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Upholding Consent in Psychedelic Spaces

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WOMEN IN COMMUNITIES THAT USE psychedelics have been talking about sexual assault and sexual harassment long before #MeToo. In these conversations, it's not uncommon for women to recall incidents of unwanted and inappropriate sexual contact—and express frustration that these violations are often never addressed. While the initial focus of #MeToo encouraged victims to tell their stories about abuses in the workplace, these discussions have expanded to include sexual violence and coercion in therapeutic and social settings. Under these circumstances, there is the same need to stand in solidarity with people of all genders who have been harmed, and to educate everyone that they have a right to say no to sexual advances. While legal and corporate protocols in some workplaces offer ways for victims to come forward and file a complaint, this is more difficult in non-professional environments. This challenge has sparked much discussion about how to intervene when witnessing abusive behavior and take a stand against sexual violence.

Almost two years after the emergence of #MeToo, communities of all types are looking for ways to address consent violations and end impunity for perpetrators. In settings where psychedelics are used, the need for restorative justice is especially pressing as victims may be less likely to trust the criminal justice system. Within communities that I am part of, thoughtful people have put forward some useful ideas about upholding a culture of consent when participants may be exploring altered states of consciousness.

SAFETY WHILE HEALING WITH PSYCHEDELICS

In 2007, some friends and I organized an annual gathering where women who worked with non-ordinary states of consciousness could present their work. The Women's Visionary Congress (visionarycongress.org) and its nonprofit sponsor the Women's Visionary Council (WVC), were created to overcome the historical exclusion of women in public conversations about psychedelics. The event features women activists, healers, researchers, and artists, and hosts frank conversations about safety and ethics.

Shortly after we launched the Women's Visionary Congress, women began sharing stories about sexual assault and harassment in ceremonies that used psychoactive substances,

especially ayahuasca. These ceremonies offer opportunities for deep healing and self-knowledge when led by facilitators who maintain impeccable ethics, but some participants have the mistaken impression that people who lead psychedelic ceremonies can always be trusted and that ritual spaces are inherently safe. Sexual violence carried out by people who present themselves as spiritual leaders is an old problem that impacts people of all genders. But these accounts of sexual coercion during and after these rituals were so troubling that in 2014, the WVC published a series of Safety Tips for people participating in psychedelic ceremonies (visionarycongress.org/safety-tips-for-participating-in-psychedelic-ceremonies).

Drafted by a group of WVC elders, these Safety Tips have been widely shared and have inspired other organizations to produce their own versions. These recommendations include conducting due diligence before the ceremony and checking out the reputation of the *ayahuasquero*, shaman, or healer with whom one is considering working. Participants are advised to attend ceremonies with friends, develop a safety plan, and carefully evaluate how they are touched during the ritual to determine if this contact feels sexual or non-consensual. Extra caution is recommended when offered individual healing sessions, especially if the participant is asked to remove clothing.

The Safety Tips also note that entering into consensual sexual relationships with ceremonial leaders, while possibly making the participant feel special, can expose them to an imbalance of power that has the potential to be coercive and abusive. They include a reminder that the professional ethical standard for therapists in the U.S. is a complete ban on intimate relationships with former clients for at least two years after the conclusion of their therapeutic work together. Finally, participants in psychedelic ceremonies are encouraged to determine prior to the ritual what forms of accountability exist for the shaman or healer. If that person harms or disrespects you in some way, how will they be held accountable? Will the ceremony take place in a country where it may be difficult for women to file a sexual assault complaint within the local justice system? Is the healer part of a larger community of practitioners that hold them to a standard of care? Should participants consider taking part in ceremonies within their own local legal jurisdictions where they can file sexual assault charges against facilitators who violate them?

