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Inner Traditions 2021 - Psychedelics and Psychotherapy: The Healing Potential of Expanded States

Eds. Tim Read and Maria Papaspyrou

AYAHUASCA AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Rachel Harris, PhD

Years ago, in a land far away, I was talking with a Jungian analyst about his female client whose mother had died when she was a child. It seemed clear to me, a young therapist at the time, that this woman should have a female therapist. I blithely made my point with the kind of confidence only an inexperienced therapist is naive enough to express. The older therapist, steeped in the wisdom that Jungians attain after listening to thousands of dreams, patiently responded, “Yes, it will be the woman in me who heals her.”

After decades in private practice, I often reflect back upon this snippet of conversation that turned out to be formative. The analyst exemplified how it’s the relationship that heals as opposed to the specific therapeutic technique,¹ and it’s what we bring from our personal depths to that relationship that makes all the difference.

At some level, this is the essence of psychedelic psychotherapy. As therapists we have to be able to meet our clients in those mysterious realms that both open from within and also blast into outer space. We have to know how to access these mystical territories within ourselves in order to connect with our psychedelic clients who are exploring these other worldly worlds. We have to know in our bones what they’re talking about. It’s the mystical traveler in ourselves that we must be able to bring to the therapeutic relationship.

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Does this mean the therapist has to have personally attended an ayahuasca ceremony? Does the therapist have to be in their own healing process with this psychedelic medicine, attending regular ceremonies? Yes and no. Is this absolutely a requirement? No. A therapist can gain access to these states of consciousness in a variety of ways. Does it make a difference if the therapist has their own personal relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca? Yes.

We have now officially left the realm of evidenced-based treatments.

The spirit of ayahuasca may be referred to in different ways depending upon context—as a generic Unseen Other, Grandmother Ayahuasca, or a cosmic serpent. When I asked in a study of ayahuasca use in North America, ‘Do you have an on-going relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca?’ 74% of people reported “yes.”² If both the therapist and the client have such a relationship with this mysterious plant spirit, the whole nature of the therapeutic alliance is qualitatively transformed.

Ayahuasca differs from many of the other psychedelics in that the plant spirit remains in the body long after the psychedelic effect or even the biochemical markers. The sensation is that an intentional Other has entered your body to scan your energy field, to balance, align, and repair your vibrational patterns. This is the shamanic healing process, and it continues albeit with less intensity for weeks, even months following a ceremony. Gorman captured this sensation with the title of his book, *Ayahuasca in My Blood*.³ The medicine is not literally in the blood but this phrase describes the lived experience of the presence of ayahuasca at a cellular level, at the level of DNA,⁴ that becomes a permanent aspect of the felt somatic sense.

The presence of ayahuasca in the therapist’s body and energy field changes the process of therapy. The therapist’s inner world is expanded into shamanic realms, imaginal

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landscapes, and the farther reaches of the unconscious. The therapist is a knowledgeable traveler through these realms, experienced in maintaining equilibrium in the face of extraordinary emotions and psychedelic experiences. This enhanced inner capacity, with its access to the numinous, allows for a deeper and broader connection between the unconscious of the therapist and that of the client. Jung described this elusive dynamic in the therapeutic relationship as “soul must work on soul.”⁵

Recent work on intersubjectivity in neuropsychanalysis describes this implicit connection⁶ as the therapist attunes nonverbally to the client on a moment-to-moment basis.⁷ The therapeutic healing process is alive and present in their bodies and energy fields. The process of therapy unfolds via implicit communication, nonverbal resonance, and somatic responsiveness between two human beings, beyond their roles as therapist and client. This implicit, embodied, and unconscious realm is ayahuasca’s prime territory, and the presence of the medicine creates a deeper connection between therapist and client, replete with mystery and meaning. The two share an appreciation for other realities and sources of insight and wisdom. At this level, cognitive behavioral techniques or analytical interpretations are irrelevant at best and harmful at worst. With ayahuasca present in both therapist and client, our understanding of the therapeutic alliance must be transformed.

Personal Experience

I must admit I’ve been hesitant to state unequivocally that it’s better to see a therapist who has their own relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca. This is hardly a requirement in graduate school or for professional licensing. But I have experienced both sides of this equation and think it’s a critical aspect of the therapeutic relationship.

