

**A CALL
FOR**

**PREFIGURATIVE
MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORT &
COMMUNAL CARE**

**WITHIN RADICAL
GROUPS &
ORGANIZATIONS**

“In Ojibwe and Cree culture, leadership didn't mean power; it meant caring.”

— Tanya Talaga, *All Our Relations: Finding the Path Forward*

[Transformative Mutual Aid Practices is] a group practice of mutual aid, imagination, and prefigurative cultural change.

— tmapscommunity.net

*Here is the home and
the time of the tellable!
Speak out and testify.
This time is the time when
the things we love are dying
and the things we do not love
are rushing to replace them,
shadows cast by shadows:
things willingly restrained
by temporary confines
but ready to spew forth as
outer change of form decrees.*

— Ranier Maria Rilke, from the Ninth Duino Elegy

“[W]ithout changing the most molecular relationships in society — notably, those between men and women, adults and children, whites and other ethnic groups, heterosexuals and gays (the list, in fact, is considerable) — society will be riddled by domination even in a socialistic ‘classless’ and ‘non-exploitative’ form. It would be infused by hierarchy even as it celebrated the dubious virtues of ‘people’s democracies,’ ‘socialism’ and the ‘public ownership’ of ‘natural resources.’ And as long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction”

— Murray Bookchin

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Who created this zine and why?

Rationale: this zine proposes the following as true:

- Many of us experienced childhood and adolescent traumas and continue to experience traumas based on our individual intersectionalities
- We understand the mechanics of the harms and traumas inflicted by the prevailing social order's oppressive and exploitative systems
- We acknowledge that society unloads its ills onto vulnerable individuals from marginalized populations as a feature, not a flaw
- We witness and experience how society maintains its false image of itself as "healthy": its negative consequences are transposed into problems for targeted individuals, which by definition are problems too massive for them to solve alone, and this serves as further "proof" to prevailing society why those individuals are undesirable and expendable (i.e., ultimate gaslighting)
- We resist and counteract prevailing society's efforts to subjugate us, incarcerate us, and murder us
- The capitalist cultural focus on "self-care" is a fetishization of individual responsibility for collective harm and abuse that is cast upon those not valued
- Capitalist society is advancingly alienating, actively degrading our authentic interactions with each other and destroying our human communities along with all natural communities

- We must recondition ourselves towards caring for each other; communal care is ongoing radical action
- Alone we are vulnerable, but together we are strong; therefore, genuine community is paramount
- As natural beings, we recognize the restorative value and power in adopting the principles of nature that manifest the web of life, such as mutuality, symbiosis, spontaneity, creativity, and unity-in-diversity
- As human beings, we recognize the restorative value and power of applying the benefits of human consciousness to our work together
- We acknowledge that the architecture of capitalist society is colonizing white supremacy culture; it is an architecture of domination, abuse and exclusion
- If unacknowledged, unexamined, and unaddressed, we repeat this architecture and culture within our thinking, interacting, and being, both in ourselves and in our groups and orgs
- We focus intensely on the concept and practice of mutual aid
- We endeavor to decolonize our thinking, group interactions, and architecture of group processes
- We center acting in solidarity across groups in ways that build unity through diversity
- We care deeply about praxis and engage in an ongoing dialectical process within ourselves and within our groups
- We care deeply about ongoing accountability
- We emphasize prefiguration within our organizations as necessary to counteract the abuses of prevailing

society and manifest community and liberatory ways of being and living

- Dominant society deems those with mental health differences as undesirable and expendable
- When we do not prefigure communal care into our group structures and routines, we unconsciously recreate the alienation, racism, homophobia and transphobia, hierarchical ableisms, and neuro-homogeneities of capitalist society, along with their negative effects
- Groups and orgs that do not prefigure group support for mental and emotional health are ultimately inaccessible for those with mental health vulnerabilities and for other neurodiverse individuals
- “LGB comrades experience greater stigma, abuse, and trauma and are more than twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition” (*Sexual Orientation and Estimates of Adult Substance Use and Mental Health: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*)
- Transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming comrades experience greater stigma, abuse, and trauma, and “40% of transgender adults have attempted suicide during their lifetime” (*The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*)
- Black, indigenous, and comrades of color experience greater stigma, abuse, and trauma, and have exponentially fewer avenues than white comrades for accessing mental health support and communal care
- Many of our comrades are fighting a multitude of stigmas that negatively impact their wellbeing

