

Psychedelic Session Work

***Disclaimer:** I wrote this overview in 2004 based on my experiences with myself, my partner and with friends and clients. It is intended for informational purposes only, and should not be considered medical advice. In the meantime, the legal situation is changing and much new research is being done. You might refer to Michael Pollen's *How to Change Your Mind* and *This is Your Mind on Plants*, or go to MAPS.org for more up-to-date information.*

Session Work is defined here as sessions that are conducted for the purpose of healing and liberation, where the Seeker, or Client, is assisted by a skilled and compassionate Guide, or Sitter. The work is facilitated by means of Medicines or Substances which open the mind of the Seeker, creating access to the deep psyche and thus bringing awareness to the subconscious patterns that influence and limit our behaviors and thought processes. These mind-expanding materials used in such a conscious fashion can assist us on our path to inner Freedom, Truth and Transformation and can help us achieve the so desired sense of purpose, of belonging and of our interconnectedness with Life.

Session Work can provide openings and breakthroughs that are difficult or near impossible to achieve by any other means. The ordinary mind, the one we usually consider to be our conscious mind, is in fact the very instrument that protects us from those feelings we could not express and did not have support for in our tender young life. All trauma, grief, fear, rage and shame that have not been consciously experienced and brought to completion are stored and often vehemently protected deep in the body-psyche until such time when we finally feel safe and supported enough to access them again, to bring them into the light of loving awareness, to re-experience the depth of the pain and to complete the unresolved emotions.

When the natural, innocent trust of the child is violated through the ignorance and dysfunctions of however well-meaning (or not so well-meaning) parents and others, the child's innate intelligence attempts to make sense of and cope with these utterly incomprehensible and confusing experiences. In its primal need to survive and get its needs met, the child begins to create patterns of behavior and belief systems that will become its only perceived reality

throughout life. And so we continue to feel unloved, unworthy, isolated, hopeless and frustrated, until we make the conscious choice to face the pain and fear inside. It is this injured trust that must be healed.

Every human being has a core complex, a wounding of the psyche, with its unresolved emotions and misconstrued perceptions. Stanislav Groff called this the COEX system. As long as any part of this wounding is not fully made conscious, it remains in the dark and from there continues to run our lives. This is where most spiritual practices and traditions fall short. No matter how beautiful and useful they are, and how much compassion and awareness they may foster, few direct us deeply enough into our own subconscious material and provide the personal safety and guidance necessary to consciously journey into and through the abyss. The gateway to our liberation lies in the core of the wound! We must go there. This is the true Hero's Journey. For those who are seriously on the path of self-discovery and liberation, Session Work may become an integral part their journey. A minimum interval of one to three months is generally recommended to allow for integration of each session. Ideally, the Seeker will continue regular healing or therapy sessions with the Guide. When the process stagnates or another big chunk of the COEX is up, both of them will recognize when it's time to schedule another medicine session. Sometimes one session suffices to bring about a deep and lasting shift.

Since most forms of therapies have to navigate slowly through the resistance of our conscious mind to access these deeper layers of fear and shame, they tend to be excessively costly in terms of time and financial commitment, and worst of all in the prolongation of suffering. No matter how helpful therapy can be in improving coping skills and deepening one's awareness, in the end true transformation often cannot be achieved. Isn't it then most sensible to partake of a few molecules, in the right setting of course, that dissolve this resistance, that temporarily set aside the control of the egoic mind, allowing us effortless access to our subconscious mind? How much unnecessary suffering can thus be avoided?

Since psychoactive materials open our minds to seeing more deeply and clearly and since trust is the real key to the doors of the subconscious, the profound trust- worthiness of the Guide is of the essence! Much more so than any other health practitioner, the Guide must be transparent in

his/her own inner state of being. Any remaining internal fear, reticence or judgment still present in the subconscious of the Guide will likely be detected by the Seeker whose vision has become illuminated, and will interfere with the Seeker's ability to trust and rightfully so.

Sometimes the unconscious intention of the Seeker during the first psychoactive session is to test if the Guide can truly be trusted. 'Nothing happening' may be the manifestation of this process. Only if the Guide is able to truly stay present and give his/her complete trust to the Seeker even in this 'nothing', is there a chance that the session will proceed, or in extreme cases that the next session will be more obviously successful. The success of the first experience is then exactly the deeper trust between Seeker and Guide.

