

Elevated State of Mind: The Transcendent Effect of Psychedelics

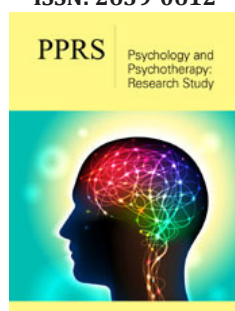
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Opinion

Human Beings have been using psychoactive substances for millennia. Drugs made from plants have historically been used as keys to commune with the spiritual world in many indigenous pre-modern societies [1]. Psychedelics were hugely popular during the 1960s and 1970s, with reports of its “transcendent” effect entering the western research narrative [2]. There was a keen interest in investigating these compounds until they were deemed as ‘drugs of abuse’ [3,4]. However, there has once again been a rise in psychedelic use among young people [5]; renewed investigations are also taking place on the use of these substances to treat various mental illnesses [5].

Psychedelics remain Schedule-1 drugs federally in the US and Class-A in the UK [6], and the general public is well aware of their potential harms. But that has not stopped people from using them for various purposes. David Nutt, a neuropsychopharmacist at Imperial College London, mentions that not only do recreational users use these substances for escapism but also to understand the full capacity of their minds and well-being [5]. They want to be involved in a transformative experience. A transformative experience, or a self-transcendent experience, is defined in philosophy as experiences characterized by a cognitive shift that is so profound it causes a substantial change in one’s personal values and priorities that is practically impossible to accurately imagine in advance. Such profound changes to a person’s values, beliefs, or morals may in turn result from a mystical-type experience, a key element of the psychedelic experience, that is characterized, by feelings of internal and external unity, transcendence of time and space, a sense of awe or sacredness, and a distinct noetic quality pertaining to one’s understanding of reality [7].

Individuals enrolled in clinical trials and those using psychedelics recreationally have reported experiencing the aforementioned transformative state. In a placebo-controlled psilocybin study conducted in a laboratory setting, 22 of 36 participants reported having had such an experience after taking psilocybin. 21 of those participants considered it as one of the top five most personally meaningful experiences in their lives [7]. The Good Friday Experiment of 1962 was a session held in a church with seminary students to test psilocybin’s capacity for inducing mystical experiences. One-half of the subjects were given the active drug, and those dosed wandered around the grounds in a daze envisioning God [6].

A series of field studies involving 1,200 participants across mass gatherings (such as music festivals) in the United States and the United Kingdom reported that the recent use of psychedelic substances in a naturalistic setting was associated with experiences of personal transformation [7]. Albert Hoffman, the Swiss chemist known for being the first known person to synthesize, ingest and learn of the psychedelic effects of LSD, details his own experience with his ‘problem child’ as surreal: “space and time became more and more disorganized and I was overcome with fears that I was going crazy...Occasionally I felt as being outside my body” [8].

Rick Doblin, the founder, and executive of a non-profit organization called the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, describes his first experience with LSD as transformative. He mentions how he reverted to being a boy again. The imbalance of emotion and intellect that drove his life every day was sensible. He realized he was this way for a reason, and this meant it wasn't set in stone. He could change things. He could be free [6]. These experiences have been found to produce lasting, positive effects on subjective well-being, openness to experience, perceived meaning in life, and prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Importantly, past research found that the beneficial effects of psychedelic substance use on subjective well-being depended on the strength of mystical-type experience reported by participants during the experimental sessions, with more pronounced experiences predicting greater long-term positive outcomes [7].

Psychedelic drugs have powerful effects on the conscious experience, whether synthesized in the lab (such as LSD) or those found in nature. Psychedelics are often close analogs of chemicals found in plants or fungi used traditionally for spiritual rituals. Psilocybin is primarily found in 'magic mushrooms'. They have historically been used as a way to connect to nature and self-transformation [8]. The peyote cactus is prevalent in Central and North America and contains mescaline, a substance that has both stimulant and hallucinogenic effects [1]. Ayahuasca is a combination of two plants, *anisteriopsis caapi*, and *Psychotria Viridis*, both of which are native to South America and contain DMT [1]. LSD is an ergot derivative [9]. The root of the iboga plant (*Tabernanthe iboga*) is a stimulant and hallucinogen and primarily acts on the NMDA, nicotinic, σ -, κ -opioid, and μ -receptors.

Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) acts primarily as a serotonin-releasing agent and has effects that somewhat overlap but are substantially distinct from classic psychedelics [10]. The 'classic' psychedelic drugs (such as LSD, psilocybin, DMT, and mescaline) are primary agonists of the 5-HT_{2A} (serotonin) receptor [9]. This allows greater activity in neural pathways by shutting down the action of the Default Mode Network (DMN) [11]. The lack of control from the DMN increases the connectivity between different regions of the brain allowing for an altered sensory experience; a classic example would be synaesthesia: hearing color, or smelling sound [12]. The altered sensations allow one to transcend the rigid controls they have indoctrinated as part of their existence [13]. They become more in touch with a higher plane of existence; another word for psychedelics is "entheogen", to search for the divine within. This explains why even when interviewed years later by a follow-up researcher, the participants of the Good Friday Experiment rated it as one of the most mystical experiences of their lives [14].

Psychedelics are unique in schedule 1 drugs that they are anti-addictive [15]; being used by substance misuse/addiction services worldwide to treat alcoholism, opiate dependence, and nicotine addiction [16]. Thus an "addiction" to psychedelics in the classical

sense is not possible. It comes with its dangers, as there are reports of a "bad trip", a traumatic journey into the mind one can also find themselves having "flashbacks", a glimpse of the transcendent state again, unbidden, for a few minutes; officially called HPPD or Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder. Type 1 is the colloquial flashback with Type 2 of HPPD harkening a more long-term side effects [17], that of the "endless trip" as suffered by the French Philosopher Chartre on injection himself with mescaline and seeing giant crabs following him everywhere for months! [18]. Immediate and short-term physical side effects include gastrointestinal upset, vital sign disturbance, and musculoskeletal abnormalities [19].

The most common adverse effects from the administration of psychedelics under clinical supervision are limited to the time of drug action, such as acute increases in anxiety, fear, heart rate, and blood pressure. Without careful supervision, fearful responses could lead to dangerous behavior (e.g., fleeing the study site). In addition, delayed-onset headache is sometimes caused by psilocybin use and possibly by other classic psychedelics. Although adverse effects of MDMA overlap somewhat with those of classic psychedelics, cardiovascular effects (e.g., tachycardia) are generally greater with MDMA, whereas adverse psychological reactions are more likely with classic psychedelics. It is important to note that acute adverse effects are readily managed. No new clinical research studies have reported long-term harms [9].

Psychedelics have long been used for ceremonial, therapeutic, and cultural purposes. They are associated with experiences of personal transformation, a sense of altered moral values, increased feelings of social connectedness, and a more positive mood. They provide an escape for individuals who feel trapped in the monotony of their lives. This is especially so in recent years with the growing prevalence of mental illness. In addition, renewed interest in this class is generating new knowledge with important implications for their therapeutic potential. "LSD is a catalyst or amplifier of mental processes. If properly used it could become something like the microscope or telescope of psychiatry".

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