

The Growth of Psychedelic Harm Reduction

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I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM coordinating and providing psychedelic peer support and harm reduction services at a music festival located in the southwest of the United States. At this event, I was hired by a medical team that understands the importance of creating a supportive environment for someone undergoing a psychedelic emergency. Our goal, of course, was to reduce the possibility of psychological trauma and encourage a psychologically healing experience. To do this, our team of trained psychedelic peer support volunteers staffed our quaint and calm sanctuary space, ready to support festival attendees who unexpectedly find themselves in intense states of consciousness.

As momentum grows towards legalization in the field of psychedelic research and therapy, it is important to state that psychedelic usage and culture has been alive and thriving outside of clinical settings since the 60s. Large-scale art gatherings, music festivals, and concerts have historically been settings where people come together to collectively experience something outside of the framework of their ordinary state of consciousness, whether they choose to ingest a substance or not. 10 years ago, psychedelic harm reduction was not a common term, let alone approaching an event to offer such services. What has changed in the past decade or so is a normalization of psychedelic difficulties, an acceptance around the wide spectrum of experiences psychedelics can offer, and a statement of compassion from those within the psychedelic community saying “we can help people through it.” We are also seeing that as awareness of these substances becomes more accepted by the mainstream, event producers and event emergency teams are recognizing the importance and value of incorporating psychedelic harm reduction and peer support services.

At this time, psychedelic harm reduction is a rapidly grow-

ing field and there is honestly no limit to being a part of this movement. It’s catching on quickly and the demand is way higher than the supply. Worldwide, there are too many events to name that would benefit from these services and as of now do not provide them. Some of the obstacles towards spreading these services have to do with either the perspectives of event producers themselves, legal considerations, and/or limited resources for harm reduction providers. Little by little, these obstacles are slowly dissolving, thanks to the efforts and encouragements from various harm reduction organizations, pro-harm-reduction event medical and security teams, and festival producers who understand and support the work. The more support and attention psychedelic harm reduction gains, and

the more society recognizes the need for a more compassionate and caring approach to assisting those in distress, the easier it will be to expand into events that are new to these services. The end goal is that psychedelic harm reduction services become standard in forming a complete event safety team where one might expect attendees to ingest these substances.

While psychedelic peer support services and harm reduction operate primarily from volunteers within the communities they are serving, it is not separate from

the budding psychedelic industry. In some sense, we can say that before people seek professional help for challenges that may arise in connection to psychedelic use, they may be more likely to reach out to their peers, friends, family, or community. With new professions such as integration coaches and psychedelic therapists, peer support and harm reduction services can act as a gateway into deeper professional care, should the need arise.

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the status quo. As in the field of social services, people don't do this for money, but out of genuine care. Because of this, models for these services are based on volunteerism and community service. Most psychedelic harm reduction organizations are non-profits and rely on donations, fundraisers, and compensation from the events themselves to at least break even. There are those of us who have devoted our lives to this form of service, and it is generally not considered a clear path to financial livelihood at this time.

Volunteer culture is actually a core component to psychedelic peer support. If we are going to discuss the commercialization of psychedelics in relation to psychedelic harm reduction services, there are a couple important sides to mention here. On one hand, volunteer culture is paramount to creating a sustainable, well-staffed, and effective peer support service at an event. The primary motivation for peer support needs to come from a desire to be of service for it to be most effective. Also, it would be unrealistic to expect to have the funding to pay a full staff of peer support workers, given that it is already difficult to generate money just to set up the services and pay the those who manage the team of volunteers. Harm reduction volunteerism is a great way for people from many different backgrounds to spend time helping others in a meaningful way. It also serves as helpful adjunct experience for those looking to pursue other avenues of work in the psychedelic field, such as research and therapy. On the other hand is the year-round or more regular psychedelic harm reduction worker, devoted to the service and traveling to as many events as possible to offer that compassionate presence to those having psycho-spiritual breakdowns in the midst of a festival. As it exists today, there is little financial security or stability in this work for those who wish to focus their lives in being a professional psychedelic peer support worker. The only avenue I have seen in generating any kind of income is in being in team coordination positions or running one's own psychedelic harm reduction organization. Even for those in these leadership positions, which require long hours, challenging work, and require a unique and diverse skillset, harm reduction isn't typically a path to financial stability. In this way, it is akin to some other forms of public health and service, such as being a paramedic, EMT, or teacher. Similar to the public service sector, and one factor that makes psychedelic harm reduction unique amongst other emerging professional opportunities in the psychedelic field, is that those who receive care obviously do so free of charge.

Perhaps psychedelic harm reduction will become a more lucrative professional path as the world and culture continue to evolve with more understanding of these powerful tools of consciousness. Perhaps it is actually necessary or preferred to keep psychedelic peer support and harm reduction in the field

of non-profits, community service, and volunteerism. Whatever the business structure may be, perhaps the peer support model can evolve to find new ways to support a culture of volunteers and paid higher-level peer support specialists, recognizing the value and honoring the time, energy, and skills required for this important work. In summing up, the needs for psychedelic peer support and harm reduction services have existed well before the current wave of mainstream psychedelic awareness. As the psychedelic movement provides more acceptance and understanding of these important psychoactive substances, it is allowing psychedelic harm reduction efforts to grow as well. Event producers and medical teams are catching on to the importance of these services. The hope is that we are able to

create financially supportive models to those pouring their love and devotion into this form of community care. To all the volunteers, organizers, and supporters of psychedelic care teams, thank you so deeply.



MAPS Zendo Project: Providing Safety & Support for Festivals and Events

MAPS has been providing peer support services at festivals and events since the early 2000's. The Zendo Project has been a presence at domestic and international festivals and events since 2012,

successfully assisting over 6500 guests undergoing difficult experiences, substance related or otherwise. The Zendo Project provides emotional support services in a comfortable setting for individuals coping with the difficult mental and emotional effects that can arise from the use of psychedelic substances at festivals and events. We empower communities by providing hands-on educational workshops, training, and outreach.

To help grow psychedelic harm reduction services, reach out to events you might be attending and inquire if services already exist. Another way is to support groups that already exist through volunteering and donations.

Adam Rubin is a psychedelic harm reduction activist and crisis counselor. He has devoted his life to supporting others experiencing extreme states of consciousness and creating safety systems at events where people might choose to ingest a psychedelic substance. He has worked over 45 events around the world since 2015 with many different organizations including the Zendo Project, White Bird Rock Med, RGX Medical, and Take 3 Presents, as well as manages his own teams. He has given trainings to peer support volunteers, local psychedelic communities, and event medical teams in attempts to bring deeper understandings around effective ways to support people undergoing a psychedelic emergency. He has also written a series of zines titled "The It's Okay Psychedelic Harm Reduction Series" and distributes them for free to spread information, safety, and community support.