- We all have many ways of being and knowing, including but not limited to our hearts, guts, bodies, psyches, brain structures and brain firings, intellects, emotions, intuitions, sensory perceptions, extra-sensory perceptions, visualizations, so-called delusions and hallucinations, and our intersectionalities
- More often than not, the more powerful, demonstrative, or vocal members guide their groups, narrowing opportunities for other modes of expression, communication, and consciousness to emerge, develop, and evolve
- All of us experience mental health that is dynamic and fluctuates according to various factors
- If we don't practice solidarity with our own comrades, we cannot expect to practice solidarity with others
- Knowing what we know about how prevailing society operates to oppress, exploit, and traumatize vulnerable people, a group or org that does not actively engage and support the mental and emotional wellbeing of its members is not revolutionary
- Like an individual, a collective is an organism responsible for tending to its own health
- Like an individual, a collective that ignores its health will fall into dis-ease and potentially die
- Many folks who show up to our groups do not stay because they sense the group is non-supportive or unsafe for their being

A radical care schema for groups and organizations



**Care comes first and leaves last.
It makes all other work possible.**

What can prefigurative community care that supports the mental health and wellbeing of all members look like?

Two recommended ideas for a solid beginning:

1.

Create space for an in-depth group discussion focused on the concept of your collective as an organism with a life of its own. Talk about your group as an organism that can flourish with everyone's nurturance or get sick and die from everyone's lack of care. The objective is to create group consciousness and ownership, and to arrive at and agree to incorporating new features that will consistently support the mental and emotional health of members.

Start with an anticipatory set (an exercise to engage attention, excite curiosity, activate prior knowledge, and prepare folx for the task ahead). Here is an anticipatory exercise that does all of the above in the style of concept attainment: Collectively create a drawing of an organism. On a large piece of paper, start one bit of drawing, such as a curve or a squiggle, then pass the paper. Each member contributes a new piece by starting where someone else's mark leaves off – no isolated marks. Encourage each other to think out loud while doing the exercise, as many insights formulate during this group experience. When your collective organism is complete, describe it! Personify it! Celebrate it! Discuss some of the insights members have about how individuals work as groups,

how groups are created, how they function, and how they are maintained.

Take the time and care to discuss and develop a group vision of your org as a living organism that each of you is committed to nurturing. This is the beginning of creating group consciousness. Prompt comrades to share what their mental and emotional needs are regarding participating in the group and maintaining the organism. Prompt comrades to bring to light other forms of ableism, racism, and oppression currently built into the group's structure or routines. There is no room for white supremacy culture, colonizer culture, or capitalist culture within nurturance culture – <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/whitesupcul13.pdf>. We must recondition ourselves towards caring for each other.

Look for commonalities across all members and brainstorm and discuss adaptations your group can implement. Also consider social gatherings, protest situations, community outreach situations, etc. If the discussion strays to the work-as-usual, redirect it to the supportive and restorative qualities you would like your org to embody and how your group can consciously build them into your structures and practices. The goal is to arrive at and agree to incorporating new features to support the mental and emotional health of all members. If enough members maintain the emphasis on the group as an organism, then its health and its unique nature will become personified in the minds of all members, and folx will begin to enjoy acknowledging the group as a living, dynamic being – especially when they can feel the energy they receive from it.

2.

In addition to your regular monthly meeting, commit to a regular monthly restorative gathering for wellbeing. This is for members only. It could potentially serve as a welcoming way for prospective members to dip their toe in, as opposed to their first engagement being a meeting or an action. In organizing circles, more often than not the more powerful, demonstrative, or vocal members guide their groups, narrowing opportunities for other modes of expression, communication, and consciousness to emerge. Monthly nurturance counterbalances that tendency. The focus here is on creating a predictable format for restorative connection, communal care, and wellbeing among comrades.

