

Better living through psychedelic-induced mystical experiences?

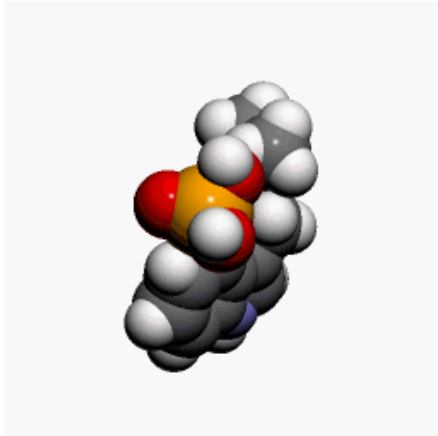
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Psychedelics are back in clinical research



For **psilocybin** in particular

- Preliminary findings support efficacy for treating depression, addictions (Andersen et al., 2021; Ko et al., 2022)
- 75 clinical trials on-going globally for treating a variety of mental health disorders (ClinicalTrials.gov, 03/2023)

Psychedelics induce mystical experiences

”[P]silocybin can induce states of consciousness which are indistinguishable from, if not identical with, those experienced by mystics” – Walter Pahnke (1963, p. 236)

“[P]sychedelic substances reliably induce religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences, even in tightly controlled laboratory settings” (Yaden et al., 2017)

Mystical experiences

”I saw time falling into the future. I no longer existed”

“[T]he rest of the universe just disappeared and all of a sudden we were everything“

”I felt I was one with my friends around me ... I felt I was traveling in another dimension, a world of shadows”

(Finns’ first experiences with psychedelics; Kangaslampi et al., 2020)

”Complete mystical experiences” reported by

- 60 % of psychedelic-naïve volunteers (Griffiths et al., 2006) and 54% of depressed patients (Davis et al., 2020) after medium-to-high dose of psilocybin in laboratory setting
- 27 % of Finnish participants reporting on their first time using a psychedelic in any context (Kangaslampi et al., 2020)

Mystical experiences lead to improved well-being?

Both clinical laboratory studies and surveys suggest that

“mystical-type experiences are predictive of beneficial outcomes from psychedelics” – Yaden & Griffiths (2021)

→ Has become a prominent, often repeated and even standard explanation for why psychedelics might have therapeutic potential

- I reviewed all studies examining this link (Kangaslampi, 2023) and found
 - Dozens of studies (36/44) to show a link between mystical experiences under psychedelics and later improvements in well-being or mental health

A few caveats

- Studies that compared mystical experiences with insight and emotional breakthrough experiences suggest such aspects may be even more linked to positive changes (Kangaslampi, 2023)
- Substantial methodological problems in how psychological "mechanisms of action" have typically been studied (Kangaslampi, 2020)

Still: Spiritual cures?

- Are psychedelics as medicine bringing spiritual experiences into psychiatry (e.g. Yaden & Newman, 2022)? If so, what does this mean and how should we approach this?

E.g.

- Is it ethical to induce mystical experiences in people?
- What sort of informed consent can people give for having such experiences and potentially having their worldviews challenged or changed (e.g., in a non-physicalist direction; Nayak et al., 2021)?
- Are we priming people to have mystical/spiritual experiences by talking about them and using surveys about them?
- Should we even use words like "mystical" in scientific discourse? (Sanders & Zijlmans, 2021)

Mystical Experiences Questionnaire

Mystical

4. Gain of insightful knowledge experienced at an intuitive level.
5. Feeling that you experienced eternity or infinity.
6. Experience of oneness or unity with objects and/or persons perceived in your surroundings.
9. Certainty of encounter with ultimate reality (in the sense of being able experience).
14. Freedom from the limitations of your personal self and feeling a unity or bond with what was felt to be greater than your personal self.
15. Sense of being at a spiritual height.
16. Experience of pure being and pure awareness (beyond the world of sense impressions).
18. Experience of the insights that “all is One”.
20. Experience of oneness in relation to an “inner world” withing.
21. Sense of reverence.
23. You are convinced now, as you look back on your experience, that in what was really real).
24. Feeling that you experienced something profoundly sacred and holy.
25. Awareness of the life or living presence in all things.
26. Experience of the fusion of your personal self into a larger whole.
28. Experience of unity with ultimate reality.

