Preparing for a Psychedelic Experience

There is no one prescription for how to prepare in every circumstance.

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"The vast majority of psychedelic use is non-clinical and non-medical. But when you look around the psychedelic space, almost nobody is talking about it."
— **Paul F. Austin**, Third Wave, founder & CEO

La Medicina Is Not a Medicine

As psychedelics move into the therapeutic mainstream, they are being degraded to the level of a therapeutic tool. The government sees medicalization as the only justification for their use. Psychotherapists see them as furthering their scope of practice. Despite more people using psychedelics for non-therapeutic purposes, there is little advocacy for other uses. Other uses have been stigmatized and criminalized. Alternative discussions are trivialized and ignored.

There is no precedent for psychedelics in a medical context. The Spanish label of “la medicina,” assigned to mushrooms, peyote, and ayahuasca, is a misused term perpetuated by those who should know better. It’s applied by those in the Western medical establishment an insincere respect for traditional use. It’s insincere because the traditional use of these substances is not medical, it is sacramental.

Medical practitioners don’t understand the transcendent psychedelic experience because rational therapy conflicts with the non-rational psychedelic experience. As a result, the medicalization of psychedelics lacks direction and offers few indications of how one might prepare for such an experience.

Psychedelics offer different paths depending on whether one’s objectives are therapeutic, recreational, transformative, or inspirational. Their traditional sacramental roles offer some guidelines, but these guidelines are culturally specific and insufficient for us.

Gunpowder was invented in China in the search for immortality, used for amusement, motivated progress in chemistry, and later used in weaponry. The use of psychedelics was first developed by those cultures in contact with the plants that produce these chemicals. Their uses are related to the needs and opportunities of these cultures. These chemicals are now being applied by Western cultures to Western needs and opportunities, most of which involve money, safety, and normalized behavior.

Traditional cultural use of psychedelics involves a good deal of preparation. Much of this appears primitive to Westerners. As a result, it’s misunderstood and ignored. If we can open ourselves to the larger Indigenous perspectives, then we can see a use for psychedelics that is greater than their application as antidotes for pathology.

My Experience With the Abnormal

My experience with psychedelics centers on personal growth. I have the unusual history of having psychedelic experiences with and without the use of chemicals. This gives me insights into their role in normal life that most others don't have.

Psychedelics both precipitate and integrate altered state experiences, and these experiences are similar to experiences that don't involve chemicals. It's not the chemicals that have transformational power, it's the experiences.

My first experience was with mescaline after returning from six days on El Capitan, a vertical wall in Yosemite Valley, California. Both being on the wall and being on mescaline were state-altering experiences, but it was the wall that was transformational. The mescaline merely provided a different mirror for reflection.

My dozens of experiences over subsequent decades involved extreme sensory or physical encounters. Rather than create new realities, my experiences with psychedelics allowed me to review my past and future. The same holds with rational therapy or dreamwork, both of which are tools for integrating ourselves.

This applies to people working with trauma or illness who take psychedelics. The chemicals do not "cure" you, they put you in a state that provides a different perspective. What you stand to gain is the opportunity to assign a different meaning to your situation. This can change the balance of memories and emotions. It can change them, but there is no guarantee that it will.

Events have different meanings when seen from different perspectives. When alternate perspectives have equal power, you may choose between them. Until then, you are stuck with the perspective that exerts the greatest power.

The Promise of Novelty Is Not Kept

People take psychedelics to be inspired. The “trip” that is the object of both recreational and therapeutic users is an excursion to heightened meaning or insight. If you’re motivated by a problem, then you’re looking for a solution. If you’re motivated by a lack of purpose, then you’re looking for a new idea or feeling.

Novelty without context is not memorable. The unique experiences afforded by psychedelics will not endure if they are not connected to other meaningful events in your life. A phantasmagorical journey to another planet will only have an enduring effect if the experience resonates with your sense of wonder, travel, longing, and hope. A hellish experience only has meaning if it connects with your life.

The claim that an entirely unusual and unprecedented psychedelic experience will change your life is not true. All changes leverage your existing personality and involve some effort. To enhance the potential of a psychedelic, you must come to terms with what you’re willing to do. This is a hidden variable because few of us are aware of our limitations, and few of us are willing to challenge them.

You keep yourself on a short leash. You will only find inspiration to the degree that you're willing to allow yourself to change. But to allow yourself deep change is a contradiction because the change being referred to is beyond your ability to control. You cannot agree or disagree to change into what is beyond your knowledge. What is really being asked is for you to agree to let go of parts of yourself and enter parts unknown.

Preparation Occurs on Both Sides of Your Boundaries

You can address what you don't know, but you cannot describe it. There may be a part of you familiar with ignorance or afraid of it. There may be a part of you that has greater courage in facing chaos, uncertainty, and doubt. That part of you will be familiar with these challenges, but you cannot resolve them.

You can maintain your boundary and integrity in the face of challenges. You may operate with integrity in the face of chaos and doubt. You can maintain your direction, but you cannot eliminate what you don't know if it authentically exists in your environment. Preparation for a psychedelic experience is like a preparation for novelty of any sort: you can only define what you will allow. You cannot resolve what you don't know.

On one hand, this is obvious and on the other hand, it seems trivial. It is neither obvious nor trivial. It is in the nature of thinking to have limits, and our identity is only as clear as our boundaries. For every important aspect of ourselves, there is an important boundary.

Preparing for a psychedelic trip is like preparing for a trip of any kind. You must outfit yourself to encounter those things that you know, and you must have some sense of how you'll deal with the things you don't know how to deal with. You must pack whatever measures of safety are available to you, and you must fortify your integrity for the journey that takes you beyond the familiar.

The Map Is Not The Territory

We each have our own issues so, for each of us, this journey is different. Yet the trip always involves two parts: the part within the boundary of what's familiar and the part outside that boundary. Some of your problems lie within this boundary and are maintained by the things you hold on to, and some of your problems lie outside this boundary and are maintained by your fears.

> "Understanding the triggers of those stresses and learning how to prevent them in the first place like maintaining proper nutrition and a good sleeping pattern for example is a great place to start. Coping mechanisms when you find yourself in that dark place and knowing how to dig yourself out of it and move forwards will be the difference between a successful expedition and watching the whole thing unravel." — **Secret Compass** (2023)

There is no one prescription for all preparations, so we can consider different situations in turn. The differences will depend on what you're starting with, what you're holding on to, what you need, and what you're afraid of. The more clearly you can see these, the more clearly you will recognize the boundaries and be able to hold yourself together in crossing them.

If you are interested in inspiration and want to prepare for it, schedule a free conversation with me at:

https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15

References

Secret Compass (2023). How to Prepare For Your Next Expedition, *secretcompass.com*. Retrieved from: https://secretcompass.com/how-to-prepare-for-your-next-expedition/