

Why some mentally ill patients are rejecting their medication and making the case for 'mad pride.'

By ALISSA QUART

WE DON'T WANT TO BE NORMAL," Will Hall tells me. The 43-year-old has been diagnosed as schizophrenic, and doctors have prescribed antipsychotic medication for him. But Hall would rather value his mentally extreme states than try to suppress them, so he doesn't take his meds. Instead, he practices yoga and avoids coffee and sugar. He is delicate and thin, with dark plum polish on his fingernails and black fashion sneakers on his feet, his half Native American ancestry evident in his dark hair and dark eyes. Cultivated and charismatic, he is also unusually energetic, so much so that he seems to be vibrating even when sitting still.

I met Hall one night at the offices of the Icarus Project in Manhattan. He became a leader of the group—a "mad pride" collective—in 2005 as a way to promote the idea that mental-health diagnoses like bipolar disorder are "dangerous gifts" rather than illnesses. While we talked, members of the group—Icaristas, as they call themselves—scurried around in the purple-painted office, collating mad-pride fliers. Hall explained how the medical establishment has for too long relied heavily on medication and repression of behavior of those deemed "not normal." Icarus and groups like it are challenging the science that psychiatry says is on its side. Hall believes that psychiatrists are prone to making arbitrary distinctions between "crazy" and "healthy," and to using medication as tranquilizers.

"For most people, it used to be, 'Mental illness is a disease—here is a pill you take for it,'" says Hall. "Now that's breaking down." Indeed, Hall came of age in the era of the book "Listening to Prozac." He initially took Prozac after it was prescribed to him for depression in 1990. But he was not simply depressed, and he soon had a manic reaction to Prozac, a not uncommon side effect. In his frenetic state, Hall went on to lose a job at an environmental organization. He soon descended into poverty and started to hear furious voices in his head; he walked the streets of San Francisco night after night, but the voices never quieted. Eventually, he went to a mental-health clinic and was swiftly locked up. Soon after, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was put in



Listening to Mad

restraints and hospitalized against his will, he says. For the next year, he bounced in and out of a public psychiatric hospital that he likens to a prison. The humiliation and what he experienced as the failure of the medication were what turned him against traditional treatment. Since then, Hall has been asking whether his treatment was really necessary. He felt sloshily medicated, as if he couldn't really live his life.

Hall and Icarus are not alone in asking these questions. They are part of a new generation of activists trying to change the treatment and stigma attached to mental illness. Welcome to Mad Pride, a budding grassroots movement, where people who have been defined as mentally ill reframe their conditions and celebrate unusual

(some call them "spectacular") ways of processing information and emotion.

Just as some deaf activists prefer to embrace their inability to hear rather than "cure" it with cochlear implants, members of Icarus reject the notion that the things that are called mental illness are simply something to be rid of. Icarus members cast themselves as a dam in the cascade of new diagnoses like bipolar and ADHD. The group, which now has a membership of 8,000 people across the U.S., argues that mental-health conditions can be made into "something beautiful." They mean that one can transform what are often considered simply horrible diseases into an ecstatic, creative, productive or broadly "spiritual" condition. As Hall puts

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