

# Working with Trauma: Psychedelic Harm Reduction and Transpersonal Psychotherapy

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AS A TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST ENGAGED in the study of altered states, I became involved with The Zendo Project seeking to support others in shifting potentially traumatic situations into opportunities for healing, growth, and transformation. From a therapeutic standpoint, the safe environment created in the Zendo is not unlike the one created in the therapeutic alliance. Effective psychedelic harm reduction can mitigate the potential risks associated with substance use as well as support the healing process often catalyzed by the psychedelic experience.

Over the past year, I helped coordinate the Zendo Project in Black Rock City, Envision Festival in Costa Rica, and the Bicycle Day event in San Francisco. The festival setting is one of extremes where even without the use of a substance individuals are pushing the boundaries of their own consciousness. Like psychedelics, transformational festivals invite us to question everything we know about the universe and ourselves. This inherently disorienting environment provides a distinct container: one that at times can be supportive of healing experiences and at other times can be overwhelming.

Difficult psychedelic experiences have often been referred to as “bad trips.” The mindset evident in this term helps shed light on the outdated and often harmful methods by which these experiences are often addressed, including hospitalization and the involvement of law enforcement. This approach to handling someone having a difficult psychedelic experience is common at events and often worsens or escalates a situation. They are methods that attempt to end or interrupt the individual’s experience and can send a message to the individual that something is wrong with them or that they are not safe. The absence of a feeling of safety is a root cause of trauma and is not the ideal approach for someone who is already feeling overwhelmed or frightened.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

From the perspective of transpersonal psychotherapy, every difficult experience we have serves to further our learning and expansion. The internal and external support system of an individual determines how they relate to their experience and the extent to which they learn from it, integrate it, or become traumatized by it. Likewise, in the Zendo, we hold the view that a difficult experience does not necessarily mean a bad one. We provide support to the individual and empower them to shift their experience rather than end it. We accomplish this by providing positive regard, grounded presence, unconditional respect, deep listening, reassurance, and reflection. Uncomfortable emotions and physical sensations, fear, and disorientation are all common during a mind-altering psychedelic journey. People who ingest a psychedelic can expect to be pushed past their comfort zone, experience internal conflict, and learn and grow from these experiences. Altered states of consciousness reveal to us the extremes of suffering and bliss, pain, and ecstasy inherent in human existence.

A common experience of Zendo guests is that they are overwhelmed by their experience and not feeling the safety necessary to surrender to it. The conditions for this safety, or support system, are known as set and setting. Set refers to an individual's internal state and includes emotional state and mood, pre-existing mental conditions, stress, comfort, and developmental stage. Setting refers to individual's external conditions including where the person is, with whom they are with, dosage, and drug interactions. Set and setting are not mutually exclusive and affect and inform one another. When attention is given to set and setting, a safe container can be created, within which the individual can surrender to the experience, even when discomfort or fear arises.

In psychotherapy, the process of turning toward difficult emotions can create powerful opportunities to heal trauma. Pain is the gateway through which we access the parts of ourselves that need to be healed. The therapist can help the client use pain as a portal to healing by inviting the client to turn toward their experience within a safe environment provided by the therapist. During a controlled research study, this same process

is used together with the aid of a psychedelic drug. Therapists place significant importance on the creation of a safe and comfortable environment for the client, which allows the subject to feel deep emotions without being overwhelmed to the point of dissociation or hyper-arousal. Improving how we address

our emotions relating to our life experiences and trauma is at the core of psychotherapy, and is also crucial to helping someone process a difficult psychedelic experience.

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### CREATING A SAFE SPACE

Psychedelics can either help to heal trauma or cause it, depending on whether one feels safe enough to release resistance to the catalyzing effects of the substance. Without this sense of safety, the psychedelic may still illuminate the trauma but the individual will not be able to release their resistance to processing it. This resistance works against the natural healing process catalyzed by the psychedelic. It is important to note that it is this resistance to the experience, and not the experience itself, that causes someone to get stuck in a negatively focused difficult situation. What we resist persists: Resisting an experience creates fear and emotional discord as we attempt to hide from our pain.



Sara Girón and Zendo volunteer/unicorn Rion Beauregard outside of the volunteer yurt. Photo credit: Nicole Sylvestre



Sara Girón speaking to a group of Zendo volunteers.

If a safe container is not in place prior to ingesting a psychedelic, it is still possible to create it afterward. Effective harm reduction projects serve two main functions. The first is to reduce the potential harm caused by ingesting a psychedelic without a safe container; this means mitigating the potential trauma that can result from being overwhelmed by the psychedelic experience. The second is to provide an environment that supports the innate healing process present in each individual and catalyzed by the psychedelic experience.

## HEALING TRAUMA

We have all experienced trauma to varying degrees. Trauma can be defined as any event that overwhelms the central nervous system and can be experienced as physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. From a transpersonal perspective, traumatic experiences left unprocessed become “stuck” in the mind and body of an individual, often resulting in mental and physical illness. In this model, preventing and addressing trauma through harm reduction can have long-lasting beneficial effects on the health and happiness of the people receiving those services.

Psychedelics are catalysts with the potential to assist the innate healing process by helping the individual access and process trauma that has been repressed and relegated to their subconscious. By increasing awareness of energetic, emotional, and

mental processes, they can help disarm the defense mechanisms of our conscious mind. They can also help the individual see the larger context and meaning of their traumatic experiences, leading to understanding and integration.

When it comes to effectively preventing and working with trauma, psychotherapy and psychedelic harm reduction deeply inform one another. The Zendo volunteer team is comprised of many individuals with backgrounds and career aspirations in the mental health field, bringing together people with diverse experiences to apply their knowledge to helping people having difficult experiences. Psychedelic researchers, therapists, and students can benefit from the unique knowledge gained by the *in situ* experiences of The Zendo Project and similar harm reduction programs. I encourage all those interested in getting more involved in the Zendo Project to contact us at [zendo@maps.org](mailto:zendo@maps.org).

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A safe place to rest inside the Zendo at Burning Man 2013.



The Zendo provides a comfortable setting.