

# The Challenging Psychedelic Experiences Project

(We are a non-profit academic research center dedicated to learning about psychedelic harms and what helps people avoid them or mitigate them. Find out more at [www.challengingpsychedelicexperiences.com](http://www.challengingpsychedelicexperiences.com))

## Adverse psychedelic experiences: what we know so far

There has been little research on adverse psychedelic experiences, and even less empirical research on what helps people who have them. However, lack of research does not mean there are no risks.

[Breeksema et al \(2022\)](#) conducted a systematic review of adverse experiences reported in clinical psychedelic trials, and found that many psychedelic trials did not systematically assess AEs. Their paper noted: 'AEs are poorly defined in the context of psychedelic treatments and are probably underreported in the literature due to study design (lack of systematic assessment of AEs) and sample selection.' [A recent study](#) of adverse events in trials of esketamine (a form of ketamine) found that 40% of adverse events went unreported, and when participants felt suicidal, this was often not attributed to the drug by the trial scientists.

Some research that directly focuses on adverse psychedelic experiences has begun to emerge. For example:

- In our survey of 608 people who report extended difficulties after a psychedelic experience ([Evans et al 2023](#)), one third reported difficulties lasting longer than a year and one sixth longer than three years. The most common reported difficulties were **anxiety, social disconnection, derealization, existential struggle and continued visual distortions**. And 8% of survey respondents had taken psychedelics in a therapeutic or clinical setting, so harms happen even under 'safe' settings.
- **52% of people** who responded to the Canadian Psychedelic Survey said they'd had an intensely challenging trip, and **45%** thought no good had come of it. The most common difficulties were: mental or sensory overload (61%), social paranoia (51%), worried about mental or physical health (42%), worried about never being the same after trip (34%), worried about dying (26%). ([Lake et al, 2023](#)).
- **8.9%** of people reported **functional impairment** lasting longer than a day after a difficult trip. **2.6 % reported seeking medical, psychiatric, or psychological assistance** in the days or weeks following their most

challenging psychedelic experience. 6% considered harming themselves or others. ([Simonson et al, 2023](#)) Again, the most common adverse mental health effect reported was anxiety.

- In a 2023 survey of 770 Norwegian users of psychedelic drugs, while most reported positive changes, **23% also reported adverse events lasting longer than a day** - for 10% of the total sample these adverse effects lasted days, for 4.5% of total sample they lasted weeks, for 3.8% they lasted months, and for 4.2% of the total data-set they lasted longer than a year. 25% reported flashbacks, although these were mainly mild. ([Kvam et al. 2023](#))
- **22.5%** of those who self-medicate with LSD or psilocybin for depression or anxiety report negative effects, as well as positive effects ([Kopra et al. 2023](#)).
- **7% of people report persisting negative effects 2-3 months** after naturalistic use of magic mushrooms, in [this 2023 study by Nayak et al.](#)
- **12%** of people who've taken ayahuasca said they felt functional impairment lasting longer than a day, for which they **sought psychological assistance**. ([Bouso et al. 2022](#)). The most common adverse mental health effects in the Global Ayahuasca Survey were feeling socially disconnected, anxiety, low mood and 'feeling energetically attacked'.
- **7%** of patients in Compass' trial of psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression experienced treatment-emergent serious adverse events. ([Compass SEC filing](#)). You can watch [a testimony](#) by one participant who felt more suicidal in the days after her treatment here (she ultimately felt she had improved compared to before the treatment).
- **7%** of participants in MAPS' phase 3 trial of MDMA for PTSD reported increased feelings of suicidality. ([McNamee et al. 2023](#))