The Seeker

Anyone in search of happiness, wholeness, meaning, purpose, clarity, insight, wisdom, equanimity, liberation and God-consciousness can benefit from session work. However, a sufficiently developed ego and at least a reasonably functioning personality are necessary pre-requisites.

Good candidates for Session Work are those who have already done quite an amount of inner work, who are or have been in therapy, or who feel they have come to the limits of what other therapies or practices can offer them; as well as those who have explored consciousness by study, by meditation, by being on a spiritual path, or by experimenting with mind-altering substances. Then there are those intrepid, young adventurers who seek to explore consciousness and self-awareness, who have educated themselves enough that they know to make the intelligent choice of carefully selecting set and setting and who look for a guide or sitter to hold a safe space for them. They should be congratulated!

Some people are so open that they have little or no resistance to enter the deeper and higher states of consciousness. Then, why bother with medicine? It would be like carrying water to the ocean. For them mind-altering substances may be redundant or even too much for their sensitive nervous systems.

It is the strength of the Seeker's desire for inner growth and the intention for the journey that

determines more than anything the successful outcome of the Session.

Counter indications: People with serious mental instability such as bipolar disorders, paranoia, compulsive disorders, schizophrenia or any pre-psychotic disposition should generally avoid the use of mind-expanding materials. If in doubt, consult with a psychiatrist who is experienced and well informed about the use of psychedelics in therapy.

Note regarding the myth of 'bad trips': So called 'bad trips' invariably occur as a result of uninformed and unsupervised (I'd rather call them unprotected) use of a powerful substance. Besides the above-mentioned counter indications, there is only one reason for a 'bad trip': It is due to uninformed use, where no attention has been paid to set and setting nor is an experienced Guide present. When a process gets unleashed during a psychedelic journey, in an unsafe setting and without a competent guide to help the person through it, the feelings that arise may become overwhelming and terrifying.

The problem does not lie with the materials but with their improper use. The unfinished process will continue to try to attract the person's attention. Since the subconscious generally does not have access to the ordinary mind, it tries to get our attention by feelings of discomfort, irritability, anxiety, depression, physical pain or recurring memories of the terror. As long as these symptoms are medicated, the process cannot unfold and stays stuck in the subconscious. It is the wrong track!

The real solution lies not in alleviating the symptoms or in avoiding psychedelics. On the contrary, by going back in, this time with an experienced guide, the process can be accessed again and finally complete itself. As a result, the symptoms usually disappear and deep insight and healing occur.

The Guide

The presence of an experienced and compassionate Guide, or Sitter is essential for Session Work.

The main purpose of the Guide is to hold a safe space for the Seeker and to be a 'container' for whatever arises.

The first pre-requisite for the Guide is to have done a significant part of his/her own inner work. The Guide must have faced his/her own inner fears and be clear about transference issues, i.e. be able to detect projections in both directions. It is absolutely essential that the Guide be familiar with the use of the Material from his/her own experience. After all, the Seeker can only safely travel where the Guide has already gone!

The Guide must have a profound trust in the work - no matter what arises - and in the wisdom of the Seeker's own psyche. The Guide must be willing and able to be completely present for the Seeker during the full duration of the Session. Mostly, the Guide simply remains quiet and present, trusting Seeker's process to unfold. S/He takes care of Seeker's needs for comfort and safety and knows instinctively when to provide support or reassurance, or when to nudge a process or call something into awareness that seems to be avoided.

The Materials

Both Mother Nature and some of our finest chemists have created materials to help us awaken to our true nature, to the miracle of Life and the Universe and to our interconnectedness with all that is. Some of these are particularly useful in Session Work. The Guide should be skilled in determining which material is most appropriate for the Seeker to support him or her to reach the desired goal.

When a medicine session is planned, it is essential for the dose to be effective. A less than effective dose is a waste of everyone's time, and tends to create more discomfort without the gain!

MDMA, or Ecstasy. This material is almost always recommended for the first or the first few sessions. After Alexander Shulgin brought this material to the attention of the therapeutic community in 1977, it was quickly recognized as an extraordinarily effective therapeutic agent. It

became fondly known as Adam, referring to life in the Garden of Eden before the fall, engendering the experience of one's original innocence. Just one MDMA session can forever alter a Seeker's relationship to his/her subconscious material.

MDMA brings many special gifts to a person's inner work. It is called an empathogen, because it opens the heart. It offers a window of time without fear! It is as if one opens the door to the pantry of the subconscious and can simply discover all that is there and understand how it got there, without any fear or blame of self or others. Deeply unconscious patterns can be detected that have been handed down in the family through the generations. Patterns of victimization are lovingly exposed and Seeker often emerges with a new sense of self-confidence, understanding that changes can be made by being truly responsible for one's own state of being.