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During research interviews for my ayahuasca study,⁸ which admittedly bordered on brief psychotherapy, I could feel in the person-to-person connection when the spirit of ayahuasca arose in each of us and connected us at another level. I often asked the other person if they could sense her arrival and they usually agreed. This other worldly bond deepened our conversation and trust in each other as we talked about experiences that are difficult to capture in words or are outright ineffable.

I emailed a request to interview one of my research subjects five years after he'd completed the questionnaire. He agreed and we talked on the phone. I wanted to follow-up with him because he'd had a complex relationship with Grandmother Ayahuasca, feeling guilty that he hadn't lived up to her recommendations. He had not attended an ayahuasca ceremony during that five-year period and he continued to feel guilty. Fairly soon into our exploration of his relationship with this plant spirit, I asked him if he felt her presence, "... now as we speak." He said, "Yes," almost immediately. I agreed and could feel our connection deepen into our shared mystery.

It's as though there's a third-party present — a co-therapist for me and a supportive presence for the interviewee. Acknowledging my sense of the presence of ayahuasca between us is healing for the person I'm interviewing because it affirms their relationship with this plant spirit. Such recognition is important in our Western culture since the experience of the presence of a plant spirit is outside our consensus reality. Yet it's a significant aspect of the ayahuasca healing process that continues well after the ceremony ends.

On the other side of this equation, I've been seeing a Jungian therapist who has studied Hawaiian shamanism and even has an intimate connection with Hawaiian goddesses. I can sense that she's connected to those particular spirit realms, however, as I'm not, I don't join her in that other world. She understands these unseen realms but that's not the same as a

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shared energetic connection. We still have a good working relationship in therapy, and I've clearly benefited and, at the same time, I know she cannot enter into my experiences with Grandmother Ayahuasca.

From an indigenous point of view, this concept of shared spirit realms is an accepted reality. Shamans can see into participants' visions during ceremonies and guide them through these other worlds. Also shamans have been known to impart teachings to their proteges by appearing in their nighttime dreams. The medicine seems to open a link that allows for this level of communication.

Attachment Relationship

The 74% of people in my research study who reported an on-going relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca described "a consistent presence in my life," an ever-present guide and source of wisdom, both supportive and loving. A few people wrote that this was the first time they felt truly loved in their lives even though at times it was a tough love — they felt the spirit of ayahuasca always had their best interests at heart, "showing me how to forgive myself, how and why I should live healthier." One person answered that the "relationship felt like a parental bond" and he "felt loved." Another wrote, "She is my mother...."⁹

These quotes describe an attachment bond, the kind of affective relationship between baby and primary caretaker. The key elements of an attachment bond are that the child seeks to be close to the attachment figure, experiences distress at separation, turns to the attachment figure in times of stress, and feels that the attachment figure is a secure base from which they can explore the world.¹⁰ The descriptions of a personal relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca meet these criteria in the same way that Kirkpatrick has said that people with a personal relationship with God are also in an attachment relationship.¹¹

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Moreover, these attachment relationships with an Unseen Other have the capacity to repair old attachment wounds from childhood.¹² People who grew up with parents who were not consistent, attuned, or responsive fall into avoidant, anxious, or disorganized attachment categories. They struggle with emotional dysregulation and have difficulty managing relationship distress. The narrative of their life story lacks coherence, purpose, and meaning, and they seem to have a diminished capacity for self-reflection and insight. About 50% of the population falls into these categories of insecure attachment.

In a relationship with an Unseen Other, these people heal enough to shift attachment categories and achieve an earned security attachment category with a better prognosis for long-term relationships and a coherent life story.¹³ Without equating the spirit of ayahuasca with God, both kinds of relationships are with an Unseen Other and are filled with a love that is always available.

When the experience of being loved peaks during an ayahuasca ceremony, it's as if the universe embraces us with love. This is such a healing revelation, filling us with radiant light, that we emerge the next morning with great gratitude for Grandmother Ayahuasca. Receiving cosmic love in ceremony changes the person in a profound and permanent way. A mortal therapist, even with a strong therapeutic alliance, cannot cajole the heavens to open up and shower the golden light of love upon a client sitting in her office.

