



Psychedelic-assisted Coaching, VI – Protocols

A little insight into the psychedelic experience.

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“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I’ll spend the first four sharpening the ax.”

— **Abraham Lincoln**, President

In this series, I distinguished therapy from coaching. This division reflects a dichotomy in how therapy is defined and how psychedelics are approached. Dividing people into a disabled class that needs help and an enabled class that needs encouragement is limited and unrealistic.

In the fifth installment, I suggest a more connected interaction between a facilitator and client. Here I propose a protocol for a psychedelic journey that expands on this idea.

The few readers who are going to take a chemically induced psychedelic journey will not remember what I say here if I am too abstract. And most of my readers who are not planning to journey may find my comments irrelevant if I speak in detail.

My ideas for a psychedelically assisted protocol apply to a few psychedelic practitioners and those creating a new container for their psychedelic journey. That demographic is looking for new thinking, and while many are interested, few are exploring new protocols.

The old protocol for taking psychedelics, which remains largely the only protocol, could be summarized by saying, “Get comfortable and have a nice time.” Given that we’re talking about a fundamentally mind expanding experience, this is incredibly lacking in direction or engagement.

The reason we have such lame indications for conducting a psychedelic experience is that we have little basis for mind expanding experiences. Most people who head off on an adventure of any kind do nothing more than pack a lunch. It’s because we have no experience in managing altered states of mind that we neither offer nor accept guidance in the psychedelic realm.



Stages

There are stages, phases, and states in a psychedelic journey. We talk about three stages: preparation, engagement, and integration. They are defined as you would expect. The structure is to create positive intentions and a supportive environment in the preparation phase, wish the journeyer good luck in their psychedelic engagement, and return to business as usual for integration. There is no discernment of what happens within these stages and no recognition of the phases and states within the psychedelic experience.

The greatest void exists in the engagement stage. The reason for this is that people who talk about it either have not been there or have lost their minds when they were there. If you have no idea what's going on when you're engaged with a psychedelic, you won't be much help in guiding others.

There are several states and phases within a psychedelic engagement. There is a progression that's predictable, and there are predicable states of experience within that progression.

With psilocybin, there are relaxed, enervated, and inquisitive phases. In my limited experience using psilocybin in groups, group members followed each other through these phases. I am not sure if this was because of the similarity of those in the group, their similar preparation, intentions, or my role in providing guidance.

In the initial relaxing phase, we all entered meditative spaces. In the enervated phase, people engaged different emotional experiences. In the inquisitive phase, everyone went outdoors and experienced the natural environment.

Most of my psychedelic experience comes from the traditional use of ayahuasca, whose phases differ from psilocybin. Altered state experiences using cannabis and san pedro (mescaline) are different again. I have no experience with MDMA or ketamine. The dissociatives, DMT, LSD, and salvia can disconnect you from physical reality entirely.



States

In the realm of non-dissociatives, I identify four alternate states of experience: verbal, emotional, communicative, and overwhelmed.

In the **verbal state**, you feel the desire to use words to express yourself; you want to express yourself. This is a monologue state of expression, not a dialog state in which you are receptive to analysis.

The **emotional state** is nonverbal and internally receptive. Emotionally incompatible influences are disruptive. In the emotional state, one laughs, cries, or is otherwise immersed in an experiential, noncommunicative frame of mind.

People in a **communicative state** want dialog. There is a rhythm that is more about the structure of the interaction than its content. It combines speech and emotion and has an energetic arc that comes in waves.

The **overwhelmed state** is internally stimulated and receptive. One is receiving intense internal input and is thoroughly focused on it. The overwhelmed state is not a dissociated state. You know where and who you are, but your entire focus is directed toward experiencing yourself.

A Chemical Protocol

This protocol works to empower a person's states by grounding their experience and encouraging exploration. It's a one-on-one engagement between a facilitator and a journeyer. It presumes the facilitator can recognize these states and is comfortable in accompanying a journeyer through them.

As preparation, a facilitator needs flexibility in appreciating psychedelic states. Until facilitators are legally allowed this experience and are free to talk about it, there will be little progress in the above-ground world. But there will be progress in the underground. As a result, those working in the underground will become increasingly more competent and helpful while those with professional training and certification will become increasingly less competent and helpful.

This protocol involves recognizing a journeyer's state and engaging appropriately. The facilitator would need to have good control over their own state. This may mean they need to refrain from any chemical effect. The precedent in shamanic rituals shows that there is an advantage in the facilitator being in an altered state.

