

Are mystical-type experiences key to the therapeutic effects of psychedelics?

- State of the research and evidence

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Honoraria	-
Advisory Board/Consultant	-

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

"a complete ripping out of myself into another form of being and reality"

"[T]he rest of the universe just disappeared and all of a sudden, we were everything ... I actually felt like I was the world"

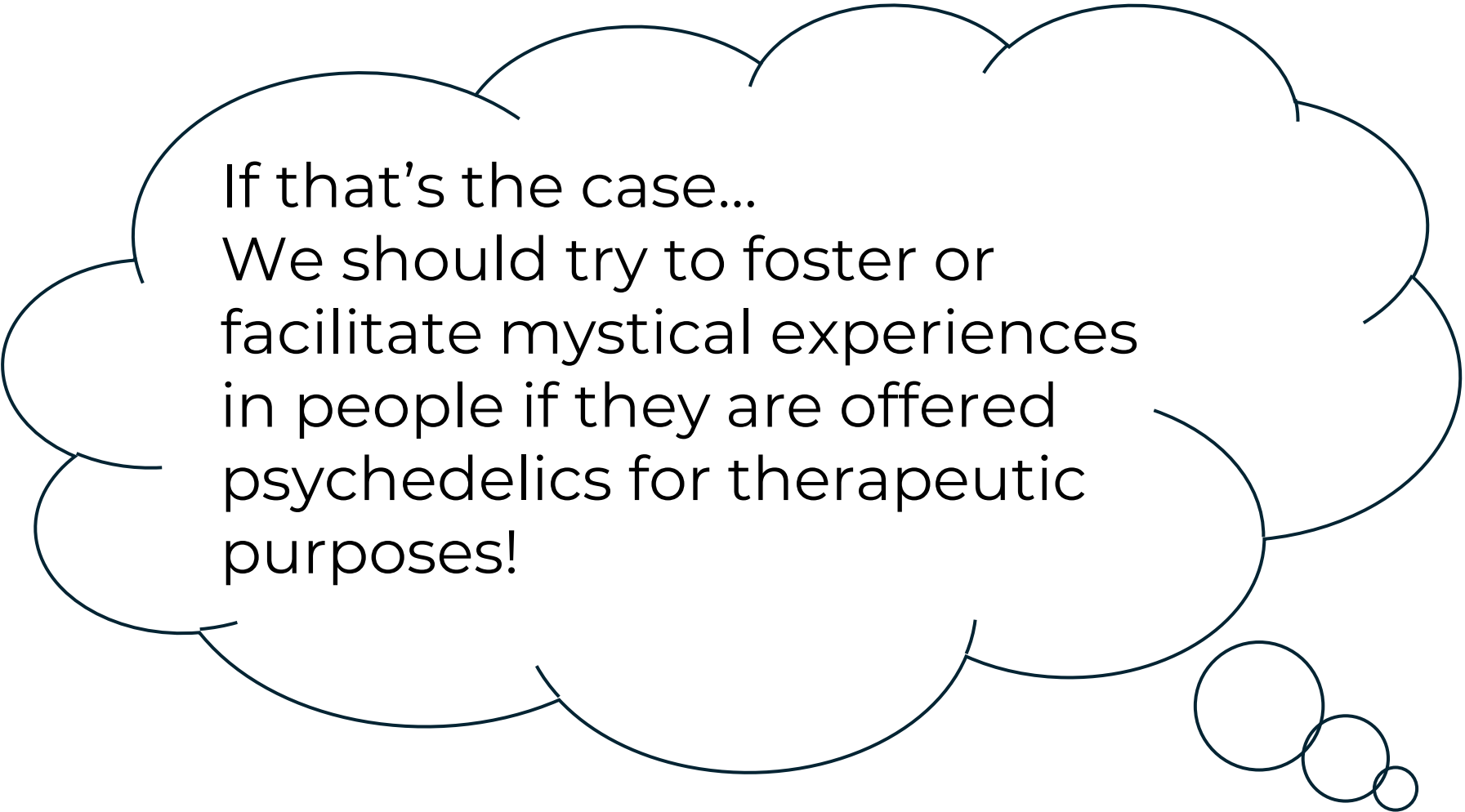
(Finns' first experiences with psychedelics)¹

"[P]silocybin can induce states of consciousness which are indistinguishable from, if not identical with, those experienced by mystics"

Walter Pahnke (1963)²

"[T]hose who experience the most profound mystical experiences invariably receive the greatest symptom improvement"

David Nichols (2016)³



If that's the case...
We should try to foster or
facilitate mystical experiences
in people if they are offered
psychedelics for therapeutic
purposes!