90 Minutes after the first dose, which should be adjusted to the person's body weight, a booster is given (consisting of about 60% of the original dose) to prolong the experience and to have a smooth integration and transition time back to baseline.

Possible minor side effects can occur, mostly jaw tension and the post-MDMA slump. To ease the jaw tension, it helps to take three or four calcium magnesium chelate tablets at the first dose and again at booster time. It can be taken for several days, if needed, until the tension has subsided. One Prozac towards the end of the session, at approx. the fifth hour, helps to ease the post-MDMA slump the day after.

Peak experience 3-4 hours. Total session time 5-7 hours.

After the Seeker has benefited from the heart opening and the deepened awareness derived from one or more MDMA sessions, the natural next step is to explore more deeply those issues that are a part of one's core complex, or COEX system, as described by Stanislav Grof.

2-CB. One of the most successful compounds from the cornucopia of materials created by Alexander Shulgin. 2-CB is an excellent tool for therapy, because of its focus and limited duration. It can be described as a 'slow acid'. Some stomach rumblings may occur or a few extra trips to the bathroom, but this material is very clean and easy on the body. When a clear intention

has been set, it induces in the Seeker a profound focus on the issue. It is a body-centered material, a 'gut-level' psychedelic, so to speak. That particular property creates a deeply felt experience and helps to access memories and feelings stored in the body, without the distortion or undue magnification that can occur with LSD. And, when the issue is resolved or the process has come to completion, generally no new material is kicked up (as with acid). During the remaining time of its effect, one lingers in the ecstatic after glow of this very fine and clean material. This offers all kinds of opportunities for a deeply personal and spiritual exchange between Seeker and Guide.

Dose: 3-4 5mg tablets depending on body weight and sensitivity should suffice.

Peak experience 3-4 hours. Total session time 5-7 hours.

LSD. Discovered by Albert Hoffman in 1948. However much maligned, this is a master ally for inner work and for transcendence. When, occasionally, 2CB doesn't quite get a Seeker where he needs to go, LSD will do the trick. No barriers can stand in the face of it, although even here, the psyche is always in charge of what material gets uncovered. An experienced guide is particularly important. LSD could be described as a non-specific amplifier. It amplifies everything, sensory perceptions, emotional states, any kind of process and opens the mind to the most profound and ecstatic spiritual revelations. Here is where the experience of the Guide is needed to hold a safe space or even accompany the Seeker into the depths of his being and to know when to reassure or reorient him/her onto safer grounds, if necessary. One of the greatest gifts of LSD are the much coveted peak-experiences. Profoundly transcendental experiences can change a person's life, turn around self-destructive, addictive behaviors and establish a person's connectedness with the numinous.

Peak experience 6-8 hours. Session duration 7-10 hours.

Mushrooms. Possibly the most ancient of all psychoactive materials. Used by shamans and tribes throughout the ages and all over the world. A true psychedelic with an earthy, magical flavor. Beautiful magical visuals charm the psychonaut. Inner work can be done, insights can be gained, and because of its earth bound nature a sense of home coming to the natural world can be

experienced which can have significant therapeutic effect on 'modern' man. Its charm can also be a distraction for Session Work.

Peak experience 5-6 hours. Session duration 7-8 hours.

Ayahuasca. An Amazonian concoction of a variety of vines and plants, especially vile to drink, is mostly used in ritual group sessions led by an Ayahuascera. Strong emetic effects, often seen as a purification. Equally well suited for individual Session Work as most other mind opening substances. Its particular flavor seems to be of cellular transformation. People often feel 'rearranged' on a molecular level. Many experience the presence of or identification with power animals.

Peak experience 5-6 hours. Session duration 6-7 hours.

San Pedro. A particularly benevolent earthy teacher which can engender fine insight and, as with the other earthbound materials, provide the Seeker with a deep feeling of natural connectedness with life and nature. A fine and gentle material, which makes it particular suitable for solo journeys as part of one's inner work.

Peak experience 5-6 hours. Session duration 6-7 hours.

