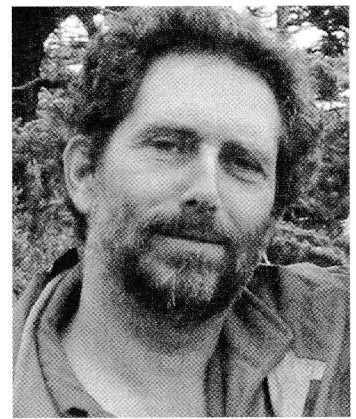


# PSYCHEDELICS AND HYPNOTHERAPY

By Lincoln Stoller

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## Altered States

Altered states are the key to understanding the human condition. Every saint and savior would agree that understanding the universe as best we know it requires being in an altered state. A completely altered state exploration would probably provide an understanding of every devil and demon as well. The result of such knowledge would be a betterment of the human condition.

Psychedelics act as or on our neurotransmitters to augment or reduce brain function. While we have some idea of cause and effect, as we can't connect neurochemistry to mental states. We don't really know how psychedelics work.

Traditional cultures extract complex, plant-based chemical concoctions while Western culture synthesizes pure ingredients. Plant-based and synthesized psychedelic substances rarely have the same effect. Don't believe chemists who tell you otherwise; we don't know what these things are doing.

Psychedelic substances are neuroplasticity enhancers. Pre-scientific societies gave these experiences supernatural explanations and administered these substances in a spiritual context. They were sacraments: the eucharist and soma, essential parts of a vision quest, walkabout, and the Eleusinian Mysteries. They've been used to enable, disable, modify, and enhance people since before the beginning of history.

We are now referring to the chemicals involved in these experiences as medicines. They are not medicines in their action, but they may be medicinal in their effect. It depends on what kind of change you're expecting.

Some people see psychedelic chemicals as a means to become better adjusted or more capable. Others see them as chemicals that will fix something. There are many reasons that one might want to change the way one thinks and feels. You could be in psychological distress, physically ill, or emotionally unsatisfied. It's fair to say that most people still find the idea of a psychedelic trip threatening and dangerous.

For various reasons—none of which are guaranteed to continue—the legal status of psychedelics is changing. In some jurisdictions, they are legal, though many cautions and restrictions remain. Most users are hoping for the removal of restrictions on trade and use within the next few years.

## Psychedelic-assisted Psychotherapy

Psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is where a psychotherapist gives a client a psychedelic for therapeutic effect. The therapist sits with the client to make sure their headphones work, they can reach the bathroom, and they don't hurt themselves. The client undergoes an experience after which they no longer exhibit a psycho-diagnostic condition and... voila! Psychotherapy at work!

If the client was "cured" of a physical condition, spiritual conflict, creative block, chemical addiction, or lack of community

spirit would we call this a medical, spiritual, artistic, substance, or educational procedure? What puts the effect of psychedelics in the domain of any particular result? More to the point, why should credit for the change be claimed by a professional who isn't playing much of a role, to begin with?

In preparing for a psychedelic-assisted shamanic ceremony one person said, "... the shaman was wearing face paint, beads, and a feathered headdress... this is the real deal!" Real deal of what? Did they think they were going to become indigenous? What if the facilitator wore a stethoscope, a clerical collar, or a fraternity crest?

Do you remember the point in your life when you started to read? Your grades improved and your teachers took credit. At that point, you might have realized the school library contained little of interest, to begin with. Try to find Mathew Brady's *"War Photographs Taken on the Battlefields of the Civil War"*, Henry Miller's *"Tropic of Cancer,"* or James Loewen's *"Lies My Teacher Told Me"* in your high school library. You won't, these books are considered too revealing.

As educational institutions take credit for learning that they do not further, psychotherapeutic institutions appropriate healing that they do not facilitate. Let's not let psychedelics validate psychotherapy over hypnotherapy.

## Psychedelic Hypnotherapy

Psychedelics affect deep change because the people who take them are ready to change at a deep level. Hypnotherapy can prepare a person for deep change better than most other therapies because hypnotherapists do not insist on an explanation. This is precisely why hypnotherapy is not institutionally endorsed: hypnosis does not support an institutional narrative.