Based on years of creating group cohesion and deep trust among vulnerable students from disparate backgrounds, the author recommends a specific format: a regular relaxed gathering where individuals enjoy solo projects alongside each other (when two or more people work on one project, it tends to disrupt the group dynamic). Each member brings a relatively quiet activity that they will work on, such as creative writing, drawing, crafting, reading, planning or visioning, designing, etc. At the start, folks will want to greet each other and it's interesting to get to know each other through hearing what everyone else is going to work on. Once y'all get started, talking will become secondary to the texture or feel of the group-as-relaxed, meaning that talk should not be allowed to take over the ability of everyone to generally stay focused on their activity. This container fosters individual and collective nervous system soothing, group nurturance, authentic group communication, divergent group thinking, and organic group

relations. Relaxing, restoring, and recreating together is very powerful medicine.

Many of us only experience each other in supercharged situations like intense meetings, protests, street outreach, and community work. Our groups attempt to balance those experiences out by having social gatherings such as potlucks, bar karaoke, and game nights, which have their own place. However, social containers do not foster egalitarian community-building or the types of experiences required to build the trust comrades need in order to open up and be vulnerable with each other. In addition, social gatherings often reenact the ableisms and other -isms present in dominant society. This monthly gathering allows members to relax and encourages other parts of their beings to emerge within the safety of the calm group in ways that round out both the individual and the group experience. It fosters care of the self via meaningful recreation; it cultivates group consciousness and group heart via the commitment to be more patient, open, and authentic with each other; it provides an antidote to alienation and isolation, restoring the communal bonds that dominant capitalist society strips away.

To get your ideas for creating your own radical care culture flowing, here are a few additional examples of structural support routines:

- A. After opening your meetings by acknowledging the indigenous tribes whose land you are occupying, go around the group so that each person can tell everyone in a word or two how they're feeling, as well

as how much capacity they currently have to offer to the work proposed on the agenda. If this seems to trend too negative, ask folks to add one thing they noticed recently that they thought was cool.

- B. Set a timer for mid-meeting and take a few minutes to play with each other. The point of a mid-meeting break is to refocus on your group as an organism that deserves care and joy. It is the organism that will be manifesting whatever the content of your meeting is, so it is more important than the content on the agenda. Simple movements can reinvigorate the group energy and reconnect the individuals to the group.
- For example, someone starts a flow of energy and passes it to their left by touching elbows with their neighbor, who receives it with their right elbow and passes it to their neighbor with their left elbow. See how fast you can get it going around.
 - Another example: everyone stands up where they are, and someone throws out a trivia question that pertains to your group's history, work, or essence. The first person to answer correctly sits down. A variation is to throw out absurd/humorous fictitious trivia questions, and the first person to answer sits down. This is repeated until everyone is sitting down again.
 - Another way to regroup and reenergize is to have one person start a very slow rhythm by tapping or banging on the table or slapping their thighs/chest/body. Others join in as they get the rhythm. Once everyone is in rhythm, it

is natural for the group to increase tempo and build intensity, but if not, make it increase and build. This one is great because of the crescendo and release for the group at the end.

- A final suggestion is to knock a hacky sack around the table or group only using your upper body.

Once a group is used to having a few minutes' break mid-session, people will come with ideas that will be more authentic for your group. Remember, the point of a mid-meeting break is to remember that the health and joy of the group is more important than cramming more content into each meeting.

