

The Walls Come Tumbling Down: My First MDMA-Assisted Psychotherapy Session

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I WENT FOR MY FIRST MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session on November 30, 2015, the Monday after Thanksgiving. Was it really a coincidence that the colonoscopy which found a malignant tumor in my colon some years earlier had also taken place on the Monday after Thanksgiving? I think not. Full circle, indeed.

I arrived at the site in Marin County, Calif., where the session was to take place, at 9:30 in the morning. One of the study requirements is that you do the sessions while fasting. Someone also has to bring you to the site and pick you up. My adult son dropped me off and took a couple of minutes to meet Dr. Phil Wolfson and Julane Andries (the study co-therapists) and see their place. I think he was suitably impressed by the location, and comfortable with the idea of his father tripping in that environment, under the care of those people. He seemed supportive, if perhaps a bit mystified at the thought of his dad taking part in a drug trial for MDMA. I made it clear to him that this was not a rave.

After passing a urine test (good thing I studied for it) I was placed on a couch under a shaggy blanket that looked like it had been stolen from the set of an Austin Powers movie. I don't remember the exact order of operations, but over the next 15 or 20 minutes I picked a card from an animal deck (the first one I picked was blank, and the second was a goose), Phil shook a rattle and called in the spirits for their assistance, somebody played bells and/or a gong, they asked me if I had an intention for the session (I hadn't yet thought about it), and I took a pill, which was either MDMA or placebo. I felt hyperaware, with all of my cynical controls set to full power. As New York-bred Phil called in the spirits from the compass points, I imagined he was bringing them in from the Bronx to the north, Brooklyn to the east, Staten Island to the south, and Hoboken to the west. I was trying to keep my expectations to a minimum—in fact, I really had no specific expectations—and while part of me was curious or excited about what was about to unfold, part of me was thinking, “Have I totally lost my mind? What on earth am I doing here?”

I wouldn't say that I went in knowingly anxious and defensive, but I'd never done the drug before and didn't know what the physical, emotional, or psychological effects might be. Also, I had a rather negative experience the last time I took a psychedelic drug—about 40 years previously—and I'm pretty wary of all kinds of mind-altering substances. I tend to like my mind just the way it is, and I was reluctant to hand over the keys to another driver. As a result, all of my warning systems were on red alert.

I lay under the blanket and we talked. I don't remember what we talked about, but after a little while they asked if I felt anything. At that point all I felt was hungry. I remember thinking, “What am I going to do here all day if this turns out to be placebo?” More time went by—I suspect 30 or 40 minutes—but I still did not feel the drug taking effect, and enough time had passed that it seemed as if it should have.

Apparently every defense mechanism in my being—walls, trenches, moats, barbed wire fences, magnetic force fields, radar installations, anti-aircraft batteries, as well as psychic barriers—was doing its best to fend off, or at least be the first to spot, the drug's first incursion into my perceptual sphere. The reconnaissance planes and drones circled overhead to keep a lookout. The drawbridge was up, the entrance gates were locked, the bomb shelter was stocked with supplies, and the royal family (me, myself, and I) had withdrawn to the inner sanctum.

Still, the drug found its way inside. I have no specific memory of it happening, no “Ah ha!” moment or sudden recognition that I was “under the influence.” Instead, I just kind of slipped out of the normal space/time continuum and landed in some other perceptual zone. I wasn’t asleep, but I wasn’t exactly awake either. I recall a sort of buzzing energy force around me, a feeling like being underwater and carried along by a stream without needing to hold my breath. The feeling was not unpleasant or scary, nor was it euphoric. It just was. I never felt at risk or insecure in any way. The anxiety and trepidations were gone, and I felt fully conscious. I did not try to resist it or fight it, which I’m convinced would have been futile.

I remember opening my eyes once or twice, and seeing Phil or Julane. I vaguely recall one of them walking out of the room for a bit, and I remember seeing Phil reading a book, but it was in a kind of stop-action, like the room was lit by a strobe light (it wasn’t). I observed them speaking quietly to each other, and I assumed they were talking about me. Maybe they were laughing about how far gone I was, or congratulating themselves on knocking the psychic stuffing out of this unsuspecting middle-aged lawyer.

