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Hallucinogen test is praised

Life-changing effects felt by many in study; lead researcher excited

By Chris Emery | Sun Reporter
July 1, 2008

More than a year after they took the hallucinogen found in "magic mushrooms," volunteers in a Johns Hopkins study rated the experience as one of the most meaningful and spiritually important of their lives, researchers reported today.

The results suggest that hallucinogenic compounds, long considered taboo after widespread abuse in the late 1960s, represent both an untapped resource to help people cope with trauma, and a scientific tool for exploring human spirituality, the authors said.

The study was one of the first of its kind since federal authorities banned research on hallucinogens more than four decades ago.

"It's the Rip Van Winkle effect," said Roland R. Griffiths, a professor of behavioral biology and neurology at Hopkins who led the study. "These drugs are now available for scientific study. There's a lot to do, and that's very exciting."

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Participants took psilocybin, the active ingredient in some species of wild mushrooms, then lay down, closed their eyes and slipped on headphones as they listened to classical music and followed instructions to "look inward."

Of the 36 who participated, more than 60 percent reported a significant increase in life satisfaction and positive behavior after 14 months, and 67 percent rated it as one of the five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

"When I felt the substance take hold, it was a powerful thing," said Dede Osborn, 66, of Providence, R.I., who volunteered when she lived in Washington.

Griffiths warned that the salubrious findings were not a license to take such drugs outside of the lab.

"These compounds may provide something positive," he said, "but they're not

something that can be toyed with. They can lead readily to fearful responses that lead to panic. People can end up doing harm to themselves, including suicidal behavior."

For those reasons, the federal government places psilocybin in its most restricted class of drugs - along with LSD, marijuana and heroin. David Shurtleff, director of basic neuroscience and behavior research at the National Institute on Drug Abuse, said NIDA funded the study to better understand the substances' neurological effects.

Hallucinogens alter the chemical balance in the brain's serotonin system, which plays a role in the brain's reaction to many addictive substances, including alcohol, nicotine, heroin and cocaine.

"The study points to how serious these adverse effects can be with the hallucinogens," Shurtleff said. "This was done in a highly controlled environment, and there were still adverse effects."

Some participants reported unpleasant experiences, including feelings of terror, sadness and paranoia. The study quoted one volunteer who recalled "the profound grief I experienced, as if all of the pain and sadness of the world were passing through me, cell by cell, tearing apart my being."

But many described life-changing mystical experiences of the sort typically reported by monks, saints and other devoutly religious. Even those who experienced fear or sadness rated the experience as spiritually important, and no one reported long-lasting negative effects.

Osborn participated in the study when she was 59, during a period of soul-searching after a divorce and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

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She estimated that her psilocybin session lasted eight hours. "I felt like my heart was said in a phone interview yesterday. "Once I got by the sensory titillation, the color pain was a very strong physical pain, but it was nothing I was afraid of.

"It was a combination of sweet and painful," she said. "There is so much joy in being much pain in being alive. We usually don't feel it because we are so armored."

She credited the experiment with lasting effects, including helping her better cope with fear. "I became more aware of when I was afraid or when my heart would become closed up," she said. "I began asking myself what I would do if I wasn't afraid. When I felt myself tensing up, I would breathe a little deeper."

Sandy Lundahl, 55, of Bowie said her interest in the research was piqued by acquaintances who had already participated in Griffiths' experiments. Like Osborn's, her experiences ranged from odd to profound. "At first I saw these figures that looked like little harlequins opening a curtain, trying to show me all these colorful things," she said, "but they weren't really important."

As the effects of the drug became stronger, she said, she wrestled with emotions rooted in her personal relationships and sadness about her father's death. "I had no idea what I had been repressing with regards to my father's death," she said. "I had to process the truth about it."

She also feels a lingering sense of "oneness" often associated with religious awakenings. "There is a bigger explanation for everything," she said. "You know that there is something beyond your everyday reality. I knew that the world was going to be fine."

Griffiths suggested that these insights might help people with life-threatening diseases cope with the related anxiety and depression. He is now enrolling cancer patients in a psilocybin trial approved by the Food and Drug Administration, as part of their psychiatric counseling.

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