- C. Wrap up meetings by going around the group so that each person can tell everyone in a word or two something about the meeting that made them feel good, or something they're looking forward to with the group.
- D. We think of compliments as something only individuals exchange with each other, but compliments are incredibly powerful when given about the group to the group. Any time you build into your gatherings to acknowledge what feels good about the group will pay off tenfold. *It acts as a catalyst for even more positive group behaviors to emerge, develop, and evolve.* It also makes communicating constructive critiques easier.
- E. Close meetings by asking for the hand of a volunteer who will stay after the meeting for 10 minutes in case anyone needs someone to talk to. It doesn't matter if no one ever avails themselves of this offering – the point is creating and maintaining the psychological

safety this offering provides, reconditioning ourselves to caring for each other, and building orgs that unapologetically create opportunities for supporting mental health among their members.

- F. Any time is the right time for a member to initiate a round of play for everyone present, like while you're having a work party. Someone can initiate by going first and passing to their left: what animal are you like today, or make a sound that shows how you feel right now. In fact, starting up unusual sounds is often contagious and can take on a life of its own, bonding a group for a long stretch of time while they work alongside each other. As with any game, it depends on individuals being willing to risk looking silly; this is also why it is of the utmost importance that folk respond sincerely and generously when a comrade starts up a game.
- G. Wellness pairs for organizational events. Remember: the point is creating and maintaining the psychological safety this offering provides, reconditioning ourselves to caring for each other, and building orgs that unapologetically create opportunities for supporting mental health among their members. Some folk carpool to group events, while others travel solo. Often those who travel together stick together during the event, which can feel to those traveling solo that they must take care of their own needs during the event hours. When you arrived alone and later find yourself feeling stressed or having difficulty coping, it can be too daunting to interrupt a group to say that you need some mental or emotional support. One way to make

sure that everyone has someone to be there for them if needed is to get into pairs ahead of the event (there may be one triad). This is your wellness partner for the event; you can rely on each other. It is best for the health of the group to get out of your comfort zone and avoid pairing up with the same familiar people over and over again. To implement this system, it will be necessary and helpful to take 20-30 minutes or so of a meeting to agree on what kinds of responses and supports you all can expect to give and get from each other if you find yourself experiencing difficulties during events. You can call it whatever your group wants to – like hearts, or corazones – something more soulful and meaningful to your group than wellness partners.

Capitalist society teaches us *not* to care for each other. Approaching the creation of a nurturing culture as *the* fundamental revolutionary praxis of your group and as a dialectical process that is ongoing will transform your org in uncommon ways, draw a diversity of individuals to join your group, and ultimately empower it to transform the world you live in and the world around you.

Transformative Mutual Aid Practices (T-MAPs) developed by Sascha Altman DuBrul and Jacks McNamara

If you've heard of or enjoy the work of the Icarus Project (<https://theicarusproject.net/>) then you've already been

exposed to the work of Sascha Altman DuBrul and Jacks McNamara.

“Transformative Mutual Aid Practices (T-MAPs) are a set of tools that provide space for building a personal “map” of wellness strategies, resilience practices, unique stories, and community resources. Creating a T-MAP will inspire you to connect your struggle to collective struggles. When we make and share our T-MAPs with others they become potent tools for healing and liberation” (*tmapscommunity*).

DuBrul details the origins of T-MAPs:

<https://www.mapstotheotherside.net/t-maps/>

T-MAPs forms & the T-MAPs community:

<https://tmapscommunity.net/>

“T-MAPs offer the opportunity to connect with yourself and others in tangible ways that contribute to personal and community healing.

T-MAPs can help us:

- Practice communicating needs and desires.
- Develop language for thinking and articulating personal experiences.
- Create an empowering narrative for our personal journey.
- Identify stressors and what it looks like when we struggle.
- Articulate wellness strategies that support us.

- Write down our resilience practices.
- Assemble a collection of community resources.
- Connects us to movements for justice that are fighting for a better world.

Articulating these things gives us a resource we can share with the people in our lives to guide our conversations and help us support each other through rough times” (*tmapscommunity*).

