



Chelsea Rose

Just Being: My Experience of the Simple Efficacy of Psychedelic Harm Reduction

CHELSEA ROSE

AS A THERAPIST IN TRAINING, participating in the Zendo Project's psychedelic harm reduction has brought me incredible learning opportunities, connections for resource collaboration, and a purpose to serve others. By helping people through difficult psychedelic experiences at events and gatherings, I witnessed those who were struggling gain valuable insight. Additionally, this prevented unnecessary and potentially traumatic situations from escalating.

Participating in two Zendo Project harm reduction trainings provided me with the basic foundational understanding that we can create a container for someone going through a psychedelic crisis by attuning to our innate gifts and simply holding space. We needn't "do something" other than be a presence that allows another to discover more of who they are, in a safe, compassionate, and loving way. Through my experience at the Zendo, I have strengthened my therapeutic skills and my understanding of non-directive interventions that allow healing to take place in its own intrinsic way.

The topic of psychedelic harm reduction reaches beyond just those who want to offer their time in the Zendo, as many festival-goers find personal meaning in the material. When attending Zendo Project trainings at Burning Man 2013 and Envision 2014, I noticed that several people had trickled into the trainings who weren't Zendo volunteers. By the end of the training at Envision, a good-sized crowd had accumulated to hear the information presented, including an audience of people hanging out in the nearby rope-and-net jungle gym in the trees. When Zendo Project coordinator Linnae Ponté and co-coordinator Sara Girón finished their presentation, an enthusiastic response

echoed from the trees. It became clear to me that these trainings could benefit not only those working in harm reduction, but the culture at large.

Festival culture, in its myriad forms, extends far beyond the events themselves and has become an everyday lifestyle, where exploration and transformation are keys to happiness and well-being. Although not always, for some people this search for inner evolution includes the use of psychedelics to catalyze these growth processes. As a result, many people have experienced themselves, or a close friend, going through difficult and sometimes scary "trips," which happen fairly often due to the lack of supportive contexts or adequate education.

The training empowers volunteers and attendees to use their inherent gifts of presence and of being, without needing to "fix" a particular problem. Seeing someone going through pain, fear, and hardship can evoke in us the desire to do something to end their suffering. The training teaches that these challenges are part of the human experience, and that transformation can come from going through such experiences while being supported in a sensitive and considerate way. Actively being present involves techniques such as attunement, validation, mirroring, and breathing. It can

also be useful to provide gentle reassurance or reframing of the experience. These methods of support reflect what is already happening for the individual, while also reassuring them that their experience is acceptable and that we can allow it to unfold.

If someone you're with is having a difficult psychedelic experience and they want to jump around, jump around with them. If they are feeling sad, reflect that emotion on your own face. If they are scared, validate that what is happening could feel



zendoproject.org

really scary. It's basic. It's simple. And it has incredible effects. In doing this over the course of a troublesome experience, resistance decreases, acceptance finds its way in, and we can emerge with valuable insights.

In the Zendo, experiences come in many forms but everyone is welcome, free of judgment and blame. At Burning Man 2013, my fiancé Aleh and I worked as a team, sitting with a young man who wanted to hide his head beneath a blanket and hold our hands. At the time I didn't feel like I was doing much, but later on the guest told me that was exactly what he needed to feel connected to reality. Another

girl brought herself into the Zendo, sharing that she had taken a combination of substances including alcohol, LSD, and ketamine, and had lost her friends. She wasn't having a particularly difficult time, but wanted to be somewhere she felt safe until she became more sober. We listened to and acknowledged her perspective, and we spent several minutes curled over in laughter. The next day she came back to offer her appreciation and gratitude, enthusiastically exclaiming the Zendo was her favorite place on the playa.

At Envision 2014, a volunteer, Mason, and I sat with a man who had taken LSD and was feeling overwhelmed by the festival energy. He spent the whole day in the Zendo, feeling relieved to be in a place where he could rest and feel safe. That evening, Mason helped the guest move his tent next to the Zendo, because for him, it felt like the safest place at the event. At the end of the weekend, he gave me a giant hug, sharing his gratitude for the help we had offered and his hope to keep in touch with the project. It isn't uncommon for guests to become volunteers at later events.

We have an incredible team of volunteers from several walks of life, full of talent and creativity. Our Envision training started out with two of our playful volunteers, Johannah and Addie, hula-hooping to electronic music onstage. Their interactive way of dancing together was nothing short of magical and demonstrated the spirit that our volunteers bring to the Zendo Project. As a shift lead, I have had the opportunity to oversee volunteers while they spent time with guests. It was inspiring to watch all the unique ways that volunteers provided support. It was intellectually nourishing to share our ideas, thoughts, and natural brilliance with one another. At Envision, our shift leads included Lucas, an eight-year military war veteran who now owns a medical marijuana dispensary in Washington; Dominique, who has many years of experience working in harm reduction at Shambhala Festival in Canada; Danuta, a Polish woman whose diverse cultural exposure has inspired a passion



Zendo at Envision 2014

for understanding human nature; and Bette, an art therapist and ibogaine therapist living in Costa Rica, where she combines the ancient knowledge of the Mosoko Bwiti tradition with the Western model of ibogaine treatment. We also had the opportunity to triage with the medical staff, lead by Richard Gottlieb.

When we help one person at the Zendo, it makes being there worth every bit of effort. It is wonderful to discover how simple and rewarding this work can be. Every time a guest comes in feeling frazzled, overwhelmed, and disoriented, then leaves feeling peaceful and rejuvenated, I'm reminded how necessary harm reduction spaces are at transformational events and gatherings.

Linnae ended the training at Envision by sharing a quote from inspirational poet Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." By sitting with a guest and just being present and being ourselves, we allow them that same opportunity to be themselves. When we have space to be ourselves fully, we feel fabulously relieved, empowered, and satisfied. This is the growth and change we are inspired to support through the Zendo Project.

Download the Zendo Project Psychedelic Harm Reduction Training Manual and learn more at zendoproject.org.

Chelsea Rose, M.A. is a Marriage and Family Therapist Intern in Nevada City, California and event co-facilitator for the Zendo Project. She can be reached at chelsearoseblake@yahoo.com.

THE ZENDO PROJECT MISSION STATEMENT

It is our mission to:

- Provide a supportive space for individuals undergoing difficult psychedelic experiences or other psychological emergencies in order to help turn those experiences into opportunities for learning and personal growth, and to reduce the number of drug-related psychiatric hospitalizations.
- Create an environment where volunteers can work alongside one another to improve their harm reduction skills and receive training and feedback.
- Demonstrate that safe, productive psychedelic experiences are possible without the need for law enforcement-based policies.

zendoproject.org