

KosmiCare: Creating Safe Spaces for Difficult Psychedelic Experiences



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SINCE 2002, the Boom Festival in Portugal has hosted psychedelic emergency services with the support of MAPS. This past March at the 2nd World Psychedelic Forum in Basel, Switzerland, Diogo Ruivo, the chief organizer of Boom Festival, worked with MAPS to develop an extended framework for psychedelic emergency services that could be shared around the globe. So this year the “KosmiCare” framework was put into operation; coordinated by the Portuguese Psychologist David Lameiras and Sandra Karpetas (the initial program in 2002 was under Sandra’s supervision).

Over the past several years, the network of people interested in supporting psychedelic emergency services has grown in numbers and diversity. In 2008 the project became broader, both in infrastructure and partnerships. We had a large 14-meter dome capable of holding up to 20 guests, three tipi tents to host Energy Control (drug testing), Check-In (harm reduction), Erowid (substance specialists), and a unique straw bale womb shaped “Kiva” for makeshift facilitation work. We consulted with the local hospital, fire department, paramedics, internal and external security forces, and regional harm reduction teams. Together with recruiting of facilitators, this process was set into motion months well ahead of the opening of the gates at Boom.

Approximately 25,000 people attended the festival, and the KosmiCare dome operated non-stop during eight days. That week volunteers came from across Europe and elsewhere and were distributed in a team of 30 multi-lingual volunteers—four team leaders (psychologists Svea Nielsen and Iker Puente, medical writer Kelly Morris, and mental health assistant Jon Atkinson), one co-pilot (Psychologist Constance Bettencourt), two psychiatrists (José Pádua & Alexandra Cavalheiro); and senior consultants

Boom Sets the Psychedelic Emergency Service and Harm Reduction Standard

MAPS President Rick Doblin ventured to the lakeshores of Portugal for the first time. He was amazed by the quality of psychedelic emergency services and harm reduction principles put in place at Boom. Rick acknowledged Boom for setting the standard for coordinated psychedelic emergency services at festivals and credited Boom as leaders to be recognized in preparing for a post-prohibition world.

The aim for psychedelic emergency service providers at festivals and dance events is to turn potentially unpleasant

psychedelic experiences into something as constructive as possible by providing a safe and caring environment. This is a unique chance for those having difficulty processing an experience while under the influence of psychedelic substances - a situation where unfortunately there is usually poor support! While these safe spaces are rare at festivals, we should not underestimate their beneficial role. Too often at festivals “bad trips” occur and are overlooked by the festival organizers. Those of us who work with KosmiCare believe that the world is a shared, community responsibility wherein we must look out for and take care of each member, just like in a tribal setting. We

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believe the well being of each individual is vital to the well being of the whole. As a true tribe and a living organism, breathing as one, KosmiCare gives extra meaning to Boom mottos: “We are All” (2008) and “We Are One” (2006).

At the World Psychedelic Symposium in Basel in January 2006, Albert Hofmann’s concluding remarks were, “Awareness is the core of personality, the gift of the Lord to human kind. Now, we have LSD but we don’t have the religious ceremony to go with it. We have to find a place so these substances can be taken in good circumstances.”

Hofmann’s words left a deep impression on those of us seeking such tribal cohesion. It is well known that at parties and electronic music festivals around the world much of the exploration and “spontaneous research” is done with psychedelic substances. Responsibility for self and others is an essential factor to help clear misconceptions associated to substances themselves. The challenge is, as Hofmann said, that there are few guides or shamans in western societies, and it leaves people who use psychedelics at risk of having difficult experiences without someone to care for them.

Some of the stigma can be seen on the web, on sites like YouTube, where partygoers have fun uploading videos of other people having bad trips—while lending a helping hand is simply overlooked. Boom’s attitude has always been in the opposite direction—addressing the realities of difficult psychedelic experiences and misrepresented drugs. Boom goes out of its way to raise awareness. The process of helping one another at Boom went as follows: Fellow dancers noticed partygoers who were displaying signs of difficulty. The dancer in turn would alert festival workers, who then would seek out paramedics. The paramedics would then evaluate the situation and bring the person experiencing a difficult moment to the KosmiCare tent.

When someone was brought to KosmiCare, useful crisis information, such as drugs ingested, effects felt by the person, other symptoms, and relevant past medical history were collected by a volunteer. Sometimes a person tripping would walk in seeking help on their own—just as if the place was already well known

to the person. At this stage a facilitator was appointed—depending on language, gender, age, and shift duration. Facilitators were required to complete a form logging the therapeutic techniques used, ranging from listening, sitting with quietly, talking, hugging, hand-holding touch, music therapy, leaving the person alone, shift handovers, etc.

