

Psychedelic Experience

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June 5, 2026

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2026). *Psychedelic Experience*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38183>

A psychedelic experience (or 'trip') is a temporary altered state of consciousness induced by the consumption of psychedelic drugs (such as LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, 2C-I, DOM, AMT, DMT, and 5-MeO-DMT). For example, the term acid trip refers to psychedelic experiences brought on by the use of LSD.

The term "psychedelic" derives from Greek words meaning "mind revealing". Psychedelic experiences are interpreted in exploratory, learning, recreational, religious/mystical and therapeutic contexts.

Definition

Psychedelic experience is a temporary altered state of consciousness induced by the consumption of psychedelic drugs (the best known of which are LSD and psilocybin 'magic' mushrooms). The psychedelic altered state of consciousness is commonly characterised as a higher (elevated or transcendent) state relative to ordinary (sober) experience; for example, the psychologist Benny Shanon observed from ayahuasca trip reports: "the assessment, very common with ayahuasca, that what is seen and thought during the course of intoxication defines the real, whereas the world that is ordinarily perceived is actually an illusion."

Similarly, psychologist Stanislav Grof described the LSD experience as: "complex revelatory insights into the nature of existence... typically accompanied by a sense of certainty that this knowledge is ultimately more relevant and "real" than the perceptions and beliefs we share in everyday life." The philosopher Alan Watts likened psychedelic experiencing to the transformations of consciousness that are undertaken in Taoism and Zen, which he says is, "more like the correction of faulty perception or the curing of a disease... not an acquisitive process of learning more and more facts or greater and greater skills, but rather an unlearning of wrong habits and opinions."

The LSD experience was described by Alan Watts as, "revelations of the secret workings of the brain, of the associative and patterning processes, the ordering systems which carry out all our sensing and thinking."

Etymology

The term 'psychedelic' was coined in 1953 by the psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond, during written correspondence with Aldous Huxley. 'Psychedelic' derives from two Ancient Greek words, 'psyche' meaning mind or soul and 'delos' meaning reveal or manifest. The psychedelic experience is said to reveal aspects of the mind that are normally hidden.

The term "trip" was first coined by USA Army scientists during the 50s when they were

experimenting with LSD.

Basic phenomenology

Psychedelic tripping consists of a small number of distinctive phenomenological characteristics. The major identifying characteristics include alterations of visual perception, psychotherapeutic breakthrough experiences leading to personal growth, experiences of religious epiphany/mystical transcendence, and 'bad trips' - negative/unpleasant panic-attack control-loss experiences (note: these three characteristics of psychedelic tripping are not mutually exclusive, there is a wide overlap between them). These four central characteristics of psychedelic experiencing are described in detail in the following sections:

Visual alteration

Probably the most common, widely recognised psychedelic experiential phenomenon is the alteration in visual perception; this includes surfaces in the environment appearing to ripple and undulate; Albert Hoffman, the discoverer of LSD, described how during his bicycle ride home after his first deliberate LSD self-administration: "Everything in my field of vision wavered and was distorted as if seen in a curved mirror". Psychedelic visual alteration also includes spontaneous formation of complex flowing geometric visual patterning. These visual effects increase in intensity with higher dosages, and also when the eyes are closed.

Psychotherapy/personal development

There is a distinctly gnosis-like quality to psychedelic experiencing; it is a learning experience that elevates consciousness and makes a profound contribution to personal development. For this reason, the plant sources of some psychedelic drugs such as ayahuasca and psilocybin mushrooms are sometimes referred to as "plant teachers".

Similarly, in a follow-up to the psilocybin and mysticism study at Johns Hopkins, researchers observed that psilocybin: "occasions personally and spiritually significant mystical experiences that predict long-term changes in behaviors, attitudes and values".

Mystical/religious experience

Psychedelic experience includes the full range of mystical or religious experiential phenomena. Two scientific studies have concluded that psilocybin (a typical psychedelic compound that occurs naturally in psilocybin mushrooms) reliably triggers mystical-type experiences. The more recent study at Johns Hopkins University identified mystical experiences by means of several questionnaires designed to categorise altered state 'non-ordinary' experiences, including one questionnaire called 'the mysticism scale'.

Furthermore, psychedelic drugs have a long history of religious use across the world, they are often called entheogens because of their propensity to induce these kinds of experiences.

Several modern religions exist today that base their religious activities and beliefs around psychedelic experiencing, such as Santo Daime and the Native American Church. In this context, the psychedelic experience is interpreted as a way of communicating with the realm of spirits or ancestors.

Bad trip

A "bad trip" ("drug-induced temporary psychosis" or "psychedelic crisis") is a disturbing, unpleasant, frightening and possibly traumatising psychedelic experience. Bad trips are more common at high doses, where the psychedelic effect is more intense.

The manifestations can range from feelings of vague anxiety and alienation to profoundly disturbing states of unrelieved terror, ultimate entrapment, sheer insanity or cosmic annihilation.

Bad trips can be exacerbated by the inexperience or irresponsibility of the user or the lack of proper preparation and environment for the trip. At the extreme, the occurrence of bad trips without proper preparation can result in a tripper committing self-harm or harming others, suicide attempts and contact with law enforcement.

Psychedelic specialists in the psychotherapeutic community do not necessarily consider unpleasant experiences as unhealthy or undesirable, focusing instead on their potential for psychological healing, to lead to breakthrough and resolution of unresolved psychic issues.

Aldous Huxley's concept of the cognitive reducing valve

In his book *The Doors of Perception*, author and psychonaut Aldous Huxley presents the idea of the mental reducing valve in order to explain the significance of the psychedelic experience. According to Huxley, the central nervous system's main function is to shut out the majority of what we perceive; the brain filters those perceptions which are useful for survival. Society aids in this filtering by creating a symbolic system which structures our reality and which reduces our awareness. Psychedelic experiencing has the effect of reducing the strength of the mind's reducing valve, which allows for a broader spectrum of one's overall experience to enter into conscious experience. A person undergoing a psychedelic trip temporarily possesses a higher level of conscious awareness.

Psychedelic psychotherapy

Psychedelic therapy refers to therapeutic practices involving the use of psychedelic drugs to

facilitate beneficial emotional processing and exploration of the psyche. In contrast to conventional psychiatric medication which is taken by the patient regularly or as-needed, in psychedelic therapy, patients remain in an extended psychotherapy session during the acute activity of the drug and spend the night at the facility. In the sessions with the drug, therapists are nondirective and support the patient in exploring their inner experience. Patients participate in psychotherapy before the drug psychotherapy sessions to prepare them and after the drug psychotherapy to help them integrate their experiences with the drug.

An early practitioner of psychedelic drug based psychiatry was Humphrey Osmond, a British psychiatrist who was responsible for coining the word 'psychedelic' in the first place. Osmond claimed that his own personal use of LSD had helped him to understand the inner mental states of his schizophrenic patients.

Another important practitioner in this field is Stanislav Grof, who pioneered the use of LSD in psychotherapy. Grof characterised psychedelic experiencing as "non-specific amplification of unconscious mental processes", and he analysed the phenomenology of the LSD experience (particularly the experience of psychospiritual death and rebirth) in terms of Otto Rank's theory of the unresolved memory of the primal birth trauma.

This use of ego death can allow many terminally ill patients (e.g. those with end-stage cancer) to rationally approach their deaths from outside of the usually egotistical value one places on themselves. Trials have proven that this release is capable of causing the pains associated with imminent, unavoidable death to become manageable and understandable; realizing that the passage from life to death is simply another step in living. This work was most actively pursued by Charles Grob at the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.