

# Is Psychedelic Therapy Integrative Medicine?

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## **Abstract:**

Outside of FDA-approved clinical trials, psychedelics remain illegal though there are indications that this status will change in the coming years. An unanswered and seldom discussed question is, who will be authorized to provide psychedelic therapy? Will it only be board-certified psychiatrists and licensed psychotherapists? What about integrative providers? This paper will discuss the parallels between psychedelic medicine and integrative health, their origins, definitions, and safety.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first and obvious parallel between psychedelic medicine and integrative health is the frequency and importance placed on *integration*. The shared root word, *integral*, implies a consideration of parts of a whole. In the psychedelic context, integration is the process of incorporating a psychological experience into the wholeness of a person's being. Similarly, the integrative health paradigm attempts to optimize health by considering the parts in the context of the whole. The aim of this paper is to highlight the correlation of ethos between integrative health and the emerging field of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. It will focus on the shared history of these two fields, further define each, and attempt to weave them together in a modern context.

## **ORIGINS**

Plants and fungi are the original medicines. Evidence of this goes back as far as 60,000 years; however, humans likely evolved symbiotically using them for nourishment and medicine <sup>[1,2]</sup>. Terrence McKenna's stoned ape theory <sup>[3]</sup> hypothesizes that psychotropic plants and fungi, most likely psilocybin-containing mushrooms, are responsible for the evolutionary development of language, though this theory lacks sufficient evidence to be accepted as

scientific fact. Nonetheless, it warrants consideration <sup>[4]</sup>. Indigenous cultures that remain to this day demonstrate their intimate relationships with the plants in their respective environments and a wide variety of practices related to healing. This is the original integrative medicine in the sense that there is no separation of an ailment from the patient's mind, body, spirit, community, and environment. Remedies in these systems of medicine are rarely single herbs for a single ailment. Instead, they might include ceremonies with dancing, singing, prayer, special diets or fasting, sweat lodges, breathwork, or any number of other things. Many such practices would seem taboo and unscientific to the modern mind, but the modern mind is also reductionistic in its perspective; more on this later.

A detailed history of modern and traditional uses of psychedelics is outside the scope of this article; other resources for more information are available for review <sup>[5,6]</sup>. However, the following examples highlight that the more commonly told stories about Albert Hoffman's discovery of LSD and Gordon and Valentina Wasson's contact with Maria Sabina were not the beginning of psychedelics. The earliest recorded accounts of psychedelic substances may come from the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries in the 3rd century BC <sup>[7]</sup> and mentions of Soma in the Indian text of the Rigveda, dated 2nd century BC <sup>[8]</sup>. Indigenous cultures have been using

psychedelic plants long before Westerners took notice. In western Africa, the Bwiti people have been using Iboga. In the Amazon basin of South America, numerous peoples have long-standing traditions of ayahuasca use. In Central America, there were and still are numerous traditions using psychedelic mushrooms, morning glory seeds, *Salvia divinorum*, and many others.

The origins of integrative medicine can best be described by the broader medical field's deviation from it. As described above, traditional healers were and are holistic in their approach and in large part meet the criteria of being integrative, however unscientific or taboo their practices may be. This was the norm until the Renaissance brought us new, more scientific ways of thinking and revolutionized our understanding of the natural world and, thus, the practice of medicine. The essence of the scientific method is to reduce as many variables as possible in order to test a hypothesis of observable phenomena. Thus, over time, the practice of medicine became more driven by science, with its pursuit of objective facts, and less by healing the human being who is suffering.

Suffice it to say that integrative medicine never disappeared, nor have scientifically-minded physicians been completely void of humanistic qualities in their practice. Nevertheless, the modern integrative health movement intends to bring balance to the practice of medicine, utilizing the best available scientifically acquired knowledge and practices while also applying the most holistic approaches to the people and communities in need of help.

### **PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Though psychedelic plant medicines have prehistoric origins and are found in a wide variety of cultural settings with many

applications, it is from the Western first wave of interest in psychedelics in the 1960s that the concept of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy emerges. The term itself was meant to distinguish it from recreational use due to cultural stigmas that consider mind-altering experiences irresponsible, dangerous, or pathological. It also serves the purpose of housing the approach in the realm of professionals while emphasizing the primacy of the psychotherapy involved. In other words, the drugs are not doing all the work by themselves. Framing it in these terms is perhaps a way for the modern Western mind to accept what is actually an ancient tradition of shaman-guided ceremony for healing purposes <sup>[9]</sup>.