2CT7. A long lasting beautiful and surprisingly powerful material. Sasha Shulgin's favorite creation! It takes 2hours to come on, then for some 10 hours one moves in and out of slow waves of depth and delight. Very fine for inner work! Very long to sit for! A sense of peaceful timelessness allows one to linger in states of awareness without any sense of hurry or pressure, allowing the Seeker to explore at length and in great detail those difficulties in the psyche that tend to be elusive or particularly painful, alternating with exquisite sensory and spiritual states. One's internal compassionate Witness seems to be ever present. One remains surprisingly functional on this material, but its power should not be underestimated.

Peak experiences in waves during some 10 hours. Duration of session 10-12 hours.

5Meo is a powerful substance that is best known smoked, temporarily dissolving one's mind into brief but powerful blasts of energies. However, taken orally, 20-30 minutes after the ingestion of an MAO inhibitor, like Syrian Rue, 5meo becomes a most powerful psychotherapeutic tool. It offers tremendous focus into the depths of one's psyche, empowering the Seeker simultaneously to go through it all the way and finally releasing one, as if through a birthing process, into the sublime ecstasy of surrender and the soul is at peace. This material is suitable for the hardest work the courageous Seeker may have to undertake to become free from the shackles of the past. The presence of a highly experienced Guide is a must with this one.

Peak experience 4-6 hours. Duration of session 7-9 hours

Marijuana. The mildest and sweetest of all mind altering substances is undoubtedly our friendly Lady Mari-Juana. This herb is an excellent companion for those who wish to proceed on their inner journey as an integrated part of their lives. No Guide is necessary here. Just opening one's consciousness to oneself, entirely in the present moment of space and time, with the help of Mary Jane, is a fine spiritual practice. It relaxes and comforts the body, allowing one to experience its exquisite grace and sweetness, making the body holy. And, of course, she delights the mind with illuminating rifts of insight.

Marijuana is often useful towards the end of a session with a stronger material. It will both help settle the activated mind and often ease the session into a pleasing afterglow. A little smoke about three quarters into a session with 2CB or with 2CT7 creates a particularly fine synergy!

Beware: Whereas psychedelics tend not to be addictive, contrary to popular belief marijuana can definitively be addictive. If the use of this herb becomes frequent, one can imperceptibly slide into addiction, as happened to me. In Marijuana Anonymous we have realized that, compared to alcoholics and addicts of more serious drugs who may 'hit bottom' rather dramatically, marijuana addicts can "cruise along the bottom for thirty years" and not be aware how negatively it is affecting their quality of life. We tend to get depressed, listless and unmotivated, then turn to self-medicate again with our favorite escape into the altered states marijuana provides.

The Tradition

In many ancient and native traditions all kinds of concoctions are and have been used to facilitate contact with the spirit world, to assist individuals and communities in solving their problems and to bring about healing of body, mind and soul. A great variety of literature and studies have been published on these topics.

Traditionally, the shaman lives outside of the community. S/He is not beholden to the same rules and regulations that govern the collective. The outside view is indispensable for the shaman to serve those who seek healing or guidance.

Never has humanity become so separated from the numinous and have individuals suffered from such widespread loneliness, hopelessness and lack of meaning and purpose in their lives as in our post industrial western societies. The established religions fail to inspire and enlighten. It is no wonder that so many turn to mind altering substances in a search to transcend the limitations of the materialistic life.

A vast array of fascinating and informative books has been published. Below is a list of literature especially relevant to Session Work:

LSD Psychotherapy by Stanislav Grof, MD.

The Healing Journey by Claudio Naranjo.

Listening into the Heart of Things, On MDMA and LSD: The Undesired Psychotherapy by Samuel Widmer.

The Secret Chief by Myron Stolaroff.

Through the Gateway of the Heart, Accounts of Experiences with MDMA and Other Empathogenic Substances, Compiled and Edited by Sophia Adamson.

Ecstasy, The MDMA Story by Bruce Eisner.

The Joyous Cosmology by Alan Watts.

Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered by Lester Grinspoon and James B. Bakalar

The Session

The Preparation. A deep sense of trust between Seeker and Guide are essential ingredients for the success of a Session. This requires a significant amount of contact between Seeker and Guide before Session Work is embarked upon. Seeker prepares him/herself through introspection, journaling and therapy or counseling. Both participants need to be absolutely honest with one another. The Guide must have enough insight into Seeker's psyche to determine whether Session Work is appropriate. (Important: Read Counter Indications under The Seeker.)

