

PSYCHEDELIC RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Beyond Prohibition: Naturalistic Psychedelic Use



MAPS
CANADA 

Background & Objectives

Background

- Psychedelics have become an increasingly popular topic of interest to the general public and researchers.
- Most psychedelic **use happens outside clinical or research settings.**
 - This is referred to as naturalistic use, psychedelic use in real-world settings.

Objectives

- The authors reviewed research on naturalistic psychedelic use to examine its:
 - Potential benefits & harms.
 - Why & how people use psychedelics.
 - Implications for public health & policy
- Substances included: Psilocybin, LSD, MDMA, mescaline & 5-MeO-DMT.
- Understanding what happens in real-world settings can **help identify benefits and risks** of naturalistic psychedelic use.

Methodology

The authors conducted a **literature review** and public-health analysis on naturalistic use.

How did they find the research?

- Searched the UBC Library and PubMed
- Used the search terms “psychedelic” and “naturalistic”
- Also reviewed reference lists and additional academic collections

How were studies selected?

- Screened for peer-review status
- Checked relevance to naturalistic use, health, adverse events, context and history
- Removed duplicate articles
- 104 peer-reviewed articles were included

What did they examine?

- Mental & physical health
- Social outcomes & substance use
- Well-being & patterns of use
- Challenging experiences

Findings: Mental Health & Beyond

Mental Health & Well-Being

- **Naturalistic psychedelic use was associated with:**
 - Lower depression & anxiety
 - Lower PTSD & psychological distress
 - Improved emotional regulation
 - Greater psychological flexibility
 - Greater self-insight/introspection
 - Reduced problematic substance use
 - Lower interpersonal violence
 - Lower suicidality

Beyond Mental Health

- **Naturalistic psychedelic use was also associated with:**
 - Greater social connectedness
 - Greater empathy
 - Spiritual or mystical experiences
 - Feeling more connected to nature
 - Increased openness

Findings: Why Do People Use Psychedelics?

Why People Use Psychedelics

- **Common motivations** for use identified by the Canadian Psychedelic Survey (n = 2045), in order, were:
 - Fun
 - Self-exploration
 - Well-being
 - Personal growth
 - Trauma treatment
 - Medical purposes

Other findings

- 18% reported using psychedelics to reduce or stop drug use.
- Psychedelic use was generally infrequent, although patterns varied between individuals.
- Microdosing is another form of naturalistic use, most commonly involving LSD or psilocybin.

Findings: Challenging Experiences

Challenging Experiences

- Psychedelics aren't risk free.
- 52% of Canadian Psychedelic Survey participants reported experiencing a challenging psychedelic experience.
- Common challenges included:
 - Anxiety & panic
 - Existential struggle
 - Social disconnection
 - Depersonalization/derealization
- Interestingly:
 - 55% of those who experienced a challenge reported that it also had a positive aspect.
- Factors associated with greater risk of a challenging experience:
 - Younger age
 - Inexperience with psychedelics
 - High/unknown doses
 - Psychological vulnerability
 - Unsafe settings

Public Health & Harm Reduction

The authors support a **public-health approach** **focused on:**

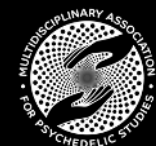
- Reducing potential harms.
- Maximizing potential benefits.
- Providing accurate drug education.
- Supporting regulated access.

Some **Indigenous traditions** use psychedelics within structured ceremonies, guided by community members, creating a supportive and controlled environment for the experience.

The authors discuss Indigenous practices alongside contemporary approaches to identify three **factors that can support safer psychedelic experiences:**

Set + Setting + Dosage

- SET: Mindset, intentions, emotions & expectations.
- SETTING: Physical & social environment.
- DOSAGE: Amount & intensity of effects.



Limitations

- Much of the **evidence was observational**.
 - Associations do not prove causation.
- **Studies examined varied** in populations, substances, doses, settings, and outcomes.
- Naturalistic research has **less experimental control** than randomized clinical trials.

Why Naturalistic Research Still Matters

- Clinical trials show what can happen under controlled conditions.
- Naturalistic research helps us understand what happens when psychedelics are used in the real world.
- This real-world evidence can help identify patterns of use, potential harms, and areas for further research.

Conclusion

Key Points to Remember

- Psychedelic use doesn't only happen in clinics and research labs.
 - **People are already using psychedelics** in their communities.
- Understanding real-world psychedelic use is the first step toward helping people make **safer, more informed choices**.
- Naturalistic psychedelic use is associated with many **potential benefits**.
- Psychedelic experiences **can be challenging**.
- Most **evidence is observational**, and do not prove causation.
- Before a psychedelic experience consider your **set, setting & dosage**.

Know the potential benefits. Know the risks. Make informed choices.



Reference

Beyond Prohibition: A Public Health Analysis of Naturalistic Psychedelic Use

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