Positive Mood

2. Experience of amazement.
8. Feelings of tenderness and gentleness.
12. Feelings of peace and tranquility.
17. Experience of ecstasy.
27. Sense of awe or awesomeness.
30. Feelings of joy.

Transcendence of Time and Space

1. Loss of your usual sense of time.
7. Loss of your usual sense of space.
11. Loss of usual awareness of where you were.
13. Sense of being “outside of” time, beyond past and future.
19. Being in a realm with no space boundaries.
22. Experience of timelessness.

Ineffability

3. Sense that the experience cannot be described adequately in words.
10. Feeling that you could not do justice to your experience by describing it in words.
29. Feeling that it would be difficult to communicate your own experience to others who have not had similar experiences.

Mystical experiences, as studied in psychedelic research

Quantified in measures like the Mystical Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ)

- Lineage can be traced to William James (1902), Bertrand Russell (1918), Aldous Huxley (1945), Walter Stace (1960)
- Items developed specifically for studying experiences under psychedelics by Walter Pahnke (1963, 1969) and Maclean et al. (2012)
- Relies on the *perennialist* idea of a common core of mystical experience
- More specifically based on views emphasized by Stace (1960)
 - The particular core of mystical experiences is an experience of (negative, void-like) unity
 - *Internal* or *inward focused* mystical experiences are more noteworthy, important or authentically mystical

Criticism and discussion

- Perennialism in spirituality and mystical experience has many critics (e.g., Wayne Proudfoot, Steven T. Katz)
- A definite generalizability problem in evidence – e.g., current psychedelic research almost completely excludes Asia and Africa
- An overly general umbrella measure, too open to interpretation?
 - Even people classified as having had a mystical experience might not themselves view their experiences as "metaphysical", "transpersonal", "spiritual" in nature, but in rather more psychological, personal, self-related terms (Letheby, 2021)
- More specific criticism recently provided especially by religious scholar Ann Taves (2019, 2022), calling for
 - "an expanded framework for studying unusual experiences across disciplines and cultures" that "includes a wide range of alterations in sense of self instead of privileging experiences that researchers view as potentially more authentic"
 - better distinguishing (generically-worded) experiences and culture-bound appraisals/interpretations/beliefs

Psychedelic researchers vs. the square world

- These debates may reflect the rather insular development of research on psychedelics until recently
 - Researchers who study psychedelics vs. the others
 - "The psychedelic community" as the source for both researchers and study participants
 - Conferences focused exclusively on psychedelics vs. mainstream scientific conferences
- Separation and hesitancy to engage previously also apparent in
 - Consciousness studies
 - Philosophy
 - Clinical and psychotherapy research
- Now: the stigma appears to be gone and may be turning into hype
 - Prominent researchers in many fields are jumping on board
 - But "psychedelic research" still needs better alignment with the mainstream of many fields of science
 - Especially to avoid reinventing the wheel, restarting debates from scratch

Towards an interdisciplinary future

Exciting research prospects abound!

- Psychedelics coming into psychiatry may represent or trigger a major shift, and understanding its implications goes well beyond psychiatry or clinical psychology itself
 - “We now have the technology for studying and facilitating experimental mystical experience” (Pahnke, 1969) – More true than ever in the 2020s!
 - Psychedelics cause a very wide gamut of interesting experiences and their increasing use may have a variety of complex effects on individuals, groups, and societies that need study
 - Despite the dominating medical/clinical discourse, all this work needs philosophers, religious scholars, sociologists, cultural and psychological anthropologists and many other types of researchers
- More interdisciplinary work and more cooperation with researchers *not* specialized in, and maybe even adversarial to, psychedelics!

Thank you!

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See more: <https://kangaslampi.net>

Slides available at <https://kangaslampi.net/anthro.pdf>

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What is (a) psychedelic?

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