Some suggestions for application:

After group consciousness, cohesion, and trust have emerged and feel stable, discuss and decide if your group is ready and willing to begin the process of creating your T-MAPs together. Ensure that all members have already looked at the [tmapscommunity](https://tmapscommunity.net/) website and encourage folks to preview the content questions inside of the T-MAPs pdf. Then hold a session where your group looks through the content of the T-MAPs together. Discuss your individual anticipations, fears, needs, and possibly excitement to determine the requirements of your group going forward. Establish guidelines that all members agree on for the T-MAPs sessions. Reach consensus about predictable routines for the sessions that will support the safety and belongingness of all members. Commit to holding regular sessions where all members make progress on their T-MAPs while experiencing each other’s support through the process. Many insights and bonds will develop throughout the work.

Be sure to establish in advance well-known routines for members who may become triggered by the content of the T-

MAPs work. As a group, brainstorm ways that individual members could adjust their approach to this sensitive material so as to mitigate the intensity of the experience, such as alternating between engaging for 5 minutes, then resting for 5 minutes. Some members may wish to skip questions that they feel will be too intense to work on while in the company of others, whereas other members may wish to prioritize working on the most intense questions while they have the support of others. There is no right or wrong way to work on your T-MAPs. It is wise to not schedule sessions too close together or too far apart; find what frequency works for your group.

Plan on using modes other than cognition and writing before attempting to put words to paper, such as art, visualization, movement, relating and communicating, meditation, etc. This will provide access to inner wisdom necessary to put experiences into words and formulate needs into words. Do not expect people to be able to go in cold and fill in their T-MAPs in a meaningful way. Best practices would see each T-MAPs session providing a compassionate and supportive beginning, middle, and ending experience to ground everyone in the group. Commit to attending all sessions even if you have completed your writing so that others who are still working on theirs do not feel abandoned by the group. Comrades who are done writing for the time being can explore other modes of describing the experiences and needs of their being, or they can do visioning and planning around the types of exercises that the group can use after completions of that section, the next sections, or in general.

From an educational perspective, your group will want to “chunk” the pdf into sections that everyone works on at the same time. Rather than being dictatorial, this technique will enable many beneficial things to happen: folx will not rush through the pdf, folx will be less likely to feel pressure to finish, folx will be less likely to feel like they’re “slow” or have “fallen behind,” and it will make it possible to engage in disclosure activities throughout the process rather than waiting until the end to do a bunch of disclosure exercises at once, which will enhance the development of the trust bonds of the group along the way (i.e., don’t wait till the end to create trust). Chunking the pdf will integrate the work and avoid the problems that would come with implementing a “phase one” where everyone finishes their entire pdf in a disconnected way and a “phase two” that floods everyone with numerous emotional experiential exercises.

Sharing information from your T-MAPs will take whatever form your group decides will be the most safe, comfortable, and supportive, and no one is forced to share anything specific from their T-MAP. Create dozens of opportunities for disclosure as you work through the pdf together. Rather than reading directly from our T-MAPs, DuBrul recommends using art therapy, drama/theater exercises, imaginative prompts, and other modalities as a way of integrating self- and group-knowledge with new ways of being as the preferred method of disclosing personal content. We are transforming. From a pedagogical perspective, this is correct and necessary for moving learning experiences from short-term knowledge to long-term integration. In addition, it rewrites the script of toxic educational culture which most of us have internalized

that prompts us to shallowly fill out a form and read it out to others; this *reinforces* alienation. Vary your chosen transformation exercises among whole-group, small-group (heterogeneous or homogeneous), triads and pair-shares. Where possible, add gentle levity and appropriate expressions of play.

It is paramount to acknowledge that all members have mental health, that our experiences of mental health exist in a spectrum-web, that all of us experience fluctuations in our mental health, and that the mental health of our groups is comprised of all of us. Therefore, those who experience more intense or severe mental health challenges should not be sectioned-off into a smaller affinity group to fend for themselves (though of course they may form bonds with each other based on their common experiences).

The mental health of all members should be supported in an ongoing way. Go around the circle so that comrades can indicate to the group if:

- they would like others to reach out to them for a period of time or in an ongoing way, and how
- they would be willing to reach out to others who ask for that support
- they are currently unable to provide support to others
- they would like people to hang out with when they are not feeling well
- they are available to hang out with others to decrease their isolation during difficult times
- etc.