Veronica was in her early thirties but had not quite gained traction in her life. It wasn't that she was lost; she just didn't have the healthy self-confidence to find a way to move forward. Veronica didn't have a college degree or independent career so she got by on minimum hourly wages. She had been in an abusive relationship that took years to escape and was currently working on her recovery.

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“Grandmother Ayahuasca is there for me in a way that no one else ever was. I can call on her day or night and she’ll respond. She’s always there and loving. So for the first time in my life, I feel lovable,” Veronica beamed as she explained her relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca.

As a therapist, I couldn’t help but ask myself if this was a textbook case of spiritual by-passing. Is Veronica relying on her relationship with an unseen spirit instead of working on healthy and realistic relationships with potential mates? Certainly some people escape the developmental challenges of so-called ‘real’ life by retreating into the spirit world and imagining personal fulfillment.

I didn’t think this was the case with Veronica. Instead, I saw her gathering her shattered sense of self into a new identity that deserved to be loved. Her relationship with Grandmother Ayahuasca was giving her a more positive foundation, allowing her to shift to a secure attachment category that would surely enable her to make better relationship choices in life. People who feel lovable create different life trajectories than people who don’t feel lovable and Veronica was, in a sense, starting over.

For Veronica, ayahuasca ceremonies were taking the place of psychotherapy she couldn’t afford. Ideally she could benefit from both, with therapy supporting and expanding her sense of being lovable, and the ceremonies deepening her relationship with Grandmother Ayahuasca. But she couldn’t afford psychotherapy. Like a good enough mother, ayahuasca can continue to heal Veronica so she can move forward with her life.

Rupture in the Therapeutic Process

Even with the presence of ayahuasca and a strong therapeutic alliance, it’s inevitable that a glitch will occur in the therapist-client relationship. One or the other will feel

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misunderstood, diminished in some way, and possibly frustrated, disappointed or upset with the other. This disconnection is called a rupture in the moment-to-moment relationship between therapist and client and it usually means that one or the other's unconscious has been tweaked.¹⁴ It can be as small an interaction as:

Client after an ayahuasca ceremony: With awe, "The lights were incredible, like fireworks."

Therapist: Slightly impatient, "Yes, but what did you learn?"

A better response from the therapist would have simply been, "Uh huh..." a neutral acknowledgement to allow the client to continue to share. But this particular therapist happens to value insight and achievement, and she wanted to get into the depth work immediately. Her timing was off. A very simple rupture.

Client: Startled by the abrupt shift, stutters, "I'm not sure, I just wanted to enjoy the beauty."

Therapist: Realizing she's out of step, "I'm sorry, I rushed you. Please go on."

Client: Accepting the repair, "Yes the lights were different this time — I could feel them streaming into my body..."

The rupture was not only about timing, it was in the wrong modality. "What did you learn?" requires a cognitive answer with linear thinking. Lights streaming into a body comes from the shamanic realm where miracles happen beyond explanation. Note the seamless shift from seeing the lights to the somatically based experience of feeling the lights enter the body. A therapist without ayahuasca experience might at best consider "light streaming into a body" to be a metaphor. A therapist with experience recognizes that this is a direct description of the process of healing.

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The challenge is how quickly can therapists catch themselves when they're out of attunement? And then, how quickly can they repair the disconnection and re-connect with the client?

From an intersubjective perspective, a rupture reflects both the client's and the therapist's psychic structure, what Bowlby called an internal working model.¹⁵ We have all constructed our egos to protect us and ensure our survival. Whatever our attachment experiences, we learned very early how to predict and understand our environment, how to survive and pursue a felt sense of safety.¹⁶ The egoic architecture we develop is typically rigid, unconscious, and reactively stubborn.

A rupture in the therapeutic relationship can entangle both the therapist's and the patient's ego. How the therapist responds in that moment can determine the course of treatment. Therapeutic skill is essential along with personal humility. In this moment, it is who the therapist is that is of utmost importance. How much awareness does the therapist have of her own psychic architecture and recurring patterns? How much flexibility does she have within her own ego structure to side-step her most reactive patterns and find an elegant pathway to re-connection with the client?