Among most healing traditions, especially those utilizing psychedelics, is the concept of the *inner healing intelligence*, though it may go by many other names <sup>[10]</sup>. It can be described as the subconscious knowledge of one's holistic nature that lies behind the veil of ordinary waking consciousness. When one is able to access this healing intelligence, there is a natural unfolding of wisdom that facilitates one's healing work. This is just as true in discussions of mental health as it is in physical health and not only in humans but in all living systems. Nature's tendency is always toward wholeness. Within this paradigm, it is not the clinician's role to know what needs to be done or said in therapy. Rather the clinician's role is to help the patient access their healing intelligence, to listen to it, follow its lead, and to get out of its way as much as possible. This does not mean, however, that the clinician's role is purely passive or easy. On the contrary a robust set of skills is necessary to be a sufficient facilitator of the healing process.

Within the psychedelic therapy world, the term *integration* has come to mean the process that follows a psychedelic session. This is sometimes reduced to a

## Is Psychedelic Therapy Integrative Medicine?

single-hour therapy session wherein the patient and clinician talk about the experience, attempting to interpret and make meaning from it in order to apply it to one's life. More broadly, integration is an ongoing process by which the psychedelic experience is brought into the larger context of one's life. This may include new perspectives on one's life narrative or more significant cosmological insights.

### **DISTINGUISHING INTEGRATIVE HEALTH AND MEDICINE FROM CONVENTIONAL PARADIGMS**

Integrative medicine has potentially more ambiguous meanings. In recent years, it has largely replaced the term *complementary and alternative medicine*, which carried its own connotations, positive and negative. To some, it simply means adding a mental health or physical therapist to the physician's team. The other extreme includes anything that claims to be healing regardless of its scientific or professional rigor. The more common middle ground includes interdisciplinary approaches that cross professional boundaries. This may include traditionally trained physicians with a functional medicine approach, osteopaths, naturopaths, chiropractors, acupuncturists, herbalists, and others.

The American Board of Integrative Medicine, a division of the American Board of Physician Specialties, defines it as,

the practice of medicine that reaffirms the importance of the relationship between practitioner and patient, focuses on the whole person, is informed by evidence, and makes use of all appropriate therapeutic approaches, healthcare professionals, and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing <sup>[11]</sup>.

While sometimes thought of in terms of its techniques (e.g., aromatherapy) or as a specialty for which a physician can get a certification, it is more about the approach to patient care that defines integrative medicine. However, further clarification of terms is warranted.

A 2017 article published in the *Journal of Preventive Medicine* distinguishes between integrative medicine and integrative health <sup>[12]</sup>. This latter term provides a broader context when determining health factors for a given patient. To illustrate the difference, the authors provide the example of an asthmatic patient. An integrative medical provider may provide education on an anti-inflammatory diet and order food sensitivity testing in addition to providing standards of care. In contrast, an integrative health perspective expands beyond the doctor-patient interaction and considers community education on rescue inhalers and the prevention of cockroach infestations in community housing. Their final definition is as follows:

Integrative health is a state of well-being in body, mind and spirit that reflects aspects of the individual, community, and population. It is affected by: (1) individual biological factors and behaviors, social values, and public policy, (2) the physical, social, and economic environments, and (3) an integrative healthcare system that involves the active participation of the individual and the healthcare team in applying a broad spectrum of preventive and therapeutic approaches. Integrative health encourages individuals, social groups, and communities to develop ways of living that promote meaning, resilience and wellbeing across the life course.

To further understand integrative health, a discussion of its opposite is warranted. The opposite of integration is compartmentalization. To put it in philosophical terms, the dominant paradigm of the present era is dualism. Though dualism has its origins in Plato, Rene Descartes of the 17th century articulated the idea that the mind and body are separate entities. This concept presently defines how most Western people perceive themselves. Descartes's theory of knowledge is famous for its maxim, *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am." He went on to argue that our experience of mind, or consciousness, justified our subjective perceptions but had no direct relationship to the external physical world of matter. Therefore, objective observation ought to be made separately from subjective ones <sup>[13]</sup>.

The impact of dualism can be seen most clearly in the realm of mental health. For centuries, subjective experiences were left to the domains of religion and philosophy, while the study of the material world acquired a more prestigious status in academia and culture. Philosophical criticisms aside, most fields of medicine have been able to make remarkable advances in the treatment of pathologies despite this compartmentalization. The study and treatment of mental pathology, however, is undeniably dependent on reports of subjective experiences. Nonetheless, the field of psychiatry has largely reduced its subject matter to measurable properties of brains and their regions, synapses, and neurotransmitters.

The frequent criticism of conventional medicine is that it lost its humanistic soul in pursuit of scientifically validated knowledge. It has become so focused on what can be known for sure that it has often lost sight of what makes us human and what makes life worth living. Conversely, the shared ethos within the field of integrative health is that of holism. Holism maintains that the mind and

body are inseparable parts of a whole complex human being. As Arthur Koestler <sup>[14]</sup> describes, we are holons, that is, we are parts of a larger whole. We are made up of various organs, which are made of cells, which have organelles, which are made of molecules, which are made of atoms, and so forth. Likewise, humans are parts of communities, which are parts of societies, which are parts of ecosystems, which are parts of the planet, which is part of the solar system, and so forth. At every scale, there is a dazzling array of interconnected parts. With due respect for and incorporation of the knowledge gained from reductionist science, integrative health attempts to embody a holistic view that a person is far more than a lab value that needs to be corrected with a single-molecule drug.