- **39%** of people who had a challenging experience said it was one of the **five most difficult experiences of their life**. Of those whose experience occurred >1 year before, **7.6% sought treatment** for enduring psychological symptoms. 16% of those surveyed felt they had not ultimately benefitted from the experience. ([Carbonaro et al, 2016](#))
- **30%** of participants in a psilocybin retreat reported emotional challenges lasting up to three weeks after the retreat, including feeling unsupported, emotional volatility, disconnection from home, and ontological shock ([Lutkajtis and Evans, 2023](#))
- Emergency department admissions connected to psychedelics **went up 69%** between 2016 and 2021 in California. ([Tate et al 2023](#)).
- The risks of psychedelics include **accidental deaths and suicide**. In Simonson et al's 2023 study, [6.7% of people](#) who reported challenging experiences said they considered harming themselves or others. CPEP research includes several reports of people feeling suicidal and also reports by family members whose loved ones took their own life.
- **4-4.5%** of people who had taken psychedelics reported **persistent visual distortions** which they found disturbing (Hallucination Persistent Perception Disorder). ([Baggott et al 2011](#) - to be clear, the online questionnaire found that 4.2% of respondents who had used psychedelics in the past reported persistent visual disturbances that were severe enough that the patients would consider treatment [66], although this is possibly an overestimate given that people with visual issues were more likely to complete the survey
- We know that, very occasionally, psychosis can trigger psychotic episodes or the onset of long-term psychotic conditions. It is presumed these risks are increased if people have a genetic predisposition to psychosis, but this still hasn't been studied.

## Adverse events on ketamine

The ketamine market is already up and running in the US and elsewhere, as ketamine was FDA approved as an anesthetic and is now used as an off-label treatment for depression and multiple other conditions, without much oversight. Indeed, during the pandemic, the DEA allowed ketamine to be ordered online and delivered to your door. There is more research on the physical and mental risks of ketamine, but not much.

- There is some evidence to suggest ketamine can become psychologically addictive, and many anecdotal accounts of this. The problem has been [particularly studied in China](#), where ketamine addiction has been a societal problem:
- There is also [evidence](#) of ketamine leading to physical harm, such as bladder injury and liver injury.
- There is also some emerging evidence of psychological harm when people have powerful ketamine experiences and don't feel able to let go – see [Breeksema et al's 2022 study](#).

## Other forms of psychedelic harm

Other forms of psychedelic harm are reported not in clinical studies, but in the media, psychedelic websites and in the courts, such as:

- Sexual abuse by psychedelic facilitators: there have been several high-profile cases of this, as documented in the [Power Trip podcast](#). There are also many more undocumented cases of sexual abuse and rape during psychedelic sessions in the underground. ([McNamee et al. 2023](#))
- Financial abuse involving psychedelics: there are several cases of unscrupulous people seeking money from people while they are on or in the days after taking psychedelics. There are also examples of people using psychedelics to control vulnerable people and take control of their finances. See the [case of George Sarlo and Vicky Dulai](#) (who is still on the board of MAPS).
- Spiritual inflation and ego-inflation following psychedelic use.
- Psychedelics and cults: there are several historical accounts of cult-leaders who used psychedelics as a tool of indoctrination and control, including the Manson family, The Family in Australia, the Osho cult in Oregon, and the Aun Shinrikyo movement in Japan.
- Psychedelics as a weapon: during the 1950s-1970s, the CIA spent millions of dollars investigating the potential use of psychedelics as a weapon for disorientating, controlling and interrogating enemies. Their research on unsuspecting US citizens caused a great deal of harm, mental breakdowns, and sometimes suicide.
- In addition there are issues of societal inequalities and prejudices emerging and being amplified in the psychedelic space - a lack of access for disabled people, a lack of

representation by minorities in psychedelic companies, and a lack of affordability for many psychedelic treatments.

Finally, there is a lot left to study. The research into the benefits of psychedelics is still quite young, and there is very little research into harms, and even less into what helps people who suffer harms.

We encourage a three-pronged effort:

- LEARN more about psychedelic harms and harm reduction through empirical research
- COMMUNICATE more accurately what harms are possible and how one may be able to mitigate or manage them.
- SUPPORT those who feel they have been harmed by psychedelics

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