E.g., Richards (2008)⁴;
Gandy (2022)⁵

Mystical experiences key to therapeutic effects?

Association between mystical-type experiences under psychedelics and improvements in well-being or mental health – A comprehensive review of the evidence

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- Up to 2022, 36/44 identified studies found a link between mystical experiences under psychedelics and later improvements in well-being or mental health⁶
- More, and more unequivocal, evidence for this
 - a) among healthy people than in clinical populations, and
 - b) for changes in general well-being and life satisfaction, attitudes and behavior, and anxiety than for depression or other areas

Mystical experiences key to therapeutic effects?



Psychedelics, Mystical Experience, and Therapeutic Efficacy: A Systematic Review

Kwonmok Ko ^{1*}, Gemma Knight ¹, James J. Rucker ^{1,2,3} and Anthony J. Cleare ^{1,2,3}

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- Ko et al. (2022)⁷: 10/12 clinical trials showed an association between mystical experiences and reductions in mental health symptoms

Recent studies on depression

Single-dose psilocybin-assisted therapy in major depressive disorder: a placebo-controlled, double-blind, randomised clinical trial

Robin von Rotz,^{a,*} Eva M. Schindowski,^a Johannes Jungwirth,^a Anna Schults,^a Nathalie M. Rieser,^a Katharina Zahoranszky,^a Erich Seifritz,^a Alina Nowak,^b Peter Nowak,^b Lutz Jäncke,^c Katrin H. Preller,^{a,d} and Franz X. Vollenweider^{a,d}

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- von Rotz et al. (2023)⁸ – Oceanic boundlessness and insightfulness, but not unity or spiritual experience, negatively correlated with changes in depression for 26 patients with TRD
- Sloshower et al. (2023)⁹ – Strength of mystical experience was negatively correlated with change in depressive symptoms after a **placebo** session, but not after psilocybin dosing, for 19 patients with TRD

Original Paper

Psilocybin-assisted therapy for major depressive disorder: An exploratory placebo-controlled, fixed-order trial

Jordan Sloshower^{1,2} , Patrick D. Skosnik^{1,2} ,
Hamideh Safi-Aghdam^{1,2}, Surbhi Pathania²,
Shariful Syed^{1,2} , Brian Pittman¹
and Deepak Cyril D'Souza^{1,2}



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Recent studies on depression

International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-024-01253-9>

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Unique Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Psilocybin Therapy Versus Escitalopram Treatment in the Treatment of Major Depressive Disorder

Brandon Weiss^{1,2} · Leor Roseman^{2,3} · Bruna Giribaldi² · David J. Nutt² · Robin L. Carhart-Harris^{2,4} · David Erritzoe²

- Weiss et al. (2024)¹⁰ – Mystical experiences and ego dissolution, but not emotional breakthroughs or insights, mediated effects of psilocybin vs. escitalopram on depression in 59 patients with MDD
- Hashimoto (2024)¹¹ – “[I]t appears unlikely that psilocybin-induced mystical experiences contribute to its antidepressant effects in MDD patients”

European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-024-01770-7>

INVITED REVIEW



Are “mystical experiences” essential for antidepressant actions of ketamine and the classic psychedelics?

Kenji Hashimoto¹

Major issues

Uncovering psychological mechanisms mediating the effects of drugs: some issues and comments using the example of psychedelic drugs

Samuli Kangaslampi¹ 

Received: 30 September 2020 / Accepted: 30 October 2020

1. Methodological problems in how psychological mechanisms of action have been studied in psychedelic research¹²
 - Much to learn from psychotherapy research!
 - Let's keep acute mechanisms / treatment components, contents separate from longer-term mechanisms or mechanisms of change

Major issues

2. Is it ethical to cause mystical experiences in people? ^{13 14 15}
- Especially if they lead to changes in beliefs or worldviews?

