

Reimagining Zendo Project

Integrating Psychedelic Harm Reduction into the Community

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OVER THE COURSE OF THE past year since COVID-19 first began to enter into our collective awareness, we as a society have watched our ability to gather in community diminish and our mental health challenges become exacerbated by isolation and uncertainty. Surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate substantial increases in anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as increased substance use and suicidal thoughts related to the pandemic. Meanwhile, scientific, peer-reviewed studies continue to demonstrate that the careful use of psychedelics can offer significant relief from symptoms of depression, addiction, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For all the division that we witnessed in last year's election, when it came to subtly furthering the integration of psychedelics into our society, the public seemed to come together at the polls.

Oregon became the first state to decriminalize psychedelic plants and fungi, while also creating a legalization framework for psilocybin mushroom-assisted therapy. Washington, D.C., and Ann Arbor, Michigan, also added their names to the list of U.S. cities like Denver, Oakland, and Santa Cruz, which were the first to succeed with psychedelic decriminalization measures. As the recent elections reflect, following decades of derision, psychedelics are redeeming themselves in public opinion, and perhaps even gaining favor. So, with large-scale public gatherings halted, MAPS is responding to ripening opportunities to meet the need to educate new and diverse sectors of the public, beyond the festival.

Historically, MAPS' psychedelic harm reduction efforts have centered around providing direct, frontline support, education, and training at events through the Zendo Project. Having trained over 6,000 volunteers on how to provide peer support to those encountering challenging psychedelic and emotional experiences, MAPS recognizes the foundational principles of psychedelic peer support that have guided and supported our community over the years to be essential, transferable skills that are necessary to navigate a changing world.

The stressors of this past year brought many of our collective wounds out of the shadows and into our consciousness. Our world being rampaged suddenly and unexpectedly by a coronavirus that exponentially outpaced modern medicine's ability to understand and control it at once showed us how vulnerable and how interconnected we are. In a matter of weeks, our world was forced to come out of our habits of distraction and frivolity to confront the reality of sickness, uncertainty, and mass death. As an unprepared public and an under-resourced medical force, we found ourselves launched into a space of existential anxiety confronted with our human fragility and mortality.

We know from psychotherapy that it is only once the materials harbored in the unconscious are brought to the surface that we are ultimately able to address them and heal them. However, devoid of the proper structures of support, we can get stuck cycling in the trauma instead of moving through it.

Much of the potential benefits of psychedelics are connected to their ability to shift our consciousness away from the mundane, toward illuminating the sublime. On their journeys, however, psychedelic choosers often discover that crossing the threshold of the neatly constructed conscious mind can lead into murky places of repressed traumas and confronting archetypal experiential scenes. Within festival environments, the Zendo structure has served as the physical place where people can come as they are to be received and supported as they traverse through such landscapes in service of their ultimate healing. Without the support of such dedicated spaces, people experiencing challenging journeys may endure unnecessary burdens, ones that can be exacerbated by their communities' lack of education about how to best help.

We are building a post-prohibition world. What happens there will be determined by the infrastructure we put into place now. To properly usher in a new paradigm of healing for all on a global scale we are going to need educated communities at all points of engagement. This includes the curious seekers, who must understand what they are committing to psychologically, as well as the potential chemical and physical risks. It also includes the communities that, knowingly or not, are creating the containers that, perhaps unbeknownst to them, are contributing to the experiences of psychedelic journeyers.

Zendo Project has collected a wealth of information from being in direct service for a decade. In furthering our desire to co-create communities of compassionate care while our cardboard yurt remains in temporary storage, we are transcending the physical space of our structure to contribute to building supportive, informed, and complete containers that can carry forward these gifts and lessons out into the world. With this in mind, Zendo Project has begun to expand and update our curriculum and training, identifying target audiences in various community settings. We are currently modifying our signature public training to provide more extensive general psychedelic harm reduction education to meet demand from growing communities of psychedelic explorers. Recognizing campus microcosms, we have also begun to develop a curriculum unique to the needs of the university setting and all its various parts. We are engaged with medical, legal, and mental health professionals to conduct needs assessments which will enable us to precisely devise offerings that bridge the gaps in our constituents' current understanding and previous training.

Thanks to Sara Gael, M.A., former MAPS Director of Harm Reduction, becoming a founding member of the Denver Psilocybin Mushroom Review Panel in February of 2020, we are currently in discussion with the City of Denver's first responder departments to create pilot trainings related to psilocybin decriminalization for their 3,600 first responders. This follows the panel's September 2020 vote to invite MAPS to lead their psychedelic harm reduction training initiative. The first responder departments include paramedics, police, fire, Sheriff's Department, and the expanding mental health co-responder units, the leaders of each expressing a desire to mandate these foundational trainings for all of their existing and incoming employees.

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KATRINA MICHELLE, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., began working with MAPS in August of 2020 as Harm Reduction Director. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology with a Transpersonal specialization from Sofia University at The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in 2017 after completing her dissertation on “Exploring Resistance to Spiritual Emergence.” She served for three years as Executive Director on the board of The American Center for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE). Katrina graduated from Stony Brook University with her Masters in Social Work and a specialization in student community development and has maintained an integrative psychotherapy practice, *The Curious Spirit*, in New York City since 2008. Katrina serves as faculty at Columbia University School of Social Work and The Institute for the Development of Human Arts (IDHA) and is currently working on producing her first documentary film, “When Lightning Strikes,” with the intention to educate the mainstream about spiritual emergence.

The Zendo Project provides professional comprehensive harm reduction education and support for communities to help improve public safety, reduce adverse outcomes, and inform and transform difficult psychedelic experiences into opportunities for learning and growth. We envision a world where communities are educated, resourced, and engaged in applying harm reduction principles to support individuals exploring psychedelic states; recognizing that challenging experiences can be opportunities for self-exploration and healing.

The collective trauma that has been unearthed by events of the past twelve months can be viewed from a myopic lens as destructive or from a reformist lens as revolutionary. Moving forward as a culture whose wounds have torn open as they rose to the surface, we can no longer band-aid and turn our heads. This collective trauma can only be resolved by a collective commitment to healing. Lessons from the Zendo Project teach us that we all have a part to play—that we really can make a tremendous difference in someone else’s journey, because when we zoom out, we realize we really are all on the same trip.

People are not separate from their environments. It is through empowering each member of our community to support the other in being seen and held through the struggle that we all benefit. It is our intention that by offering educational tools to carve out intentional infrastructures at the community level, we will contribute to the healing of each person touched by the ripple of evolutionary change. As a culture of distraction, perhaps this past year has served as our initiation into depth. Committing to the rest of this journey together is the best way forward. It is an invitation and an opportunity to heal our core wounding at the individual, societal, and even ancestral levels. As we usher in a new means of medicine, we are no longer suppressing symptoms, but diving into truth. And that, they say, will set us free.

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