These same questions are also worth asking when working with therapists and counselors who offer psychedelic-assisted therapies. The rapidly growing number of people now being trained as psychedelic therapists creates an even greater need for professional associations that hold these practitioners accountable to a code of professional ethics and a standard of care. The psychedelic community should watch carefully to ensure that such developing regulatory bodies are not compromised by conflicts of interest, and that they oversee both licensed and unlicensed therapists. Licensing and professional organizations should be independent of commercial drug developers such as COMPASS Pathways, educational institutions, and nonprofits such as the Usona Institute and MAPS. As MAPS will hold a five to six year exclusive right to market the therapeutic use of MDMA and will train many therapists, it will hold a temporary monopoly on these services. As with large pharmaceutical companies or monopoly players in any market, consumers should insist on independent oversight and not self-regulation of these groups which could lead to concealment of abuses.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATORS OF SOCIAL EVENTS

Commercial markets for psychedelic services can include different forms of accountability, but what about social communities where people participating in immersive experiences may also use psychedelics? People who organize social gatherings from private parties to large festivals also have an ethical duty to help safeguard participants from consent violations and take action when people are harmed. The process of creating safety systems encourages both event producers and the communities they serve to reflect on their collective values and how to uphold them. If volunteers are involved in providing health and safety services at events, determining how to best support these people is also an important consideration.

In 2013, I co-founded an event production company called Take 3 Presents, which seeks to catalyze personal and societal evolution through private, immersive art and music events. When we first began producing these gatherings, we made a decision to create groups of volunteers from our own community to uphold a culture of consent. The first group of safety volunteers we created were a team of rangers who roam the event site in pairs around the clock. Trained in conflict resolution, the rangers provide support for participants who need assistance or wish to report a safety issue. The rangers intervene in situations when a consent violation takes place. They work directly with a group of onsite medics and a rapid response team made up of professional counselors. If someone is violated during a Take 3 event, the rangers take action to secure the safety of the victim and document their account of the incident. This information is kept confidential as is the identity of the victim if they request. Ranger leadership also locates the person accused of the violation and collects information from them. In some cases, perpetrators have been escorted out of the event to secure the safety of other participants.

Participants who need focused care during a Take 3 event

can also visit the onsite quiet space (much like the Zendo Project) which is staffed by specially trained rangers. If they wish to leave the event, the rangers help ensure that they get safely home. After the event, a separate aftercare team of volunteers with counseling and mediation training examines the incident. Using a series of set protocols, they determine if the person who instigated the consent violation represents a threat to community safety. Being in an altered state of consciousness is not an excuse for sexual assault or harassment. The aftercare team conducts follow-up meetings with all parties. They also provide referrals to the victim for professional counseling and advise Take 3 leadership as to whether the person who committed the consent violation should be invited back to the event. If the person who violated consent is invited back, certain conditions for counseling, education, and mediation—if requested by the victim—are set as a condition of return. The people responsible for managing the cases of these returning participants are ideally not the same people making the decision about their inclusion or exclusion. Attempting to do both risks burning out this team—which also considers safety concerns from participants between events. They are a precious community resource and should be treated as such.

Take 3 also takes other actions to discourage consent violations. In particular, it does not sell alcohol or allow any participant to run a bar. Events instead feature a tea house which serves as a social center for rest and hydration. Participants can bring alcohol for personal consumption, but the elimination of served alcohol reduces conflict and injuries of all types. The invitation structure of Take 3 events also requires that participants be invited by a sponsor who are then responsible for them during the gathering. Finally, all artists who create immersive art during Take 3 parties are expected to uphold the culture of consent and treat participants with respect.

CREATING SYSTEMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND RISK REDUCTION

Risk reduction (visionarycongress.org/manual-of-best-practices-for-risk-reduction) is arguably an art form in itself. Communities should develop their own protocols for upholding a culture of consent that reflects their values. They should also share information with each other to develop collective knowledge and best practices (visionarycongress.org/risk-reduction-for-community-and-event-organizers) that can evolve over time. No system will be perfect, but each effort advances the basic human rights of all people to be treated with dignity and respect. 🌱

Annie Oak is the founder of the Women's Visionary Congress (visionarycongress.org) and co-founder of the nonprofit Women's Visionary Council. Annie is also the co-founder of Take 3 Presents (take3presents.com) which produces private, immersive art and music events. She is especially interested in risk reduction and collaborative community art, such as the the Full Circle Tea House which she created in 2009. A former science reporter, Annie now works as a researcher for a human rights organization.