Transformative experience and informed consent to psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy

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Ethics and ego dissolution: the case of psilocybin

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Viewpoint

Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine

Matthew W. Johnson*

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 [Read Online](#)

Major issues

3. Are we reliably measuring a distinct, well-defined unified phenomenon or construct reasonably called a mystical experience? ^{16 17}

- Are mystical experiences, as defined and understood in psychedelic research, really quite a culturally-loaded, perennialist, Christian-specific formulation resulting from particular historical circumstances and coincidences? ^{18 19 20 21}

De-Siloing the Psychology of Religion and Psychedelic Science: Introduction to the Special Issue on Psychedelics and Mystical-type Experiences

Michiel van Elk & David Yaden

BOOK REVIEW

The psychedelic religion of mystical consciousness

William A. Richards
Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences
Columbia University Press, New York, 2016, 244 pp.
Hardback ISBN: 978-0-231-17406-0

Rick J. Strassman, MD



Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self: An Expanded Framework for Studying Nonordinary Experiences

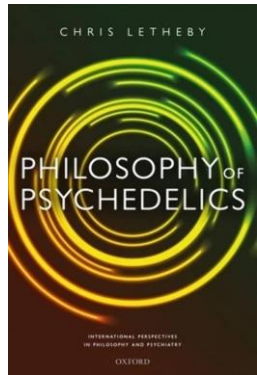
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www.psychologicalscience.org/PPS
SAGE

Original Paper

The revival of the psychedelic experience scale: Revealing its extended-mystical, visual, and distressing experiential spectrum with LSD and psilocybin studies

Kurt Stocker^{1,2,3,4}, Matthias Hartmann⁴, Laura Ley¹,
Anna M Becker¹, Friederike Holze¹ and Matthias E Liechti¹



Psychedelic-induced mystical experiences: An interdisciplinary discussion and critique

Sharday Mosurinjohn^{1*}, Leor Roseman² and Manesh Girn^{3*}

¹School of Religion, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada, ²Department of Brain Sciences, Centre for Psychedelic Research, Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom, ³Department of Neurology and Neurosurgery, Montreal Neurological Institute, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

Major issues

4. Is the link to therapeutic effects **specific** to mystical-type experiences, in general or in some particular cases?

- Some studies that have compared mystical experiences with psychological insights²² and emotional breakthrough experiences²³ suggest such aspects may be even more linked to positive changes⁶
²⁴
- There are other types of subjective content, other types of psychedelic experiences!

Two very different, separate questions:

Are subjective experiences or content necessary or important for therapeutic effects of psychedelics?^{25 26 27 28}

Are **mystical-type** subjective experiences necessary or important for therapeutic effects of psychedelics?

Autobiographical psychedelic experiences

“[LSD] permitted a re-examination of significant experiences of the past, which sometimes were relived with frightening realism”

