

My Journey through PTSD: Healing with MDMA-Assisted Psychotherapy

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I CAME TO MAPS HUMBLED by the demands of life and finished the program humbled by its mysteries.

I am the youngest of 8 kids, raised Catholic and schooled by nuns. As you can imagine, we didn't have much money to go around. What's harder to imagine is that the 10 of us shared one bathroom, one phone and one television set. Our car had no garage, our washing machine, no dryer. In the winter, my mom hung our clothes up in the basement.

Our neighborhood was violent. Houses on the block were torched, the sounds of yelling and breaking glass cut through the night. Some of my friend's parents wouldn't let them visit. Twice, I was made to get out of a car and walk two blocks home, alone, because somebody's mom was scared to drive on my street. I ran home in the dark, backwards. Poverty sucks, violence sucks more. My siblings and I were close, like soldiers in a war. Humor made it bearable.

I thought my PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] symptoms stemmed from the violent threats I experienced as a kid. Now I know sexual abuse was the main culprit. That's the thing about sexual abuse; you try to hide it, even from yourself. Once the abuse began, it built its own speed and traction. I could not voice my objections to unwanted touch. The guilt and shame remained shadowed for decades. When I found my voice and told my story the shame resurfaced on several fronts. The healing was brutal. One step forward, two steps back. The psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy changed that dynamic. The MDMA allowed me to communicate the truth of my experience while remaining connected to my therapist. Before MDMA, I couldn't tell my story without being rocked for days

by the shame that surfaced in the telling.

My life began to improve when I left my home town after graduating from college; I made a good life for myself. I worked in commercial real estate for a while and even had my own leasing and property management business for several years. I was making money and it was fun, but it wasn't enough.

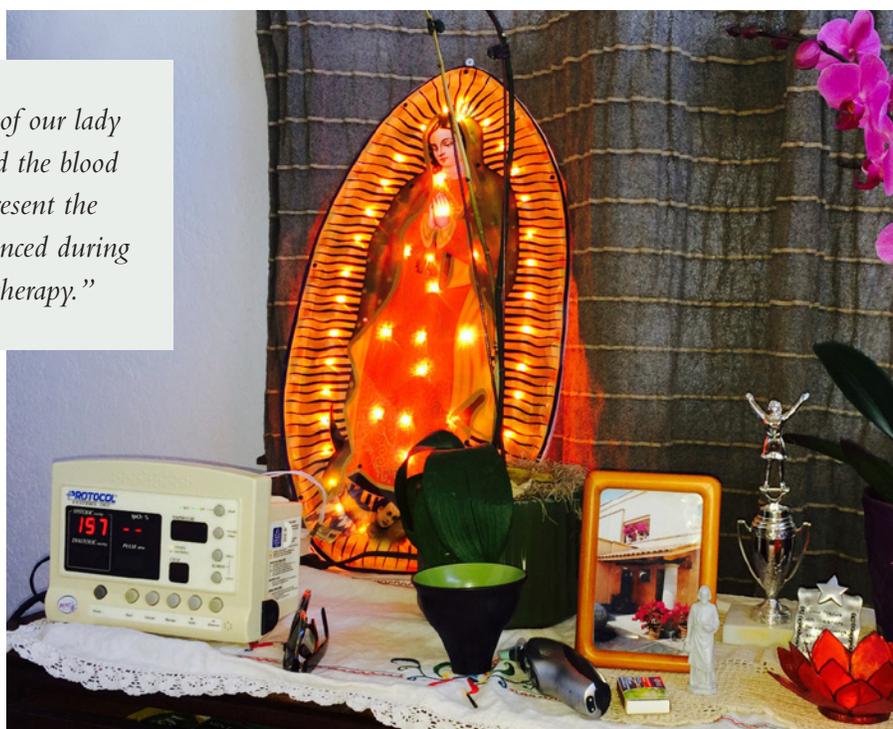
I wanted to be a therapist and so at the age of 35 I enrolled in a Jungian inspired program at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California. It was a golden time for me. I thrived on learning about the evolution of soul and the power of ritual. My graduate work gave shape to my musings. It grounded the thoughts and feelings that had been swirling around me without an anchor or a compass.

Following graduate school I met the man who is now my husband. I love him and our life which includes two cats, one dog, and a very old house. We take trips, share chores and delight in each other's company. I have a well-established private practice. Being a therapist fulfills the calling I felt since high school. Sometimes when I am on the couch or on the porch I will raise my head and my life will stop for a moment in time, like a snapshot; and in that moment I realize that I have exactly what I want. I am living the life I was meant to live.

But something was separating me from the bounty of my life; worthiness. The shame of my youth barred me from appreciating the abundance of my current life. I didn't know how to love myself but I had enough self-esteem to keep trying.

