Psychedelic Preparation, Risks and Harm Reduction Information

The psychedelic experience itself is only part of the overall experience. The emotional, mental and spiritual processes can begin as soon as you commit to arranging a psychedelic experience. Much of the healing and growth can come from the preparation you do before-hand, and the integration you do afterwards.

This document aims to explain some ways to prepare before a psychedelic experience, why this is important, and to highlight some of the potential risks to consider. It is aimed at people considering a high-dose experience for the purpose of personal insight, psycho-spiritual growth and/or healing. Good preparation will help to provide the best possible conditions for a meaningful psychedelic experience and minimise risks.

Contents

Types of psychedelic experiences
Possible effects of a psychedelic experience
What can come up in the experience
Set and setting
The role of the facilitators
Risks and harm reduction
Planning for integration

Key parts of preparation include gathering information and educating yourself, deciding on the type of psychedelic experience, considering your mindset, what support you want and need, the environment or setting, minimising risks, and how you will integrate your experience afterwards. Integration is an important topic which is only briefly covered in this document, but please refer to links in that section for further information.

This document does not encourage illegal activities, and is offered from the ethos of harm reduction. The information provided is accurate and up-to-date to the best of our knowledge, is provided for educational and information purposes only and does not constitute medical advice or professional services.

Types of psychedelic experience

An important part of preparation is deciding on the type of psychedelic experience that could be best for you. Options to consider include: the type of support available, cost, location, which psychedelic, whether a group or individual experience.

Currently, the only way to legally access psychedelic substances in the UK is through participation in a clinical trial, or through a clinic which administers prescribed ketamine for severe depression. So it is illegal to work with an underground guide in the UK offering psychedelic experiences.

There are some countries where psychedelic substances are legal or have been decriminalised, eg The Netherlands. The retreat centres and facilitators in these countries are not regulated, however, so do thorough research, prioritise your safety, and use your judgement and instincts when considering the options. In a few places, the rise of “psychedelic tourism” has amplified profiteering, and, occasionally, led to the sexual or financial exploitation of Western visitors.

It is not recommended to take a high dose of psychedelics alone, i.e. without someone sober supporting you. If you plan on exploring the depths of your psyche without trained facilitators you could potentially put yourself in psychological or physical danger.

Recreational group experiences, such as festivals, clubs or parties, are also not recommended for taking high-dose psychedelics for healing and growth purposes. These settings can quickly start to feel overwhelming and frightening, and therefore a higher risk for a dangerous or challenging experience.

There are various types of psychedelic substances (also called entheogens, medicines, drugs) to consider, each one bringing potential benefits and risks. Some may be contra-indicated for use with certain mental health diagnoses, other substances and medications, such as SSRIs. Here is some information about psychedelics. See also the section below on risk for more information.

When considering the potential benefits and risks of psychedelics, you might also wish to explore working with altered states of consciousness experienced through Holotropic Breathwork or other styles of Breathwork. There is more information here.

Possible effects of a psychedelic experience

No two psychedelic experiences are the same. Know that it's not possible to control what kind of experience you will have; it will always emerge in its own way. A person might have an underwhelming or disappointing experience, even on a high dose, or a strong experience on a lower dose.

The potential effects will differ depending on many factors covered in this document, and also vary in level of intensity, duration, and quality of experience. In no particular order:

Bodily sensations – These might include tingling, nausea or shaking, changes in body temperature, heart rate, or the sense of energy flowing throughout your body.

Visual and auditory changes – Colours might become vibrant, and objects may appear to be moving or distorted, or you may see things that are not really there. It can be useful to use an eye mask to direct the experience inward.

Emotions - There is likely to be a mixture of emotions within the same psychedelic experience. You might feel out of control, feelings of grief, anguish, sadness, or despair, or awe-inspiring beauty, love and euphoria.

Changes in thought and perception – It's common to perceive things from a different perspective and you may have realisations about your life, your relationships, or even the nature of reality. You might perceive time differently or a transformation of preconceived notions of matter, agency, the cosmos.

