

ARTICLE

The psychedelic resurgence: Opportunities for behavioral and mental wellness and theory development

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Abstract

Psychedelic treatments show promise for improving health and well-being. This article summarizes the history of early psychedelic research and its recent renaissance. Although much of this research focuses on mental health and substance abuse, observational studies have linked psychedelic use to outcomes such as healthier diet, lower rates of heart disease, and even spontaneous, positive changes in health-related outcomes. The importance of understanding mechanisms that underlie psychedelic impacts - i.e., why positive changes occur - was emphasized (“Behavioral Psychedelics”), as was the need for attention to the social context of psychedelic experiences. Evidence for differential impacts of psychedelic use with v. without a partner, and impacts of psychedelic use on close relationships, was presented.

Key words: Psychedelics, health behavior, psychedelic treatments, relationships, theory

This article summarizes the roundtable, “The psychedelic resurgence: Opportunities for behavioral and mental wellness and theory development,” which was presented at the 38th Annual Conference of the European Health Psychology Society in Cascais, Portugal. Evidence for beneficial behavioral and psychological health effects of psychedelic use is accumulating rapidly, but controversy regarding the implementation of these interventions, including health risks, legal concerns, and more, remains. This roundtable aimed to provide updated evidence on the history and impacts of psychedelic use across medical and non-medical settings. Whether, and what, role social and behavioral health theories can play in psychedelic science was also raised as a topic for discussion.

Attendee Poll

At the beginning of this roundtable, attendees reported knowledge and opinions on the acceptability and potential of psychedelic treatments. Most attendees felt neutral or disagreed that they had good knowledge regarding therapeutic uses and potential risks of psychedelics, but 2/3 agreed that psychedelics showed promise in treating mental and behavioral health (none disagreed). The vast majority agreed that psychedelics should be legally accessible for supervised medical use, with fewer endorsing spiritual/religious accessibility, and even fewer endorsing recreational use.

Historical Context

Dr. Rodrigues opened the session by providing a historical overview of psychedelic research. During the 1950s and 1960s, research exploring therapeutic benefits of psychedelics (e.g., LSD, psilocybin) flourished. Pioneering studies reported significant improvements in the treatment of alcoholism with psychedelics (Osmond, 1957) and other mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Johnson et al., 2008). Despite the promise of these treatments and their low harm potential (Johnson et al., 2008; Johnson and Griffiths, 2017), rising political and social concerns led to the prohibition of psychedelic research by the late 1960s, halting further investigation into their clinical potential (Johnson et al., 2008). In recent years, however, a renaissance of scientific research on psychedelics has begun to again explore their therapeutic potential (Barber and Aaronson, 2022), with a preponderance of evidence for their promise in the treatment of end-of-life anxiety, treatment-resistant depression, and addiction, and no substantial evidence for adverse events when therapies are administered in a controlled, therapeutic setting (Bogenschutz et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2019).

Health and Behavior Change

Moving beyond mental health implications, Dr. Encantado pivoted to provide an overview of broader evidence for benefits of psychedelic use with outcomes relevant to public health (e.g., disease status, behaviors). In population samples, research has related non-clinical use of classic psychedelics to a wide range of positive outcomes, including healthier diets, greater engagement in yoga or meditation practices, more physical activity, lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, and overweight/obesity, and higher odds of greater self-reported health (Kohek et al., 2023; Ona et al., 2019; Simonsson et al., 2021a,b). Secondary analyses from clinical

trials provide additional data regarding health behaviors, with reports of spontaneous changes in other areas of participants' lives that were not directly related to the intervention (e.g., improvements in diet, exercise, alcohol consumption and other drugs abuse (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2016; Noorani et al., 2018). Evidence for the potential of psychedelic treatments for tackling tobacco and alcohol misuse in observational (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2017) and clinical (Bogenschutz et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2016) was also presented. Dr. Encantado closed with an important caveat, emphasizing that much of the research on health and behavior benefits of psychedelic use relies on observational data.

Ms. Carvalho presented preliminary data from three recent cross-sectional studies that found associations of psychedelic use with positive changes in health and health-related behaviors. The first study (N = 203) demonstrated that, compared to the normative population, Portuguese ayahuasca users reported lower rates of hypertension, elevated cholesterol, and diabetes, lower rates of smoking and alcohol consumption, and higher levels of physical activity and consumption of fruits and vegetables. The majority (88%) rated their health status as good or very good. In the second study (N = 271), participants reported a wide range of positive behavior changes attributed to psychedelic use: contemplative practices (78%), time spent in nature (69%), work-life balance practices (55%), alcohol consumption (27%), diet (15%), and physical activity (13%). In the third study (N = 96) individuals who facilitated psychedelic experiences (i.e., psychedelic practitioners) also reported accounts of positive shifts in their clients' health behaviors: physical activity (72%), contemplative practices (92%), diet (84%), time spent in nature (92%), work-life balance (89%), reductions in alcohol (90%) and tobacco (77%) use, and in screen time (79%).

