

Psychedelics and End of Life

A focus on evidence in cancer patients

Facing cancer and other life-threatening illnesses can be difficult and lead to emotional distress, loss of purpose, loss of power and demoralization. There are currently no medications indicated for end of life existential distress.

There are two major randomized-controlled trials that have investigated the use of psychedelics for end of life care.

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Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized double-blind trial.

Johns Hopkins University

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Rapid and sustained symptom reduction following psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized controlled trial.

New York University

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Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized double-blind trial.

Johns Hopkins University

Participants: 51 people (most with cancer) who were struggling with depression and anxiety after learning they had a life-threatening illness.

Study Design: Each person took part in two sessions. In one, they received a high dose of psilocybin (about 22 or 30 mg per 70 kg of body weight). In the other, they received a very low, placebo-like dose (1 or 3 mg per 70 kg). Sessions happened about five weeks apart in a comfortable, living-room-style setting with two trained guides. After that, the researchers checked in regularly for six months.

Measurements: Researchers asked about depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, meaning, optimism, acceptance of death, and spirituality. Family and staff also rated how participants seemed to change.

Main Results:

- The high dose led to major decreases in both depression and anxiety.
- Participants reported feeling happier, calmer, more optimistic, and more at peace about death.
- 80% still had these benefits six months later.
- Most participants said the psilocybin session was one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives, helping them feel more connected and spiritually open.
- Scores about life satisfaction and well-being rose by over 80%.

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Rapid and sustained symptom reduction following psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized controlled trial.

New York University

Participants: 29 patients with cancer-related anxiety and depression participated in the study.

Study Design: This was a two-session, double-blind, placebo-controlled, crossover trial. Each participant received a single dose of psilocybin (0.3 mg/kg) plus psychotherapy in one session, and niacin (250 mg) plus psychotherapy in another session, with a 7-week gap between sessions.

Measurements: Primary outcomes were levels of anxiety and depression before the crossover. Secondary outcomes included existential distress, quality of life, spirituality, mystical experiences, cognition, emotions, and behavior, assessed before and after crossover.

Main Results

- Psilocybin caused immediate, strong, and lasting reductions in anxiety and depression.
- It decreased cancer-related hopelessness and demoralization.
- Patients reported improved spiritual well-being and better overall quality of life.
- At 6.5 months follow-up, 60–80% of participants continued to show clinically meaningful reductions in depression and anxiety.
- Positive attitudes toward death and sustained existential relief were also observed.