A basic dichotomy exists between types of deep change that apply to everyone and the idiosyncratic changes relevant to individuals. Both types of change are more the domain of hypnosis than rational therapy because both forms of change are rooted in emotion. Hypnosis makes direct connections with emotion. What hypnotherapy does not do is classify the mental world according to diagnoses. This does not have to be the case—we can apply hypnotherapy to diagnosed conditions—but hypnotherapy's generality is supported by its avoiding reductionist thinking.

Imagine that a client came to you with a problem and you said, "I suggest I accompany you on a psychedelic journey." I happen to believe hypnosis is already a psychedelic journey, but let's say you were referring to a psychedelically-assisted hypnosis session. What would this session look like?

## Personal Support

The hypnotherapy assumes there is a wealth of resources within a client's subconscious. We use the term "subconscious" as a kind of catch-all phrase for what has many levels, contains

many personalities, involves many histories, and moves us in different directions.

The psychedelic experience dumps a person into the chaotic and dissociated landscape of their subconscious. In that landscape, we try to integrate alternate states of mind. This is similar to various approaches in hypnotherapy.

The first thing a hypnotherapist could do—which a psychotherapist is not trained to do—is explore subconscious territory. Not all hypnotherapists are trained in subconscious issues. For example, neuro-linguistic programming puts emphasis on conscious involvement. Other techniques involve the subconscious more directly. These include regression, evocation, suggestion, and creative visualization.

Exploring the subconscious landscape is one of your first objectives as a hypnotherapist. To the extent that you succeed, you are in a position to fortify and even predict the content of your client's psychedelic experience. This assumes, of course, that you understand the connection between psychedelics and the subconscious. For that, you need more than traditional training in hypnosis, but more on that later.

With this knowledge, you have some ability in preparing your client for what their psychedelic experience holds in store. Once your client has returned from their experience, you may also have particular insight into the associations they have found.

Traditionally trained psychotherapists are currently told not to play anything but a distant, supervisory role in a client's psychedelic experience. I don't expect that approach will last once psychotherapists get more experience in the psychedelic modality. Once invited into your subconscious, institutions will be anxious to plant their narrative, but for the moment therapists are being taught not to disturb your psyche. See any of the various resources at the MAPS website for information on psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy protocols: <https://maps.org/resources>

Hypnotherapy takes a different approach. In many hypnotherapeutic modalities, the therapist accompanies the client into their subconscious world. In Parts Therapy, Age Regression, and Past Life work the therapist is right there with the client. We can do this because of the nature of the trance we induce.

While psychedelic trances can be more dissociative than hypnotic trances, they are not always. In particular, like hypnotic trances, psychedelic trance ebbs and flows. Consciousness alternates between being more and less separated from the ego state. A hypnotherapist learns to see and work with these changes; a psychotherapist does not.

### **General Skills**

Hypnotherapy does not generally focus on training clients in the skills of becoming aware of and navigating their subconscious. I am interested in this and I do this with my clients, see my book *"Becoming Lucid, Self-Awareness in Sleeping & Waking Life"*. I think all hypnotherapists should educate their clients in this regard.

We're doing some psychological education when we reframe the intellectual and emotional context of a client's memories and associations. This skill of reframing could be done more generally. It is a broadly useful skill if you're going to be doing any dissociative work.

These are skills that involve increased self-reflection, thinking about one's thoughts, and enlarging one's awareness. These skills involve gaining comfort in dissociated and irrational states which are the states where a client's problems become evident and engaged. Being prepared for a psychedelic experience means being more grounded and having a greater connection to positive

psychological resources. It means having more awareness of, distance from, and less attachment to negative issues.

Some of these skills are cognitive, such as gaining control over your thoughts, but other skills are experiential, psychosomatic, spiritual, sensual, and metabolic. I believe this is where "the gold is buried," and where hypnotherapy can provide needed psycho-education.