The KosmiCare Facility and Facilitators

The KosmiCare dome was uniquely recognizable on its shore from afar. With all the energy coming from KosmiCare’s dome, some guests stated that KosmiCare was like the soul of the festival and many attendees sung praise to the work we did. The KosmiCare hub was located close to a bridge, with a private beach and a magnetism of its own. Our facilitator Constantinos remarked that our area of the festival “was like an airport of psychonauts, so beautifully loaded with loving vibes, shakti force, and healing intentions!” Folks hanging out at an area denoted as Sacred Fire, even called it “mamma dome” due to its round white skirt. The round shape made for a very special setting with a peaceful environment and we played chill downtempo music. The decorations were organic, without too many details. We had a bamboo fountain surrounded with stones and colored cactus. We hung soothing silken fabrics that acted as secluded divisions—these “wombs,” were perfect for grounding and re-coiling—concealing without constricting.

At the dome, the facilitators followed roughly 200 visitors who experienced some form of crisis. These folks took shelter in our sanctuary—some of them stayed through the night and relaxed or slept in our safe space. Others sought solace and shelter during the day.

In our selection of the facilitators, we paid close attention to their motivation for being in this field. The skills needed in a therapeutic relationship and previous direct experience with psychedelic substances are important tools for a facilitator. In the words of Clé, who has facilitated at Boom since 2004: “Theoretical knowledge is rarely enough, as we must have an understanding of what is going on in the person’s mind—and sometimes body—to be able to offer the most appropriate response,

assistance, and support.”

The work of a facilitator can be very rewarding—creative, heartfelt, and even therapeutic. As one volunteer, Jonas Gregorio said: “Sometimes, the best care you can provide in such situations is to offer your empathic and calm presence, waiting with patience and trust.”

Ben de Loenen, another facilitator stated: “Working with someone going through a deep spiritual crisis is always something that requires the facilitator to open himself to that person. In that sense this work is fairly different from regular psychotherapy, as the person doesn’t choose to go to a therapist to work on his problems, but instead finds him or herself in a state of confusion and crisis accompanied by a stranger. While none of us is playing a doctor’s role, we have a more human-human approach than therapist-patient. Obviously, it is not right to do this kind of work to deal with your own issues; one must do this work for the service of others. The facilitator should be a grounded person, who is sensitive to the needs and feelings of people in those altered states of consciousness”

Facilitation of difficult psychedelic experiences is adjunct to harm-reduction practices. Ben noted that, “shifting from the disease-model in a marginalized social group to placing harm reduction as a top priority helps us to recognize the healing aspects of properly-guided experiences with psychedelics, as underlying issues regarding life-problems that can be worked on. This process not only takes place during an initial visit to our facility, but can be continued in the days after, while the festival is still going on. Visitors often return to talk about their experience, which maximizes the benefit in daily life after the festival.”

Dani Ferrari told us, “being a facilitator in the KosmiCare dome was a big experience of consciousness and development for me. I could work on my own preconception of drugs, as I had indirect contact with so many different drugs, or entheogens, through the visitors who sought our support. These substances are conductors to different states of mind and consciousness. In this sense, I still think that more respect and self-awareness can be taught while using drugs for those who use them, like a harm-reduction point of view in recre-

ational occasions. Seeing the quantities of drugs used by some visitors, like mixing different drugs—or mixing drugs with alcohol—ingesting big quantities, such as 20 drops of LSD, or using DMT at the main floor—well, it shows that we still have a lot to learn and teach.”

Some of those who walked in felt bewildered by all the stimuli in the festival and came to seek a safe harbor to continue their trips. Persons who had taken LSD out and about in the festival sometimes felt the need to be secluded in a silent place and talk to someone about overwhelming aspects of the psychedelic voyage. It was as if they intentionally preempted going through a bad trip. A few times our team of facilitators worked with people who expressed that they were shaken due to new feelings aroused by the unique free atmosphere and love within the festival. We evaluated them as undergoing a sudden “mid-life crisis” that caused them to question their actions until now—as psychedelics often do.

Constantinos said, “The KosmiCare teams had great diversity, which was very challenging and precious. We all had different backgrounds and ways of working, but unity came with the single goal—helping our brothers/sisters to go through difficult psychedelic experiences and learn from them. Opportunities are not only to keep on saving people’s minds, souls and lives but to establish a new ethos in experimenting with substances and put a loving vibe back to the tribe! Knowledge, awareness and compassion are export products from the heart of our dome! We don’t only assist but inspire! We set an example of best setting!”

Harm Reduction Strategies In Practice

There were many partners with KosmiCare. The team of Geração and Amato Lusitano distributed 2000 flyers with information on psychoactive substances, and 8000 condoms at the entrance of the festival. The Erowid and Check-In tipis provided information about management of the pleasures and risk-behaviors associated with the ingestion of psychoactive substances and/or sexuality. Their tents were always filled with a lot of people going in and coming out, as both teams provided flyers and information on almost any

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mind-altering substance one can imagine. These harm-reduction strategies sparked thoughtful and socially-prudent dialogues throughout the festival.