I was conscious of their presence, and relieved that someone was keeping an eye on me. At one point Phil asked if I could talk, and at first I said no, but sometime later I decided that I needed to try to communicate something, to send up a flare to signify that I was still functioning, if not yet quite functional. With great effort I formulated in my mind the one sentence that I thought best captured my present state. I gathered my strength, made sure that I had enough breath to speak, and proclaimed as precisely as possible, “You have managed to render me inarticulate.” That was all I could manage.

Then I fell back into the stream. It was like a fish jumping out of the water for an instant to see where its next evolutionary step was going to take it, and then returning to its natural habitat. I could have just as easily been crowd-surfing at a rock concert, passed along by the unseen hands of hundreds of strangers, or beamed up to the Starship Enterprise.

At one point Julane put headphones on me, and I remember some kind of New Age music playing. I don’t know if the music was there to guide me, or just to keep me marginally connected to reality. I would have been happy to listen to Ba-

linese gamelan, or Beethoven string quartets, or John Coltrane ballads, but that’s not what this was. There are some kinds of gentle, calming background music that I can appreciate and sink into, like Japanese shakuhachi or Tibetan bells, maybe even Gregorian chants, but I find some allegedly spiritual or healing

music insipid, and it actually gets on my nerves. I have often said that hearing is my strongest and most evolved sense, which is no surprise given that my ears grew to their full adult size by the time I was about eight years old.

Involuntarily, I whipped the headphones off and tossed them

away. It was pure reflex. I wasn’t violent about it, and I had no evil intent, but whatever was coming through them had become an irritant rather than an aid. I think Phil and Julane were surprised to see the headphones flying through the air. Luckily they (the headphones, as well as Phil and Julane) were unharmed, but in subsequent sessions they did not try to put headphones on me again.

Eventually I must have started to show signs of life, prompting Phil to ask me how long I thought I’d been laying there. I guessed an hour and a half; he told me it had been more like three and half hours. I gradually floated back to the surface, and regained some semblance of normal consciousness and communication skills. At the moment I cannot even recall what we talked about in the ensuing hours. I have far greater recollection of the substance of my second and third MDMA sessions; I think the first session served mainly to begin to break down my many barriers and soften me up for the subsequent sessions.

The physiological effects of the drug (based on when my blood pressure returned to base line) lasted about six hours. Around three hours in I was given a “booster” of half the initial dose to maintain the peak. The therapy was “non-directive,” meaning that although the therapists nudged me occasionally to explore certain things, mostly they helped me explore wherever I wanted to go. I remember feelings and sensations more than the substance of our conversation. The drug does have a stimulant effect, so I was hyperaware throughout the session, and completely exhausted when the drug wore off. The only physical after-effect was that my jaw was sore from clenching my teeth.

For several days after my first session, I felt like my gyroscope had been knocked off balance, my magnetic poles

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reversed, as if the earth had slipped off its axis. I've tried out a series of metaphors in an effort to explain it: a tsunami rolling over me, a wind blowing through my head, a fire scorching my brain, an explosion knocking down the walls and blowing open the doors and windows, a volcano erupting and flattening the immediate countryside. Whatever happened was powerful, and I felt as if I suddenly had access to parts of myself that I had never encountered before.

It's not as if I'd never looked inside myself before—I can actually be pretty introspective. But this was different. I couldn't just see inside myself, I could go inside myself. I felt like I knew the passwords for all of my mental programs, and had a master key to unlock all the doors that blocked the entry to my inner self. I could wave my hand like Obi-wan Kenobi and waltz past the guards into the secret chambers of my head and heart. I was the NSA of my own mind. I could rewind all the old tapes and play back everything I'd ever said, and see everyone I'd ever known, everywhere I'd ever been, and everything I'd ever done. More amazingly, I could see it all without harshly judging any of it. I was a deeply involved, but fundamentally dispassionate, observer. I was like a UN peacekeeping force patrolling the formerly contested borders of my brain.