Once your org has completed your T-MAPs work, plan to have refreshers every 3 months or so to check in, update, and support each other. How folks are ultimately connected to others in ongoing mental health mutual aid will depend greatly on the nature of your group and the dynamics of your group and its members.

The most important factor in how your groups implement T-MAPs is you. It takes courage to allow others who may not be our primary friends to know our struggles and genuinely support us, and to offer real-life support to people who may not be our primary friends. Go slowly, and do not advance because of unimportant things like scheduling – instead, ensure trust and care with every step. Together, you can create a deeply revolutionary, transformative, pro-evolutionary experience that yields uncommon results.

Who created this zine and why?

The creator of this zine is white. They experienced infant/early childhood abuse that altered their brain development, which resulted in psychosis when under stress; psychotic episodes can be brief or last months. They experienced childhood and adolescent abuse that altered their development, which resulted in neuroses; depression, general anxiety, social anxiety, eating disorders, CPTSD, and panic attacks are ongoing. Their family of origin rejected them when they came out as pansexual; they have been working towards accepting and embracing their gender.

After untreated mental health issues led to transience and drug addiction led to jail, they have been healing and recreating themselves for the past 20 years. In that time, they have engaged in youth/queer/union/socialist/feminist/antiracist/antifascist/ecological/anarchist/communalist work, groups, and orgs. After years of various minimum wage jobs, they became a public high school teacher for 15 years. As a reading specialist, they worked with incoming freshmen who spent their elementary and middle school years being passed from intervention program to intervention program, arriving at high school with beginning reading skills. Several years ago, they left the toxic public education system and have plans to continue engaging with community education in the future.

In addition to psychoses and neuroses, due to their neurodiversity they can be overwhelmed by sensory input, emotional sensitivity, racing thoughts, and their experience of consciousness is often overwhelming. Because of intermittent

suicidality, they do engage with the psychiatric industry, but also acknowledge its oppressive role in medicalizing society's ills onto vulnerable individuals. They live with chronic pain from fibromyalgia. They would like to emphasize the point that so-called "invisible" mental and physical illnesses, traumas, oppressions, and struggles are only considered invisible because others do not hold space for the reality of those experiences to exist in anyone they meet, regardless of how they appear. Many of our folx are neurodiverse. A majority of our comrades have been forced to develop inordinate strength and resilience. We must once and for all acknowledge that someone appearing a certain way does not tell us truths about them or their life experiences. We are each unique.

Across various groups, the creator of this zine has experienced intensely positive group energy and cohesion via work projects, campaigns, and social events. They have also experienced intensely negative distress via lack of support for wellbeing and retraumatization that is common in a lot of orgs. Many comrades who have lived through trauma reenact, project, and recycle dysfunctions amongst the group, which can trigger others who have also lived through trauma, have mental health vulnerabilities, or struggle with coping or regulating their own dysfunctions.

In 2017, they participated in a T-MAPs workshop led by Sascha Altman DuBrul and became intrigued by the concept of comrades supporting each other's mental health as a form of mutual aid. Two attempts to engage their last org with T-MAPs were met with silence, and no comrades reached out to

them during a months-long depression with suicidal and psychotic episodes. Unfortunately, this type of alienation happens in organizing circles, as folx are often too overwhelmed by surviving capitalism to counteract the patterns of prevailing society and recognize communal care as essential and others as valued. We have lost more of our humanity than we realize. We cannot remain complacent and allow white supremacist capitalist homogeneous social norms to strip away our ability to care for each other.

The creator of this zine proposes that groups and orgs that do not prefigure mental health support and communal care are not revolutionary: they will not bring about the liberatory society we seek. The need to consciously reject and deliberately rescript the toxic architecture of dominant society's patterns is dire, and the time to prefigure radical interpersonal relations in our communities is now.

“Our being is becoming, not stasis” – Murray Bookchin

In Solidarity

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