It's tempting to think that if the therapist is experienced with ayahuasca, then surely she is aware and flexible enough to respond artfully to the client. There's plenty of research showing an increase in cognitive flexibility with psychedelics.¹⁷ On the other hand, we all know people who have been sitting in ceremonies for years and are still stuck in their familiar, repetitive patterns. It's our responsibility as therapists to catch ourselves in the moment when a rupture occurs and titrate a response specific for that client.

Ayahuasca gives us the objectivity and space to dis-identify with our feelings and thoughts so that we have a split second not to react but to consciously choose how to respond.

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This is what integration looks like whether in our roles as psychotherapists or in our everyday lives. This is how we change our habitual patterns of perceiving and behaving.

Integration

My favorite bumper sticker reads, ‘Don’t believe everything you think,’ a practical summary of dis-identification especially if we extend the message to: ‘Don’t believe everything you think or feel.’

Our Default Mode Network (DMN), the neural network that occupies sixty percent of waking time with our personal narrative, anxieties about the future, rumination over the past, and other everyday worries, constitutes our habitual patterns of thinking and feeling.¹⁸

Implicit learning during the first few years of life established these neural pathways in order to survive and hopefully thrive in our family of origin. These habitual thoughts and feelings constitute our core issues, or Early Maladaptive Schemas, defined as “broad pervasive themes regarding oneself and one’s relationship with others, developed during childhood and elaborated throughout one’s lifetime...”¹⁹ These themes are the architectural building blocks of our self-construction and the self-reinforcing content of the DMN.

One person described his core issues this way: “I mean as a kid, you come to all these conclusions that aren’t necessarily right, but they help you survive in the moment. And then you spend, as far as I can tell, the rest of your life unpacking those poor coping mechanisms to see where they do and they don’t serve you.”²⁰

The good news is that this engine fueling our psychic status quo, the DMN, is disrupted during an ayahuasca ceremony as well as with other psychedelic experiences. In other words, the DMN is quieted, so the morning after the ceremony we feel more free from

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our chronic internal monologue and self-critic, experience greater inner spaciousness, and, hence, have the chance to reset our internal programming or recalibrate our psyche.

The Navajo recognize this moment in the way they greet the person returning from a vision quest, “For four days after the conclusion of the ceremony, the patient is considered, by family and friends, as if he or she is a Holy Person and given an opportunity to focus, evaluate, interpret, and experience a new self.”²¹ Our psychic architecture is deconstructed in ceremony and we have the opportunity to reimagine ourselves with spiritual maturity and conscious discernment.

Integration following an ayahuasca ceremony consists of the practice of catching ourselves when we fall into old patterns of thinking and feeling and choosing to respond differently.

Here are different ways people describe the re-programming opportunity that ayahuasca ceremonies offer: “I don’t take my moods so seriously anymore.” “I’ve always struggled with anxiety and depression, but I’m more accepting of them now.” “While I still get frustrated at times, I now have more space between action and reaction to respond in a more level-headed, caring way...usually.”

In the psychological literature this particular internal shift is described by a multitude of terms such as, de-centering, meta-awareness, cognitive distancing, self-distance perspective.²² Interestingly, neurological studies are finding that this same enhanced self-awareness occurs with both psychedelics and meditation.²³ From a clinical point of view, it’s the integrative discipline of daily self-awareness practice that maximizes a psychedelic experience.

Indigenous and Western Healing

There has been some resistance to psychotherapy in the ayahuasca communities in Western countries. It's not uncommon for people to assume that ceremonies, alone, will heal all their psychological issues. "Ayahuasca is my therapist." "I don't believe in psychotherapy; I believe in ayahuasca." And the ubiquitous, "One night of ceremony is worth ten years of psychotherapy."

One ayahuasca user described his attempts at psychotherapy, "The couple of times I tried psychotherapy, I never felt a real connection with the therapists I found. The traditional psychotherapy approaches seem too simplistic to capture how I think and feel. They're also devoid of physical and loving connections that feel healing in real life."

