, and without, the bigger mental health systems.** Radical mental health activists have a diversity of perspectives towards hospitalization, medication, and diagnoses. Most of us are not dogmatic about these issues, although we make a critical distinction between an individual's informed consent and a critique of the psychiatric establishment and the pharmaceutical industry. One of the most radical aspects of radical mental health has to do with questioning authority and the production of knowledge. We challenge the exclusive voice of formal expertise, and demand that our stories and experiences be considered alongside the voices of professional mental health service providers, profiteers, and institutions. Along with the disability rights movement, we insist: **Nothing about us without us.**

We recognize that there are many people who work in mainstream mental health settings who are deeply committed to anti-oppressive practices, who are end users of mental health care, who are traumatized by working in profoundly unjust and under-resourced systems, and who aim to share hope and support with the people most victimized by those systems. As such, while being in some ways "cogs" in a highly flawed system, they (we) are also allies in any systemic change. We need each other. For radical shifts to a monstrous, complex structure can only occur through dialogue and movement across multiple forms, people, and sites.

and not necessarily fended off. Radical mental health is about listening to and learning from the expertise of our feelings and bodies.

**Radical mental health is about new languages and cultures.** Language is powerful. It can open the world up like sunrise and it can block out the sky like prison walls. We have other people's language in our heads and on our tongues. The medical authorities offer us all kinds of words



to talk about ourselves and the troubles we have, like "depression" and "psychosis." Sometimes these words help us look back on our lives with a new way of understanding what 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. Words like "disorder" and "disease" offer us one set of metaphors for understanding the way we experience our lives through our unique minds and souls, but it is such a limited view. 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. If we can change the metaphors that shape our minds, we can change the reality around us. We need to get together and find language for our stories that make sense to us; to unlearn social conditioning about what it means to be "sick" and "healthy." We should feel empowered to create words that better reflect our personal experiences. Some of us have reclaimed the term "mad" or "madness" as no longer negative, but rather, as a proud statement of survival.

**Radical mental health is about challenging the dominance of biopsychiatry.** The biomedical model of psychiatry, or "biopsychiatry," rests on the belief that mental health issues are the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. It is an idea that is wrapped up in the same ideology of the marketplace that has cut our social safety nets and fragmented our communities—that is, that the problems and solutions of our lives are located solely in the individual. More and more, the belief that our dis/ease is in our brains has desensitized us to the idea that our feelings and experiences often have their roots



in social and political issues. If we are going to do anything to change the mental health system (along with the decaying economic system!) we need to begin by simply acknowledging how fundamentally flawed

the current, medicalized model is—how it privileges "specialists," "professionals," and "scientists" in such a way that can undermine the expertise of personal experiences, local communities, and alternative models of well-being. In addition, a clearer distinction must be drawn between the usefulness of some modern psychiatric drugs for some people at some times, and the biopsychiatric program that shrinks our minds into brains, and our feelings into chemical reactions. Above all, radical mental health urges us to talk publicly about the relationship between social and economic injustice, the pharmaceutical industry, and our psychic well-being. As such, it is about redefining what it actually means to be "mentally healthy" not just on an individual level, but on community and global levels.

**Radical mental health is about options.** Some may assume that radical mental health is simply "anti-psychiatry." However, most of us take far more complicated, diverse, and nuanced viewpoints. Radical mental health may mean accepting some of the things that mainstream, medicalized models suggest for our well-being, while discarding some of the things we may not find useful, helpful, or positive. In practice, this means supporting people's self-determination for personal, ongoing decision-making, including whether to take psychiatric drugs or not, and whether to use diagnostic categories or not. Importantly, this support is done with an acknowledgement that the pressure to make more medicalized choices is significant in our society and that these carry considerably more influence than (and often shout over) alternatives. In addition, while medical tools may sometimes be useful in the short term, some diagnoses turn our experiences into chronic incurable sickness, and its treatments come with their own problems that cannot be ignored. Radical mental health, then, often includes taking a "harm reduction" approach (promoting strategies to reduce harmful consequences) with regard to people's use of psychiatric diagnoses and drugs. Radical alternatives to mainstream approaches celebrate multiple options and diverse forms of expertise. They value, for example, peer support, listening, dialogue, mutual aid, activism, counseling, spirituality, creative activity, community engagement, politicization, and access to more marginalized healing methods.



**Radical mental health is about politics and social justice.** Radical mental health understands how the tools of psychiatric intervention

are embedded in broader relations of power. People in power benefit from controlling and silencing how our psyches/bodies/souls speak about an unjust world. They also see these tools as part of a powerful, global medico-industrial complex that profits from framing our experiences as chronic illnesses that require lifelong treatment. Participating in radical mental health activism might include denouncing how the pharmaceutical industry gains from creating new diagnostic categories, and agitating on major scales for changes among mental health institutions, professionals, government policies, and insurance companies. A radical mental health lens could also mean looking at the history of psychology with a skeptical eye; researching how definitions of madness vary across time and space, and as such are socially produced and have political (as well as personal) consequences. For example, the psychiatric establishment has a history of diagnosing entire groups of people who were queer, black, women, poor, gender-variant and/or trans, sick and abnormal, therefore justifying forms of violence and exclusion that maintained the dominance of whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

Radical mental health then, is about returning the pathologizing gaze to our crazy-making world. Our struggles for mad justice intersect with others challenging oppressive social relations, including anti-racist, feminist, queer, decolonization, disability, antiwar, decarceration, anti-corporate, public education, and other grassroots community movements.

**Radical mental health is about questioning and imagination.** Radical mental health questions authorities and critiques accepted knowledge. It draws attention to the ways that diagnostic categories and treatment regimes can be based on assumptions about science and expertise that deny the subjective and political nature of all knowledges, especially those that are embedded in powerful social and corporate structures that have a vested interest in pushing illness models of madness. Radical mental health, then, might mean critiquing some of the assumptions underpinning mainstream approaches to our psyches. For example, the concept that being a "productive member of society" means the production of certain goods, or performing certain types of jobs, even though these may serve our unjust economic structure, over individual or community well-being.