Shamans are in an altered state with or without chemical enhancement, and the effect of the chemicals on their states of mind differs from the effect the chemicals have on the journeyer. The use of a stimulant for the facilitator remains an open question. The stimulant is always taken by the facilitator in traditional ceremonies and is never taken by the practitioner in a psychotherapeutic context. Some chemical effect is useful, and training the facilitator in operating while under the influence would be necessary.

The protocol is different for each of the psychedelic states. In the verbal state, the facilitator listens. Their input is supportive and encouraging. They ask questions not to clarify what's being expressed for them, but to clarify it for the journeyer.

This differs from reflective listening, where the listener is working to understand. Here, the facilitator's understanding is irrelevant. The sense the journeyer is seeking is internal and may be clear only to them.

A different engagement prevails in the emotional state where the goal is to go deeper into the experience. The facilitator works to deepen the experience, enrich the environment, and ground the space. Grounding provides the journeyer the stability of be more immersed without losing their sense of self.

The communicative state facilitates understanding, but not the usual understanding of the rational state. The journeyer is exploring a psychedelic understanding and the facilitator gets into the journeyer's state of mind. Questions explore what the journeyer sees and which lead them further into their experience, not the moderated or compromised experience of the facilitator.

The facilitator asks, "What did that feel like?" and "What happened next?" They can be directive in saying, "Move beyond what's disturbing," or supportive in saying, "Be in a safe place. Remember the feeling of being protected."

The overwhelmed state is both powerful and vulnerable and may be a state of isolation or reception. The facilitator needs the skill to read the cues. Lacking cues, the facilitator can build the environment and watch for an encouraging or discouraging response.

To expand means going beyond the familiar, while remaining grounded means keeping touch with a stable perspective. We want to expand and ground the experience. These separate goals can be pursued together.

To expand, the journeyer sees from a new or expanded frame of reference. The facilitator needs to know what grounding means for the journeyer in order to enhance it. This should be communicated before the journey starts.



A Non-Chemical Protocol

Psychedelic states are versions of normal states, except for the dissociated state, which is not normal. We can gain experience navigating and facilitating by working with non-psychedelic states. Then, we could step gradually into the psychedelic experience by offering light facilitation or by entering mild psychedelic experiences.

Set the intention of one's journey. Explore the meanings of this intention with the facilitator. Prepare with fasting, contemplation, and meditation. Let the facilitator learn of the journeyer's issues of

struggle and situations that make them feel comfortable and safe. Ingest a mild sacrament such as alcohol or cannabis or, if you're really capable, nothing at all.

The facilitator can lead the journeyer into and through all the phases and states using visualization, breathwork, yoga, and music. It can be done in the dark late at night, using hypnosis, or beneath a tree on a comfortable afternoon.

Altered state experiences are easier to engage when you have some experience with them. You can get this experience with or without mind-altering chemicals, and the more experience you have, the less chemicals you need.



Certiably fictitious

I have heard no one talk about these things. Stages are hardly defined beyond arranging for and engaging with psychedelics. Phases and states are not mentioned anywhere; I made them up. There has been no suggestion that facilitation can be approached gradually, and there has been no suggestion that facilitation could be learned by working with normal states.

In this environment of oblivion and lack of experience, we have therapists, academics, self-certified organizations, and impresarios offering to train and certify practitioners—for thousands of dollars in some cases. I believe these trainings are hardly therapeutic and the certifications are meaningless.

This is what will happen. Promises will be made and expectations will be high. Incompetent practitioners will join unprepared journeyers with confusing results. Easily avoidable misadventures

will get exaggerated publicity. Legality will be offered to the most powerful and least capable, which will cause more confusion.

The promises will be exaggerated, the risks higher than claimed, and the costs of working above ground unjustified. There will be a surge in interest in the underground where prices are lower, experience is greater, and expertise rests on uncertain experience. This will cause conflict in establishing consensus and legality.

Between above ground therapists and underground facilitators, there will continue to be retreats in foreign countries where psychedelics are legal. This will combine the best of the over and undergrounds. This is where education will take place for both practitioners and journeyers. It is where much of this has occurred over the last few decades.

I believe the current effort to commercialize psychedelic-assisted therapy will not meet expectations. The corporate effort is uninformed and under prepared. Psychedelics can deliver on the promise when engaged fully, but the current protocols, singular focus on profit, and lack of psychological insight will not make it happen.

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