I heard about MAPS and the use of MDMA for the treatment of PTSD while having coffee with some therapist friends. I knew and trusted Marcela, the woman associated with the

“I brought in the lighted image of our lady of Guadalupe. MAPS provided the blood pressure cuff. Together they represent the multiple layers of care I experienced during my psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.”



study. I phoned, texted, and emailed her to ask to be put on the list and then I phoned again months later just to be sure that she knew I was serious. I wanted in. At the age of 55, I had been in therapy on and off for twenty years, on antidepressants for 15. When anxiety felt unmanageable I took xanax.

Medication was not my first choice to manage my symptoms of PTSD. I consulted with practitioners in Acupuncture, Reiki, Chiropractic, Cranial Sacral, EMDR, Brainspotting and more. I went on retreats, took pilates and yoga classes, learned to knit, quilt, make baskets, throw pottery, create vision boards, attended women's groups and learned to meditate from a Swami. I placed encouraging Post-it notes on my bathroom mirror, "I love and accept myself fully in this moment." I recycled, re-purposed and re-used. I volunteered time, donated money, and typically said please and thank you at the appropriate times. I had worked diligently to attain mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being and it still eluded me. I needed help; I couldn't do this by myself. The traditional methods were helping but not healing.

I decided to prepare for this journey with MAPS and prayed that I would be accepted. I already had a yoga practice and was adept with deep breathing. I decided to learn to meditate. It was tough at first but I persevered. My daily alone time began as a discipline and has become a respite.

Eighteen months following my request to be in the program, I received a message from the woman who coordinated the MAPS study and the physical, mental, and cognitive testing

began. I was accepted into the program and my anxiety spiked. These people wanted me to give up antidepressants. I really did not want to relinquish my medication but it was a requirement for the study so I called my acupuncturists and asked for help in stabilizing my mood and anxiety.

In January I met with my MAPS therapists. I walked into a room with two people who looked very young to me. I remember wondering if their combined ages would equal mine. I questioned if they had the life experience to support my process. They proved to be up to the task. After several weeks of 90 minute therapy sessions my first MDMA-assisted therapeutic journey was scheduled for a Friday.

I entered the room and it felt like a cathedral. The room was filled with natural light; there were fresh flowers and music.

My therapists were all smiles. Will, the program's psychiatrist, looked at me with the eyes of an inner sanctum. Marcela hugged me and told me she was "so excited for me," she "knew I would do great." It seemed strange that they were gathering just for me. Didn't they have better things to do? They checked

my urine and my attitude and determined I was good to go. I sat on the quilt covered couch to wait while Will placed the MDMA in a lovely ceramic bowl with golden symbols painted on the side. He asked if I had an intention for my journey. I told him "I want to learn to love myself." Then I lay on the couch, put on the eye shades and surrendered.

Early into my first session I saw myself standing tall near-

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“I was delighted to find this clock and image of Ganesha, a Hindu deity known as a remover of obstacles, at the hospice thrift store days prior to my final MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session. I brought them both to my last session on Easter Sunday 2014. The clock depicts various angels playing musical instruments, some ascending a staircase to a castle and others alternately rotating in rhythmic time. Their presence seemed serendipitous and lifted my spirits.”

ing a rock ledge that shadowed a cave. Then I saw the young me, scurrying into the shadow with the eyes and movement of Gollum. I couldn’t stand the light, couldn’t stand being seen, I was overcome by shame. The tall me stretched a Gumby like arm into the cave and extended the other arm towards the sun. “You can go as deep and dark as you want,” the tall me said to my little self, “I’m not going anywhere.” There I stood, patient, loving, stable; a force without an agenda or a judgment, a force that wouldn’t abandon me.

This theme, the interplay between my traumatized self, my resourced self, and a mystical presence repeated itself each time I took MDMA. Multiple times during my first and second sessions I would remove my eye shades to look at a large image of Our Lady of Guadalupe complete with flashing lights that I had propped against the wall. Her presence was crucial to my stability during the majority of the four months I was in treatment.

As a little girl I would kneel at the family altar and ask Jesus and Mary why they didn’t love me. I knew I had a good heart, why were my family and I being punished? Why was life so dif-

ficult for us? During repeated trips to Mexico as an adult, the Mexican people re-awakened my need for the divine feminine. By the time my MAPS program began I had come to rely on Our Lady of Guadalupe for spiritual direction and inspiration. The mystical connection I experienced on MDMA-assisted therapy was an answer to the prayers initiated 50 years ago at the family altar.