Busch & Johnson (1950)²⁹

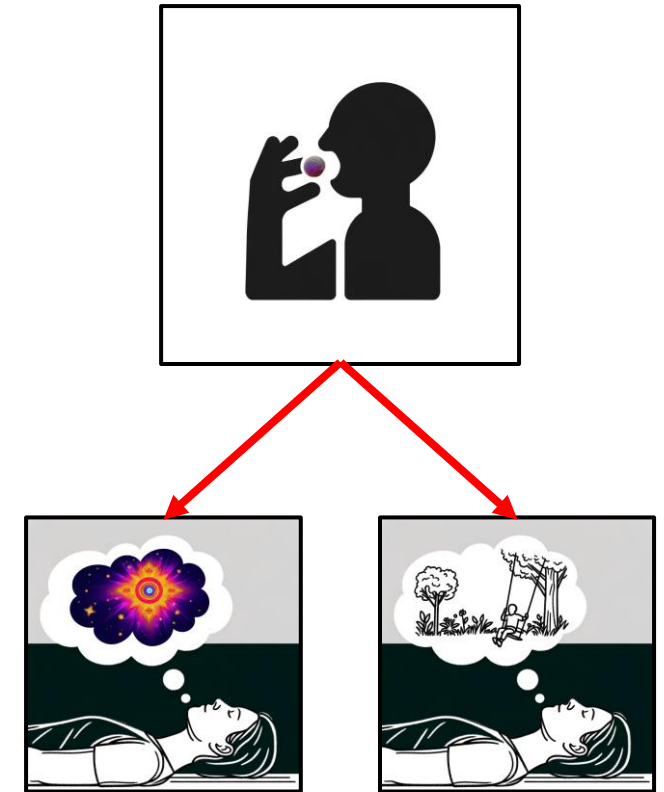
- Autobiographical (aka. psychodynamic) experiences included as one major type of psychedelic experience in major “cartographies” (e.g., Sandison, 1954³⁰; Pahnke, 1969³¹; Grof, 1975³², Richards, 2008⁴)
- Largely absent from modern research, but noted in qualitative work^{33 34 35 36}
 - e.g., Gasser et al., 2015³³: “(sometimes hypermnesic) reliving of incidents from the past”

Autobiographical psychedelic experiences

- Basic questions unanswered³⁷, e.g.
 1. How do psychedelics affect autobiographical recall and memory?
 2. When are people more likely to have autobiographical (vs. mystical) experiences?
 3. Are memories recalled typically veridical recollections of the past?
 4. How do memories change when they are recalled and reconsolidated under psychedelics?
 5. Is recall and processing of autobiographical content central to therapeutic effects?

Conclusions

- Psychedelics occasion “mystical experiences” quite reliably – this is really remarkable!
- High ratings on scales of mystical psychedelic experiences are commonly, though not universally, associated with positive changes in well-being and mental health
- Is fostering mystical experiences key to therapeutic use of psychedelics? There are major unresolved questions about
 - a) ethical issues involved,
 - b) the way we study and understand mystical experiences, and
 - c) whether other types of experiences may be as, or more, associated with therapeutic effects (for some indications³⁸)



- Psychedelics also occasion other types of psychedelic experiences that warrant careful study - especially autobiographical experiences!

Three suggestions

1. Assess specific types of subjective psychedelic experiences in more detail

- I.e., don't just include the MEQ and CEQ, don't just say "subjective experience correlated / did not correlate with therapeutic effect"

2. Do trials that vary the setting, preparation, and expectations to affect the direction and content of the subjective experience

- E.g., use props, photos, more talk to encourage autobiographical experiences vs. inner-directed journeying to encourage mystical ones

3. Continue to de-silo psychedelic research – involve “mainstream” and psychedelic-critical researchers of, e.g., mysticism, psychotherapy, or autobiographical memory

Thank you!

Planning to take a psychedelic?

Help us understand the role of memories in psychedelic experiences!

This scientific study involves

- Answering questions and questionnaires about yourself, your well-being and mental health, your memories, and your psychedelic experience, before and after taking a psychedelic for a total of 3 x 10–20 minutes.
- Reporting on mental health symptoms and adverse life events, which may arouse some negative emotions in you.
- No compensation for participating.

You can take part if

- You are 18 years of age or older and fluent in English.
- You are planning to take a long-acting psychedelic like LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, or ayahuasca soon in any context.

This study has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee Psychology and Neuroscience at Maastricht University (ERCPN-278_36_02_2024).

We do not condone, promote or encourage the use of psychedelics. Only take part in this study if you are going to take a psychedelic anyway.

The University cannot be held liable for possible adverse effects or inconveniences arising from the use of these drugs on your own initiative. Due to limited research, we cannot rule out that using psychedelics can negatively affect you in the short or long term.

More information and to participate:

<https://tinyurl.com/psmemory>



Study coordinator: Dr. Samuli Kangaslampi
Responsible researcher: Dr. Kim Kuypers

For questions, please contact
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Slides with references available at
<https://kangaslampi.net/icpr2024.pdf>

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