PSYCHEDELIC RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Patient Voices on Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy in Cancer Care

Overview

People living with cancer often experience profound **psychological and existential distress,** including anxiety, depression, fear of death, and loss of meaning.

This distress is often left **unaddressed by conventional care**, particularly for those with advanced disease.

Early clinical trials suggest psychedelic-assisted therapy can ease these symptoms. But **how do people with cancer actually feel about it?**

The Study

A recent Canadian qualitative study by **Schuman et al. investigated how people living with cancer view psychedelic-assisted therapy** for cancer-related distress.

Researchers recruited **15 participants** through a national survey, ranging in age **from 25 to over 65** and spanning a wide mix of cancer types and stages.

Over half were living with advanced (Stage III or IV) cancer, and **about 60% had tried psychedelics** before.

Interview Themes

Participants took part in a 50–90 minute interview on their perceptions of psychedelics and their experience with cancer.

Using **reflexive thematic analysis**, researchers grouped recurring ideas into broader themes.

Four key themes emerged:

Cautious Optimism about Psychedelics	Stigma, Support, and Cultural Framing
Structural and Systemic Barriers	Existential Distress and Gaps in Cancer Care

Cautious Optimism

80% of participants were supportive of psychedelic-assisted therapy, with professional guidance a key facilitator. **Psilocybin was seen as more favourable**, with synthetic agents like LSD and MDMA viewed with more caution.

"If it was guided with an expert... I'm more than open to trying it."

"I would be really nervous about... losing control and not feeling like myself."

"If I was having end-of-life kind of stuff, I think I'd want almost anything to get through that."

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Stigma, Support, and Cultural Framing

Lived experiences shaped how participants viewed psychedelics. The "war on drugs" influenced older participants, while younger ones felt more open. Stigma was prevalent, but supportive friends and partners helped offset it.

"Culturally from my background... psychedelics were a big no-no. They were scary."

"I do have a partner who is open-minded about this stuff, so it helps to have someone to talk to without being judged."

Structural and Systemic Barriers

Patients face a fragmented landscape with unclear **referral pathways**, prohibitive **costs**, uncertain **insurance coverage**, and slow **regulatory progress**. Provider attitudes also affected how comfortable patients felt asking about psychedelic-assisted therapy.

"I wouldn't really even know where to start... I don't know where it's located and how accessible it would be."

"I've experienced a resistance to hearing something they don't already know. It's frustrating, and it discourages me from bringing this up."

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Existential Distress and Gaps in Cancer Care

Conventional care often left participants' distress unaddressed, especially after treatment ended. For those with advanced disease, **psychedelic-assisted therapy was seen as a way to face their existential fears**.

"It was quite life-changing... in how I viewed existential distress and how I look at death down the road."

"I was able to connect with the vulnerable side of me... and just let myself cry."

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Future Directions

Many participants hoped psychedelic-assisted therapy could **become a more mainstream component of cancer care**.

However, Schuman et al. note **this will take coordinated change**, including insurance coverage, clinician training and education, and regulation that prioritizes those with advanced disease while protecting equitable access.

Above all, participants called for a model of cancer care that **treats the disease and honours the whole person.**

Reference

"Facing Death... Now, That's a Serious Thing to Confront": A Qualitative Analysis of Patient Perspectives on Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy for Cancer-Related Psychosocial Symptoms.

Schuman, H. D. M., Barkova, S., Mina, R., Deleemans, J. M., Nguyen, T., & Carlson, L. E. (2025).

Integrative Cancer Therapies, 24, 1–18. doi.org/10.1177/15347354251370982