In each of my three sessions I experienced the embodiment of a great cat. In my second session I was pacing in a cage;

back-and-forth maniacally looking at the people looking at me, back-and-forth hoping to ease the pressure in my chest. I was thirsty but I wasn’t going to take my eyes off the people standing outside the cage, staring at my helplessness. Then the cage wall exploded open and I was running in tall grasses, I could feel the sun on my neck and the

soft ground under my feet. As I burst through the cage wall I increased in size and strength and I acquired a mane. “Run,” the caged lion said, “Run for me.” I knew my freedom made her captivity more bearable. So I ran for both of us, grateful for her encouragement and my freedom.

“You can go as deep and dark as you want,” the tall me said to my little self, “I’m not going anywhere.”



“During the months of treatment provided by MAPS, I became fascinated by the image of the spiral. I found this spiral candelabra on eBay and used it to create several art projects. This final rendition, brought to my last MDMA session, is of a child being tended to by a loving adult.”

Session number three was on April 20, 2014; which coincided with Easter Sunday, Hitler’s birthday and 4/20, the national day for celebrating cannabis. Christ, Hitler, cannabis? I was amused and intimidated by the strange gathering of events. I feared that the psychedelics would overpower me this time. They did not. This session began with a birthing session and ended with a calling forth of the energies that had harmed me. This session roared forth my voice with a resonating NO. I was not overwhelmed, I was empowered and the boundary born of that NO remains in my body and mind. I found my voice and it is loud.

In session number three I met two holy people, Frank and Marie, who adopted me as their own. They showed me around the farm and told me about seasons and storms. They assured me that, as a family we would ride the wave of feast and famine together. They brought me to an egg shaped cave with a crack in the ceiling that let in the light. There were jewels and other objects around the shadowy edge of the cave. In the center a fiery cauldron glowed; its edges shaped like golden crystals. We spent a lot of time there, enjoying stillness. This place of abundance and shad-

ows offered respite and protection.

Since finishing the MAPS program in May of 2014, life is not necessarily easier but it is more meaningful. The kindness of my therapists was awkward for me at first. They took my temperature and blood pressure regularly, and made sure I remained hydrated. They empathized with my despair, celebrated my joy, and stood witness to my process. Most of all, they honored my need to navigate the forest of recovery on my own terms; relying on my instincts and way of moving through the world.

The quality of our relationship was as important as the MDMA. Ultimately, I did not need to take this solitary trek alone as my therapists remained staunch supporters through the entire process.

The gift of such a journey should not be taken lightly. This is club with a very steep entry fee. During the 4 or 5 months of the program I was flooded

with memories and fears. My husband was often the recipient of my anger and mistrust. One night I woke him up, I couldn’t settle. He asked what I wanted; we walked the dog, went to breakfast at a late night diner and just drove, listening to late night radio until I felt ready for sleep. His steadfast presence

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“I bought this figure of St. Francis years ago in Mexico, and acquired the woman at the local hospice thrift store. They became my parental figures during a MDMA session and remain very dear to me. I access the memories of the time spent with them when I pray or want to calm myself.”

in the face of my rage mocked the old voice that doubted my value. This is a love that humbles.

If you are considering entering into psychedelic-assisted therapy give yourself time to prepare. The medicine is only part of the process. An inventory of your personal history, strengths, and challenges will deepen your experience. Consider the needs of your mind, body, and soul. Establish rituals to help you sleep. Consider guided meditation as a way to learn to follow your inner voice. Do artwork before, during, and after. Bring items of value to the therapy sessions, bring it all, and let your therapist get to know you. Keep a journal the whole time, give voice to your heart; you’ll be glad you did. Most of all remember that this talented team is rallying around you because of your innate value.

I appreciate the tremendous amount of resources summoned by MAPS and donors for the treatment of mental illness. My psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy was a bridge to a new way of perceiving my world and myself. I feel connected to my heart in a way I couldn’t have imagined prior to my treatment. I utilize my ability to tap into sensations I experienced on

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MDMA to settle my nerves, seek guidance, and communicate gratitude for the abundance of my life.

As a licensed psychotherapist and an individual who has struggled with clinical depression and PTSD I support and encourage the study of psychedelics for the treatment of mental health. Kahlil Gibran is credited with saying, “Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling with the mistaken belief that you cannot bear the pain. But you have already borne the pain. What you have not done is feel all you are beyond that pain.” Hopefully, in this millennium, veterans and survivors of abuse and trauma will have the option to choose psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy to support their process of healing and personal discovery. 🌱

Elizabeth Matthews is a licensed professional counselor with offices in Boulder and Louisville, Colorado. She enjoys yoga, reading, hot springs, and living in Colorado with her husband, dog, and two cats. She can be reached at elizabeth@elizamatt.com.