Ego dissolution or "ego death" – The sense of self can start to change, you may lose a sense of bodily presence, and the fabric of reality can seem to disintegrate. This is sometimes called 'ego death' and occurs when there no longer seems to be a boundary between self and other, or you might feel a sense of 'oneness' with the universe.

All you need to do is to observe these sensations and experiences with curiosity, allow them to wash over you; to unfold naturally, without analysing. Deep, slow breathing can help if anything feels uncomfortable.

What can come up in the experience

Once you've taken a psychedelic substance, there's not much you can do to stop the effects. Trying to control or change your thoughts or feelings during the experience can actually generate a *more* challenging experience or conversely, a disappointing experience. Meet whatever challenges arise with acceptance and curiosity, knowing that the drug effects will eventually wear off, and that these challenges might also be opportunities for growth and healing.

It is important that you and your facilitator know that it's okay, expected and, potentially, therapeutic for strong emotions and physical sensations to be felt and expressed. Your facilitator can support you with different ways to regulate your emotional state in the event you become overwhelmed or are feeling panicked during your experience. Discuss in advance with your facilitator (and your therapist, if you have one) the emotions and memories that you suspect might come up for you and how you would like to be supported through this. Examples might include: being reminded of your intention, an affirmation, such as "This will pass", "Go in and through", or "Trust, Let Go, and Be Open", a calming breathing technique, or you requesting a hand to hold.

The term "challenging", or "bad trip", covers a range of experiences on psychedelics. Any of the effects and sensations described earlier could potentially feel challenging. Also, someone might re-live a traumatic memory, or be confronted with painful insights about themselves, relationships, or their life. Someone may have an unexciting experience that doesn't live up to expectations and hopes, and this can bring up disappointment or anger. Challenging experiences are often resolved by the end of the session, but it's possible for someone to continue to feel confused or distressed for some time afterwards. Work with the facilitator to feel grounded and safe before you leave the experience space, making plans for what support you might need in the coming hours and days.

As part of psychedelic preparation, specialist support from a psychedelic integration therapist (Institute of Psychedelic Therapy directory), facilitated Breathwork sessions and/or EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) sessions can all be powerful ways of exploring past trauma and provide some tools for challenging experiences during a psychedelic session.

Some nerves and uneasiness before a psychedelic experience are normal and common. Your inner world may well get a serious shakeup, bringing implications for you and your life that will need integrating. When deciding whether or not it is right to go ahead with the experience now, take the time to work out if you feel called to do this despite the potential for discomfort, a challenging experience, or the surfacing of supressed thoughts or emotions.

It might be helpful to also hear about this research study from 2016 which found that 76% of those who experienced a challenging experience on psychedelics said that it resulting in an improved sense of personal well-being or life satisfaction.

Set and Setting

"Set" refers to your mindset and intention, whereas "setting" is your physical and social environment. They both have a significant influence on the safety, efficacy, and outcomes of your psychedelic experience.

Cultivating the right mindset before a psychedelic experience can increase the likelihood of a meaningful experience, and reduce your chance of having a challenging experience. Mindset includes what mood you're in, recent life events, and your intention when entering the experience. It's important to approach the experience with a positive, open and curious attitude. Ideally, you won't be entering the experience with immediate unresolved worries, looming responsibilities, or fears that are playing on your mind. There's the potential for these to become amplified by taking a psychedelic, make it more difficult to relax and let go, or contribute to a disappointing experience.

Whilst you cannot control the experience, an intention can help set the tone and focus your state of mind, and serve as an anchor throughout your preparation and during the experience itself. If or when times get tough, remembering your intention can help you to move through discomfort or distress. Unique to you, an intention can be defined as a simple statement that articulates how you would like to approach the experience. Examples might include: "Be open", "Everything is welcome", Trust the process".

Intentions differ from expectations. Where intentions can put an individual on the right track for their experience, fixed expectations could hinder it. You may have heard or read many positive and exciting claims about psychedelic experiences, but holding on to preconceived notions of what the experience will be like, or hoping for a particular outcome or "cure", can inhibit the potential of the experience or even make certain experiences difficult. It's a good idea to explore your expectations and intention with your facilitator or therapist in advance.