### **SAFETY**

No form of medicine is without risk. Plants can be toxic, just as synthetic drugs can. Without oversight, people harm themselves all the time. However, the largest risk is perhaps unskilled professionals who fail to screen for or recognize more serious conditions or who, in the face of such conditions, have the hubris to make claims that they can do more than they really can. While this threat is real, and there are examples of integrative and psychedelic healers who have harmed people, this threat is often exaggerated. In the hands of well-trained clinicians who have appropriate accountability, integrative and psychedelic medicine can be powerful tools for healing. Furthermore, the harmful war on drugs has made matters worse regarding psychedelics because naive individuals partake without proper guidance due to a lack of easily available information, albeit their use is rapidly becoming more mainstream every day, and resources are becoming available.

## Is Psychedelic Therapy Integrative Medicine?

The psychedelic drugs that we know the most about, including MDMA, LSD, psilocybin, DMT, and ketamine, are remarkably safe. MDMA was previously rumored to be neurotoxic due to a lab error in a publication that was later redacted <sup>[15]</sup>. LSD had many rumors, including causing brain damage and harm to one's DNA; these rumors and other dubious lab studies turned out to be a part of an intentional smear campaign against the drug <sup>[16]</sup>. Ketamine is often associated with kidney damage and addiction. There are truths to these claims in that there are reports of street ketamine abuse resulting in kidney damage. However, ketamine is not chemically addictive, and clinically supervised use does not seem to carry significant risk <sup>[17]</sup>.

All psychedelic substances cause a transient increase in blood pressure of about 10-20 mmHg on average thus, anyone at risk for a cardiovascular event should be carefully screened. But if someone is healthy enough to have sex or climb a flight of stairs, they are probably okay to have a psychedelic experience. Other common contraindications include a history of psychosis, but there is even debate about whether there might be some benefit even in this situation. Currently, due to the fragile nature of research funding, public perceptions, and regulatory approval processes, no one is investigating this at the moment. There is also a risk of triggering a manic episode in those with bipolar disorder. However, this is not universally true, as many individuals with bipolar can and do engage with psychedelic substances.

Rather than being toxic or dangerous, most of the substances in question are non-addictive <sup>[18]</sup>, neurogenic <sup>[19]</sup>, and anti-inflammatory <sup>[20]</sup>. While it is fair to say that not all practices considered integrative, complementary, or alternative meet the highest standards of evidence (remembering that these umbrella terms includes everything from faith healing to vitamins), there is

evidence for many individual therapies and, more broadly, for their safety and enhancement of conventional care <sup>[21,22]</sup>.

### **BREAKING DOWN RIGID STRUCTURES**

Modern medicine is a marvel that should be celebrated. Critiques in this paper should not be taken as a rejection or condemnation of conventional medicine or science in general. But rather a call to return to its roots so that it may grow. In its present form the medical establishment has analogous elements to pathological brain patterns that are treated with psychedelic therapies. A common finding in MRI studies of people suffering from depression, anxiety, OCD, addictions, and other mental health pathologies is hyperactivation of regions of the brain responsible for self-reference, most notably the default mode network (DMN) <sup>[23]</sup>. When the mind is not actively involved in a cognitive process (i.e., wondering), the DMN provides the background hum that makes us aware of our selfhood. This is, of course, an important evolutionary function that supports our survival. However, in overabundance, it causes us suffering.

Psychedelics appear to work in part by suspending the function of the DMN, enabling greater interconnectivity of diverse brain regions, particularly the visual cortex causing the psychedelic visuals. This parallels the subjective reports of a felt sense of interconnectivity with all things, sometimes called the numinous quality <sup>[24]</sup>. In other words, the ego dissolves or softens, making new and creative perspectives possible.

Mainstream medicine has achieved remarkable feats utilizing the scientific method of reductionism to solve the mysteries of the natural world. It has, however, become highly self-referential. The complexities of being human cannot exclude

subjective experiences, yet the scientific community of which the medical establishment is a part has done just that. Psychiatry, not wanting to be an inferior medicine, has attempted to find its place by treating synapses with drugs rather than the human needing connection.

## **CONCLUSION**

Psychedelic medicine is an opportunity for our medical system to become more holistic, more integrative. It bridges the world of neurology, pharmacology, and science with the world of spirit, meaning, and vitality. So it would seem that to practice psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is to adopt the values of integrative health. As such, integrative health professionals have much they can contribute to this emerging field and the patients it will serve. Furthermore, this renaissance provides everyone with an opportunity to soften their egos and recognize how they are a part of a larger, integrated, whole.

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