In addition to this sense of unprecedented access to “me,” I have to say there was also some collateral impact. It felt like large parts of my infrastructure and many of my operating systems had been affected, like my brain was undergoing renovation and I was waiting for the construction crew to install the new one. Yet while it took time to rebuild the infrastructure of my everyday functioning self, it also gave me an opportunity to upgrade some aging systems. You can't really get to the sewer lines unless you tear up the roads, I thought, so as long as everything is in shambles, let's see what we can improve.

I felt a bit physically and mentally unstable for a few days, a little spaced-out or forgetful. I had trouble finding the right words, and routinely failed little memory tests I gave myself (names of musicians, actors, restaurants, that sort of thing). I was very cautious driving, and even walking around or cooking. I was frankly a little worried that I had been permanently knocked off-kilter. Maybe the dose was more than I could handle, I thought, or maybe I was rendered emotionally fragile because the drug had shattered the cage in which I had been living and (I feared) left me permanently unfit for humankind. I am happy to report that those side effects dissipated gradually after the first session, and more quickly after the two subsequent sessions. I am now restored to full operating power, and just as irreverent as I was going in to the treatments.

I also felt as if I had taken a truth serum, and lost the power to be anything other than constantly (perhaps even brutally) honest and forthcoming. For the first few days after the session, I felt like every time I opened my mouth my deepest thoughts or feelings would come pouring out, regardless of whether they were appropriate for the occasion. I don't think I deeply offended anyone, or overwhelmed them with my forthrightness, but I don't really know. Even in an unenhanced state I can come on a

little strong sometimes, but I can usually adjust the intensity of my emotional output and intellectual inquisitiveness. Now the fire hydrant was stuck open, and I didn't have a wrench to close it. I was a babbling brook that couldn't stop babbling.

I do believe there's a risk there. I'm not sure you can actually go through life in the modern world as a non-stop, unvarnished truth teller. Can one be too open? Is it possible to be too vulnerable? How does one see and feel deeply, and be open and honest in their dealings with the world, without being taken advantage of? What is the difference between being open and vulnerable, and being over-sensitive and weak? Can a person survive in a hierarchical, structured workplace with no emotional filter? Or in my case, can one actually function as a litigator—my profession for the last 30 years—in this condition? To put it mildly, the adversarial process does not generally reward emotional openness and unvarnished honesty. Will all of us who have gone through this intensive therapy have to be sent somewhere where we will be protected from the evils of an insensitive world?

Maybe these are just the musings of an excessively self-reflective person coming out of intensive MDMA-assisted psychotherapy with too much time on his hands. Or maybe this is something that should be kept in mind for future uses of the drug. I am curious to learn more about how others have come out of this experience and reintegrated into their day-to-day worlds. I am probably not the best subject for this part of the experiment as I no longer have small children, nor work full-time, nor regularly encounter many of the stresses that might dampen the openhearted MDMA glow. I'm personally thrilled that I'm now experiencing my world in a deeper and richer way, and I hope to continue to feel that way. I just wonder how to maintain, and to carry forward that feeling into a world filled with contradictions, challenges, and dangers. Time will tell.... 🌀

***Andy Gold** is a lawyer in Oakland, California. In December 2004 he was diagnosed with Stage 3 colon cancer. After surgery and 6 months of chemotherapy he was told (mistakenly, as it turned out) that the cancer had apparently metastasized and that he would need additional surgery and experimental treatments. While coping with a potentially fatal illness, he was also handling the biggest case of his career, including managing a team of 25 lawyers and paralegals, all without telling his staff, his client, opposing counsel or the court that he was being treated for cancer. As a result, he was unable to contemporaneously process the psychological impact of the cancer. Years later, still struggling to deal with the long unaddressed multiple traumas of the cancer, the misdiagnosed metastases and the stress of hiding the illness while pushing himself to (and beyond) his physical, mental, and emotional limits, he sought help. At the recommendation (and urging) of a psychiatrist, he ended up as a subject in a MAPS sponsored study of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for people suffering anxiety from life threatening illnesses. This is the story of his first MDMA session. He can be reached at agold@sonic.net.*