Practising mindfulness before, during and after a psychedelic experience can help us learn to observe experiences without judgment, and to avoid getting pulled into cycles of unpleasant or fearful thoughts and emotions. If negative feelings arise, we can notice them, and let them pass. Examples of mindfulness practises include meditation, journaling, yoga and intentionally being more present in day-to-day activities.

It can also be helpful to start a journaling practice; notice what catches your attention, such as your thoughts, dreams and 'coincidences'.

Another factor that can affect your state of mind is how you look after your body in the days or weeks before the experience. It is an opportunity to eat more healthily, maybe to cut out certain things, such as sugar, caffeine, alcohol, and any foods which make you feel sluggish or activated. Also ensure that you're getting enough sleep and rest, and try to schedule in some time for yourself before and after your experience.

The setting for your experience should be a quiet, safe, and familiar environment that doesn't have negative associations; somewhere you can feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible, with space to sit, lie down and easy access to a bathroom. Plan ahead for things you may want to bring with you to feel comfortable, eg a journal, hot water bottle, comfortable clothes and blankets.

Music can be a very important part of a psychedelic experience and can play a central role in supporting meaningful emotional and imaginary experiences, and self-exploration, as outlined in this research. You might also describe it as an anchor or traveling companion, helping to calm and steady you as you venture into your psyche. Some people will prefer silence, or periods of silence built into a playlist. So ask your facilitator to recommend, or design with you, a suitable playlist and to bring the equipment you'll need.

The role of the facilitators

The role of the facilitator/s (who may be referred to as guide, therapist, sitter) will differ depending on the type of experience you choose, and their training, experience and style of working.

While most people will be trustworthy, levels of experience, training, knowledge and ethical understanding will vary. So even if a facilitator comes well recommended, ensure that you ask them plenty of questions before you decide whether you feel fully able to trust them.

During the psychedelic experience, and for some hours or days afterwards, you could be in a more vulnerable and suggestible state than normal. There is the potential for unethical, even abusive behaviour from a facilitator, carelessly held boundaries or poor safety management, which can contribute to you having a challenging or harmful experience. Having more than one facilitator for a high-dose psychedelic experience can significantly reduce the risk of this happening.

Communicate in advance about the use of physical touch from the facilitator/s, and if so, give clear, advance consent to how, what, where and when. Be specific, for example: a touch on my shoulder or holding my hand is okay, but only if I ask for this; stroking my head is not okay. Rehearse with them in advance exactly what you mean, how you will ask for this touch, and when you want it to stop. Know that sexual touch with another person is never okay, even if you feel you want this whilst under the influence of the psychedelic.

Consider communication during the experience, including hand signals to ask for what you might need (water, tissues, help to the bathroom etc). Decide in advance whether you want the facilitators to be saying anything to you, or remaining quiet and leaving you to have a more inner-directed experience. It is generally better for a facilitator to not intervene or comfort someone who seems upset, as they might interrupt a healing emotional process, or inadvertently cause distress.

Talk through the schedule for the session beforehand (arriving, start time, drug effects, duration, aftercare, leaving). Ensure your facilitator will remain with you until you feel able to look after yourself, even if this is much later than the expected session ending time. Agree what items you will bring to the session, and what the facilitator will provide. It is recommended to put all this in writing as part of an agreement or contract with the facilitator/s.

Risks and harm reduction

Whilst psychedelics can bring potential benefits, they are powerful substances and can present a number of risks. They may be inappropriate, or even dangerous for some people and in some contexts. Good preparation and educating yourself will help to reduce the risk of harm and increase the likelihood of a beneficial experience. Ensure that you discuss the risks in advance with your facilitator/s (and therapist, if you have one). There is more information about risks on this website but here are the key ones to consider:

Legal Risks – In spite of psychedelics becoming legitimate therapeutic medicines in some countries, in much of the globe they are still illegal substances which means being caught possessing, selling, buying, sharing or using them, includes the risk of arrest and up to life imprisonment in the UK.

Dangerous behaviours and situations whilst in a vulnerable, disassociated and highly suggestible state, such as walking off alone, being in an unsafe physical environment, and the risk of exploitation or abuse. Trustworthy, well-trained facilitators, and careful attention to a safe setting can reduce this risk.

