

What is Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy?

Psychedelic-assisted therapy is on its way to becoming available as a treatment for a variety of behavioral health conditions in the United States.

There is strong and mounting evidence demonstrating the efficacy of certain psychedelic drugs in combination with intensive psychotherapeutic support for the treatment of conditions like major depression, PTSD, and alcoholism. Many experts believe that it is the combination of psychotherapeutic support along with psychedelic medication that allows patients to heal or experience reduced symptomatology. If psychedelics such as MDMA or psilocybin become available as FDA-approved medications, BrainFutures anticipates that a large demand for psychedelic-assisted therapy services will follow.

BrainFutures conducted interviews with 17 experts, leaders, and researchers in this field to understand the five core elements of psychedelic-assisted therapy. We briefly explain each one below.

For a deeper explanation and more information about safety and ethical practice, read our [full report here](#).

SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT

Screening and assessment are essential to determining whether psychedelic-assisted therapy is appropriate for an individual patient. Patients are screened for both psychological and physiological conditions which could complicate treatment or result in exclusion. Additionally, psychedelics can often bring up traumatic events for patients, so therapists assess the patient for trauma history. Clinical instruments to measure symptoms of the targeted condition (such as depression) are often

given during screening and repeated later to assess treatment efficacy.

PREPARATION

A series of psychotherapy sessions to prepare patients for the psychedelic medication session are essential and can have a strong influence on treatment outcomes. At minimum, preparation should include forming a relationship of trust between the therapist and patient, educating the patient about the psychedelic experience, obtaining informed consent, and establishing safety measures. Experts consider a strong foundation of trust between the patient and their therapist(s) to be a cornerstone of psychedelic-assisted therapy, and some evidence suggests that the strength of the therapeutic relationship affects treatment outcomes.

SET AND SETTING

The patient's mindset (set) as well as the social and physical environment (setting) have a significant impact on the patient's experience during the medication session. Ideally, patients should enter the medication session in a calm, reflective state of mind. The environment for the medication session should feel safe, comfortable, and familiar. Often, treatment rooms feature comfortable couches, decorative objects, and natural elements such as plants that are designed to help patients feel at ease. Patients are given eyeshades and headphones to help them focus their attention inwards.

MEDICATION SESSION

Psychedelic medicines are administered during a multi-hour appointment often referred to as the medication session. Patients take the medication under the supervision of one or more therapists

and are usually encouraged to focus on their inward experience. During the medication session, the therapist provides support and reassurance but generally refrains from attempting to influence the patient's experience. This is known as a nondirective approach.

There are a broad range of potential experiences that can occur during the medication session. Patients may experience compelling or disturbing visual phenomena, re-experience past trauma, feel joy, anxiety, fear, and grief, or experience ego dissolution and feelings of oneness.

Spiritual and other meaningful experiences are common during the medication session, though not universal. Early research indicates that having a mystical or deeply meaningful experience may contribute to positive treatment outcomes.

INTEGRATION

Integration helps patients assimilate the insights of the psychedelic experience into their daily lives and gain longer-term mental health benefits.

Experts believe that integration is crucial, and early evidence suggests that adequate integration may be a key factor that allows patients to realize the benefits of psychedelic-assisted therapy. After the medication session, modern research protocols typically call for a sequence of three or more psychotherapy sessions that constitute the integration phase of psychedelic-assisted therapy, although extended integration as part of an ongoing psychotherapeutic relationship is another possible model. During these sessions, a therapist may assist the patient to assign meaning to their experiences, set concrete goals, and process their psychedelic experiences.

The opinions and recommendations expressed herein are based on the research of BrainFutures and are intended for informational use only. The content does not constitute medical advice and is subject to change. Before pursuing any course of treatment for a behavioral or medical condition, including the use of psychedelic-assisted therapy, always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider and review the information together.