The Energy Control laboratory consisted of a Spanish team of eight people. This team played a key role in the overall harm-reduction goal of the festival. They had an innovative onsite drug testing technology called Thin Layer Chromatography (TLC), a technique used to separate pure components of a sample, allowing detection and identification of substances and adulterants. Energy control took rigorous notes of their activities, and from August 11th through the 16th they analyzed 303 samples. They displayed on a video screen pictures of the various substances they sampled, with notes about what the substances contained. One of the critical aspects of this service is that drug users are given the ability to identify in a short period of time the composition of the substances they might take and to avoid those with unknown or dangerous content. Furthermore, this service gave a snapshot of current consumption and offered clues to those of us in counseling roles as to what to expect in the most-extreme scenarios.

Psychologist and anthropologist Ana Flávia Nascimento observed: "This project was only possible to happen now because we are in the planetary era where we can have people from many different countries working together on a project related to psychoactive substances. This is something new happening in the 21st century, with values that go beyond boundaries and give another perception of expanding consciousness in big festivals. In 2006 the team had already recognized that grounded exploration of altered states could foster deeper personal awareness, insight, and healing."

Persisting Through Challenges

As in any project, unforeseen issues surfaced and we received these unexpected challenges as opportunities for growth. We faced questions like: What to do with germs that jeopardize public health, as was the case this year with "boom-bug"? What do we do when we have clinically-diagnosed psychotic visitors? Or, what are the limits of public hospitals?

According to the coordinator of the Emergency Medical Services (EMS), P. Mac:

"This festival has been our biggest challenge since 1997. It encountered many environmental challenges constantly testing our readiness, willingness, and endurance. KosmiCare outperformed all other attempts from previous years to have a functional mental sanctuary for those in need. We are grateful that they made our work in the EMS department a bit easier by knowing we could count on them when needed."

In 2006 and 2008, KosmiCare welcomed some people with psychiatric diagnoses. These psychiatric cases caused a lot of confusion for the KosmiCare team and drained much of our human resources. Our teams ended up taking care of mental patients and people that should be under full-time mental care. Our psychiatrists interacted with other onsite medical professionals and exercised their best discernment with the rest of our team about decisions to evacuate to a hospital, to evict from the festival, or to handle a particular case in-house. The explanations from the psychiatrists were beneficial to the rest of us, as we learned a great deal from their decisions and explanations.

Onward to Other Events

This "KosmiCare tribe" stays alive by staying in touch with all those interested in developing similar KosmiCare projects in other places. One of our volunteers, Shaï Gilad is gathering youth for positive action in Israel. First, with the growth and expansion of such project, the tribe will have to learn organizational and training tools like the one Boom is organized upon: Chaordic Organization (see the Birth of the Chaordic Age, Dee Hock, 1999). A network with a common intention fosters growth without becoming a classical hierarchical organization. Second, the expansion of this work will build a network of professionals in this field in Europe as to honor Hofmann's wish—to have the sacred ceremonial space for guided psychedelic use.

KosmiCare is creating a dataset for research by collecting visitor reports and documenting the debriefing exercises. We are in the process of designing improved formats for the next incarnation of KosmiCare. Thinking of a better training and clearer strategies defined for facilitators is an ongoing job. With KosmiCare under continuous development, our aim



Meeting introduction workshop



Svea Nielsen and Constance Bettencourt with Alex Soyouth at The Dome



Check-in at Erowid Energy Control



Erowid Energy Control



< Team meeting



The Kiva



Work in progress



Some members of The Team



Kosmicare shoreline

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is to maintain a child-like curiosity and respect for our often-overwhelming world. Our future knowledge will be based on the practical experience of each sitter and their therapeutic skills and generated from the experience of implementing more KosmiCare spaces at other festivals. The work that can be done in the future should be guided by learning from interventions in contemporary supervised psychedelic crisis.

According to volunteer Maria do Carmo, teacher and investigator of Psychology at Universidade Católica in Oporto: “KosmiCare gives us the opportunity to develop intervention close to those who directly need it and in the precise moment it is needed. These proximal scenarios, typical of harm reduction intervention, are clearly present and are our strengths to work with. In the future, we will seek to produce knowledge and research about

a number of fundamental issues, such as changing drug use patterns among youth populations and developing strategies for monitoring the youth who use drugs. We will progress with innovative intervention strategies that are better adjusted to the public—their needs and characteristics. We will continue to develop knowledge about the relations between mind and spirit, and the substances’ influence in this process.”

The KosmiCare project is producing a comprehensive account of all the psychedelic emergency services and harm reduction strategies we have implemented. We are in the process of cataloging the lessons learned so that we will have the chance of sharing our meaningful and well-thought program of psychedelic emergency services with other professionals.

KosmiCare can be found online at www.myspace.com/kosmicare.



A fantastic amount of creativity is expressed by participants at the Boom Festival.