Word Cloud

After learning more about the history of psychedelic research and being provided with evidence for benefits beyond mental health treatments in clinical populations alone, attendees participated in an activity by contributing “pros” and “cons” of these treatments for mental and behavioral health. Most often, “pros” related to safety, impact (e.g., efficacy, effectiveness), evidence-based treatments, and profound transformation. “Cons” centered around expense, regulation, and abuse.

Mechanisms of Change

Why, and how, do such powerful benefits seem to manifest as a result of psychedelic use? Some insights can be garnered from neuropsychology. For example, psychedelic treatments, such as psilocybin or LSD, interact with serotonin receptors, disrupting the brain's default mode network and promoting neuroplasticity, which can lead to new insights and emotional processing. This altered brain activity can help treat conditions like depression and PTSD by fostering behavioral changes, emotional regulation, and openness to new perspectives (Brouwer and Carhart-Harris, 2020). Beyond these chemical effects, applying theories from health psychology to identify mechanisms that underlying the impact of psychedelic use on improved well-being could further strengthen intervention impacts and inform theory refinement. It is not clear, however, whether these theories must be adapted, or which theories best apply within this domain. Very few studies of psychedelic use have tested reasons for the success of these treatments, and very few have tested reasons for positive changes reported in observational studies.

Dr. Teixeira tackled this question first, presenting a roadmap to guide future research on how altered states of consciousness may relate to changes in health behaviors and healthier living (Teixeira et al., 2020). Introducing the concept of Behavioral Psychedelics, defined as “the study of psychedelics to foster intentional changes in habits and behavior to improve health and resilience” (Neuhaus and Slavich, 2022), he framed the psychedelic experience as a “window of opportunity” to promote positive changes across a range of conditions and behaviors. Psychological flexibility and connectedness were highlighted as transdiagnostic mechanisms that support behavior change in non-psychedelic studies but also appear to be targeted in components of psychedelic treatments (e.g., incorporating motivational interviewing; (Johnson et al., 2014)). In particular, Dr. Teixeira discussed self-determination theory as a possible framework for understanding psychedelic-derived change, including constructs such as autonomy, competence and relatedness (Teixeira et al., 2020). An agenda for Behavioral Psychedelics was presented, calling for longitudinal research testing prospective associations of psychedelic use with adoption and maintenance of health behaviors, the importance of parsing behavioral and population characteristics as modifiers of psychedelic effects, mediated impacts of improved mental health on meaningful behavioral and physical health outcomes, and the need to expand beyond addiction behaviors in psychedelic treatments.

Citing social psychological theories that underscore the centrality of relationships and shared understanding of reality for well-being (Festinger, 1954; Rossignac-Milon and Higgins, 2018; Rusbult et al., 2009; Swann Jr, 2012) and pointing to a handful of studies exploring psychedelic use in a group context (Kettner et al., 2021; Neubert et al., 2024), Dr. Cornelius moved beyond individual-level theories to raise questions about differences in psychedelic experiences with (v. without) a romantic partner. Preliminary results from a large online survey (N = 798) suggested that using a psychedelic together with a partner was associated with improvements in a wide range of relational outcomes (e.g., emotional closeness, relationship satisfaction), due, in part, to the fact that these couples reported a greater degree of shared reality; conversely, non-shared use was associated with greater likelihood of ending the relationship. Shared psychedelic use was associated with improved individual outcomes indirectly only (i.e., mediated by shared reality). Implications for bolstering intervention effectiveness, avoiding unintended relational consequences, and deepening our understanding of socially embedded health psychology were discussed.

Conclusion

Attendee questions at the conclusion of the session showed that remaining hesitations in adoption of psychedelic treatments were primarily related to regulation complexities and to addiction and harm potential. This theme carried throughout the other engagement activities as well. However, attendees also expressed a high degree of interest and enthusiasm in the promise of these treatments. It is also essential to approach future research with humility by prioritizing the inclusion of Indigenous and community knowledge, paying careful attention to the recruitment of diverse participant samples, and ensuring equity in the availability of psychedelic treatments. As scientific research progresses and psychedelic therapies become available outside of research settings,

the potential of psychedelics to drive meaningful health behavior change, alongside their therapeutic benefits, offers a promising avenue for transforming mental and behavioral health care, providing us with new tools to foster healthier lifestyles and well-being.

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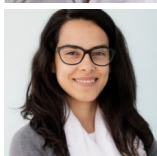


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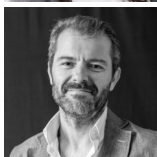


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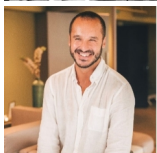


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