Hypnotherapy presents focuses on rapid solutions and minimizes the amount of psycho-education we provide. We use the tool for the job, teaching self-hypnosis skills selectively. In the case of psychedelic-assisted hypnotherapy, our clients need these skills more broadly.

Hypnotists are uniquely qualified as teachers in the exploration of experiential, psychosomatic, spiritual, sensual, and metabolic abilities. Where an analytical psychotherapist would be drawn into existentialism, a spiritual psychotherapist would wade into cultural relativism, and a marriage and family therapist would explore family dynamics, a hypnotherapist can integrate all of these territories within the client's symbolic context. We have the potential to take over the field of subconscious exploration!

### **Know What You're Talking About**

A current issue in the training of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapists is the question of whether or not therapists need psychedelic experience. Here, the misunderstanding of psychedelics as medicines and the lack of experience in working with altered states is creating confusion. Psychiatrists don't take the drugs they prescribe, and psychologists don't join their clients in their dissociated states, but if you're going to tell your client how to navigate the formless universe of a new reality, you'd best have been there yourself.

Some of the early LSD work, before LSD was outlawed, demonstrated that therapists who had psychedelic experiences of their own were better able to empathize with the psychosis-like experiences that clients' had using psychedelics. This stands to reason if you've been there, but if you have no experience with altered states, then the argument in favor of training therapists by giving them psychedelics is not obvious.

At present, few of those in the institutions that make policy and authorize drug use have the kind of altered-state experience that would enable them to fully appreciate psychedelics. That is to say, the conservative framework of traditional psychology impedes its movement into this domain. Here, hypnotherapy's lack of an institutional framework is a blessing. It would not take much to get hypnotherapists to drop acid, swallow ayahuasca, inhale ketamine, pop MDMA, or drink mushroom tea. The trouble is that none of these are legal.

Proposals are being made, and I'm involved with writing such proposals, to legally give scheduled psychedelics to aspiring psychotherapists. Hypnotherapists need not apply; you are not "qualified." If you're getting the familiar feeling of being locked out of opportunity, you're right. What can you do?

### **Time for a Vacation**

There are certain sanctioned uses of psychedelics in the US and Canada: the Native American Church is legally allowed to use peyote while the Santo Diame church and the União do Vegetal are in a somewhat grey area regarding the use of ayahuasca. In addition, a number of municipalities have legalized psilocybin contrary to laws at the federal level. Ketamine is now being widely used for depression, administered off-label by anesthesiologists many of whom provide the standard minimum level of supervision.

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## Psychedelics and Hypnotherapy

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Or you can do what many of us did: go tripping in a country where these substances are legal such as most of Latin America. In these countries, peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, san pedro cactus, yagé, and ayahuasca are legal because they are part of the indigenous cultures. MDMA and LSD do not have plant analogues used in these traditions.

Many groups are offering week-long psychedelic retreats in beautiful locations. Prices are rising and it's caveat emptor: you don't always get what you pay for. Get personal recommendations. Professional organizations cannot endorse or refer you to the providers of psychedelic retreats, but many local user groups on the world wide web provide references.

Before going on your own journey, be prepared. Become acquainted with your own altered states. It's a good idea to start without any chemicals. I suggest vipassana meditation, float tanks, mindfulness training, and breathwork, all of which are legal, widely available, and inexpensive.

In fact, you don't need any help at all. Altered states are natural states. You don't need to dissolve your ego in anyone else's test tube, simply give yourself space. Spend weekends alone, journal, paint, run, walk in the woods, maintain extended solitude, and exclude all interruption. If you keep at it, your subconscious will rise. If you're short on time and want more drama, go on a vision quest to make your subconscious rise quickly.

I make a point of going on solo, 5-day wilderness trips. I find this relaxing. If you can bear it, deprive yourself of sense entirely by putting on a blindfold and lying down for a few days. The pre-Socratics did this in the Asclepeions and called it "incubation. If you are conscientious and you go deep, then your dreams will take you there. This "new frontier" was well explored by the ancients; our culture has just forgotten.