The Set refers to the mind-set of the Seeker. First of all, the Seeker needs to be well-informed about the nature of this work and have the desire to become more aware and to wake up out of the everyday trance. There needs to be a willingness and the ability to introspect and to examine one's own belief systems and patterns of behavior. Seeker must understand that s/he will most likely be confronted with their subconscious, their shadow material and may be faced with the possibility of giving up any limiting notions of identity. Often Seeker's greatest fear is loss of control, 'going crazy'. Ironically, letting go of control – under these controlled circumstances – can be a great liberating experience. Some apprehension or even anxiety before the Session is natural and an indication that somewhere deep inside the Seeker knows that change is in the offing.

The Setting. A beautiful and harmonious space, private and peaceful, prepared with care, creates the ideal setting for Session Work. Fine art or nature photography, sacred objects, fresh flowers and candles or oil lamps add to a sacred atmosphere and help Seeker to feel truly welcome and valued. A comfortable place to lie down with pillows and warm blankets need to be available to secure Seeker's comfort. A variety of music and a sound-system with earphones are indispensable, as well as eyeshades, tissues and a bowl and towel just in case. Juice needs to be available to replenish blood sugar.

The Agreements. Five agreements are required of Seeker to set parameters for the Session for the safety of both Seeker and Guide and to honor the space.

1. Confidentiality. In view of the considerable risk to the Guide caused by the unfortunate current legal situation, this agreement needs to be made right at the beginning of any discussion about Session Work and is renewed before the start of the Session. The Guide needs to determine exactly what protocol Seeker must agree to for her/his protection.

2. Seeker will not leave the premises until and unless the Guide consents.

3. No sexual acts are permitted. Naturally, sexual feelings are allowed, but they will not be acted upon.

4. No physical harm will be done to self, to the Guide or to the space. All feelings of anger, rage and frustration are welcome and safe tools for abreaction, if needed, will be provided by the Guide.

5. During the session, Guide is responsible for the safety of Seeker. If Guide refers to the 5th Agreement, Seeker will comply with Guide's directions. This agreement secures safety and is Seeker's statement of trust and surrender into the care of the Guide.

The Intention. Possibly the most essential ingredient for the Session is Seeker's intention.

Naturally this subject will have been extensively explored beforehand. It is recommended that Seeker brings a written statement of his/her intention to the Session.

The Duration. Plenty of time needs to be set aside for the session. Most materials take about half an hour to take affect and last anywhere from four to ten hours. For duration of peak times, see

under Medicines for Session Work. It is crucial to allow time for integration before Seeker leaves.

The Prayer. Either before or after ingestion, this prayer may be given to Seeker to read:

*Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of thee;
Thou only knowest what I need;
Thou lovest me better than I know how to love myself.
O Father, give to Thy child
that which he himself knows not how to ask.
I dare not ask either for crosses or for consolations;
I simply present myself before Thee,
I open my heart to Thee.
Behold my needs which I know not myself;
see and do according to Thy tender mercy.
Smite or heal; depress me or raise me up;
I adore all Thy purposes without knowing them;
I am silent; I offer myself in sacrifice;
I yield myself to Thee:
I would have no other desire than to accomplish Thy will.
Teach me to Pray. Pray Thyself in me. Amen.*

Francois de Salignac Fenelon

Archbishop of Cambrai, 1651-1715 AD

The Session. When the material begins to take effect, Seeker should be invited to lie down comfortably and be installed with earphones and eyeshades.

The Integration. After the session has come to a close, one to two hours of time to rest and unwind usually suffice for Seeker to be able to return home. During this time, gentle, unintrusive music is played, unless Seeker prefers silence, of course. It is good for Seeker to have a notebook at hand during this quiet time. If Seeker's home situation is not conducive to peaceful integration, it is very important for other arrangements to have been made beforehand. Most of the time Seeker will be fine to drive home. For people with sensitive nervous systems, or after sessions with the more powerful and longer lasting materials, it is advisable that safe transportation has been arranged with a trusted friend or partner. In all cases, the Guide has the final say on whether and when Seeker is ready to leave.

Undisturbed integration time is inordinately important for the long-term positive influence of the session in the mind and life of Seeker. After all, this is the goal! At least one and, if at all possible, two full days should be reserved for Seeker to be undisturbed and free from all outer responsibilities. This is priceless time for Seeker to rest, to reflect, to journal. It is also advisable for Seeker to refrain from sharing her/his experiences with others during this tender time, not to disperse the energy and to avoid undue influence of however well-meaning others. It's like tending an early spring garden. You don't want to step on anything or disturb it at all, protecting the tender, sometimes barely visible new growth.

Andrea van de Loo, March 2004.