Persisting challenging emotions and sensations that were left unresolved at the end of the experience. Challenging experiences that may occur during the trip might take some time to resolve. It might become difficult to delimit where an experience begins and ends: “experience” may come to refer to the days, weeks or longer after a substance has been metabolised and left your body. Working with a psychedelic integration therapist can help you to work through challenging material that you’re left with (Institute of Psychedelic Therapy directory). Breathwork and/or EMDR sessions can also help to process intense sensations, emotions and thoughts, should they persist.

Emergence of a traumatic memory, and feeling unsure about whether is it true or not. Again, working with a therapist can help make sense of this and to process the emotions that have been activated. A person who has experienced significant trauma or adverse childhood experiences can be more likely to have a difficult experience that can benefit from being processed and worked through in integration therapy.

Prior psychological disorders and symptoms. Although rare, psychedelic substances have the potential to exacerbate or bring about the onset of mental health symptoms. It's strongly advised that people avoid psychedelic substances if they or close family members have had psychotic experiences or been diagnosed with conditions such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Some medications can interact with certain psychedelics. If any of this might apply to you, it is important to talk with your GP, psychologist or psychiatrist about any risks associated with using psychedelic substances. If you are still interested in exploring altered states of consciousness, you may choose to explore alternative experiences, such as facilitated Breathwork. Although note that a good Breathwork practitioner will be cautious with certain mental and physical health conditions and want to conduct a risk assessment before proceeding.

Substance risks - The "classic" psychedelics are not addictive and are not toxic to the body in the way alcohol is. Buying psychedelic drugs illegally increases the risk of them being adulterated or mis-sold. It is recommended to test their purity before taking them, and if you suspect that they might be mixed with something else, do not use and dispose of safely.

Always check your dosages and discuss with your facilitator/s. If you are inexperienced, start with a low dose, then consider a higher dose next time. A person has impaired capacity to consent whilst under the influence of a psychedelic, so offering or giving someone an extra dose without prior discussion and consent, can be unethical and dangerous. If you are feeling any pressure from yourself or others to take a very high dose, please be cautious. A higher dose can increase the risks of a challenging experience.

Harmful drug interactions – Taking prescription, non-prescription drugs or alcohol together with a psychedelic, creates additional risks. Although extremely rare, mixing certain psychedelics with antidepressants can increase the risk of Serotonin Syndrome - a potentially fatal medical condition. More information on this here. Unless under the care of a medical doctor, it can be dangerous to take other drugs or substances during the psychedelic experience, whether that is to enhance an experience, or an attempt to alleviate a challenging experience.

More information on risks and safety: https://psychedelicsociety.org.uk/risk-harm-reduction/risk-harm-reduction and https://www.psychedelicexperience.net/psychedelic-safety-12-dangers-of-psychedelics/

Planning for integration

It is said that the most important part of any psychedelic experience is the integration phase. It can help you to find deeper meaning, insights and healing from your experience. Book time in your diary for immediately after your experience to give yourself space to land gently and to start this reflective integration process.

The hours and days after a psychedelic experience can be a time of contented contemplation, or it might feel disorientating and disrupting. As you start to process everything you've experienced, cultivate curiosity rather than over-analysing, treat yourself with care and compassion and take time to make sense of the experience. This ongoing process of unfolding and making sense can continue for days, months or even years afterwards.

There may be certain people you can talk to about the experience, or it might feel difficult to talk to family and friends. Many facilitators will offer follow up calls to help with integration. Whilst not essential, it can be beneficial to work with a specialist psychedelic integration therapist who can support you to turn insights into actionable practices, and to make positive shifts in your daily life.

There is a wide range of possible integration practices and activities you might want to consider:

- Journaling or creative work
- Breathwork practices or workshops
- Spending time in nature, meditation, other spiritual practices
- Body-based activities, e.g. yoga, massage
- Attending online or in-person psychedelic integration circles or groups (examples: online and in-person)

There is more detailed information on integration here: https://www.psychedelicexperience.net/c/integration/ and here https://psychedelicsociety.org.uk/harm-reduction/psychedelic-integration

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