Admittedly, a healing ayahuasca ceremony is a hard act to follow for any psychotherapist but those trained in cognitive-behavioral approaches consistently strike out. For ayahuasca experienced people who have plumbed the depth of their souls in the darkness of night, such concrete approaches to therapy might almost feel insulting.

Yet some people are beginning to realize that sitting in ceremonies doesn't solve all their issues. One forty-something man who had attended over 130 ceremonies, wrote, "I still had unusual challenges in other areas of life, particularly around my personal relationships." This man decided to "try" psychotherapy, found a sympatico therapist and realized that psychotherapy can offer additional healing, different and complementary to ayahuasca ceremonies.²⁴

It's important to note that working therapeutically with ayahuasca does not follow the same pattern as other psychedelics where research protocols focus on a mystical or ego dissolution experience with minimal therapeutic support. People attend ceremonies repeatedly over months or years. It's possible to have both weekly therapy sessions and multiple ceremonies occurring over the same period of time. The two containers safely hold

the person, allowing for in-depth exploration of unconscious patterns as well as the mysteries of the universe. In this way, psychotherapy can inform ceremonial experiences and ayahuasca can inform the therapeutic process.

I received one message from Grandmother Ayahuasca in a ceremony that I immediately took into my therapist's office: 'Your childhood history is worse than I thought. That's why you can't do what I said.' I was both disturbed by this psychological evaluation from a plant spirit and relieved that she understood my inability to follow her advice. In my therapy session, her message evoked greater compassion and forgiveness for myself.

In ayahuasca ceremonies and psychotherapy, the challenge is to weave together insights, downloads, visions, and mystical experiences in order to translate them into greater wisdom and loving kindness in daily life. In both processes, we move from inner experiences to our lives in the outer world and back again. The ease with which we move between states of consciousness, the material and imaginal worlds, indigenous and modern cultures can lead to the healing of the soul we all seek.

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Maria Papaspryou and Tim Read

we decided with Tim to co-create a space for continuing professional support for therapists that either work with expanded states or with the integration process that follows. Alongside this we will also be offering a professional training course, focusing on quality of engagement instead of profit. This has given way to our project here : <https://instituteofpsychedelicttherapy.org/>

The website has some glitches and we are still refining a few things but it holds the main structures, ideas and spirit of work for now.

We would like to extend a few invitations to you but will start with the following:

We will be holding monthly keynote events starting on Monday the 3rd of May and we wanted to invite you to open the space up for us with a talk if your time and resources allow you to do so. It will be a two-hour event (1 hour talk, 10 minutes

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break, 15-20 minutes breakout rooms, 25-30 minutes Q&A). We would be able to offer you £200 for your time and energy as well as hopefully an interesting and nourishing exchange with our newly forming community in the UK. It would be a gift and an honour to host you and your work.

Talk

Integration – Lifelong Healing Process

What the hell do we even mean by integration anyway? Insert in talk (American approach)

Everyone talks about integration, but what do we really mean by integration? Rachel will present a working theory about levels of integration from talking circles to what she calls 'spa integration,' meaning massage, journaling, yoga, etc to on-going depth psychotherapy. We'll reflect on what the current research protocols consider to be integration. Rachel will share some of her findings from interviews with psychedelic women elders who have been working underground for more than two decades.

Rachel Harris | Integration: A Lifelong Healing Process

Abstract

Everyone talks about integration, but what do we really mean by integration?

Rachel will present a working theory about levels of integration from talking circles to what she calls 'spa integration,' meaning massage, journaling, yoga, etc to on-going depth psychotherapy.

We will reflect on what the current research protocols consider to be integration and Rachel will also share some of her findings from interviews with psychedelic women elders who have been working underground for more than two decades.

Rachel's Bio

Rachel Harris, Ph.D., is a psychologist with both a research and a clinical background. She was in the 1968 residential program at Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California, and remained on the staff for a number of years. During the decade, she worked in academic research, Rachel received a New Investigator's Award from the National Institutes of

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Health and published over forty scientific studies in peer-reviewed journals. She also worked as a psychological consultant to Fortune 500 companies including the UN. Rachel was in private psychotherapy practice for thirty-five years, specializing in people interested in psychospiritual development. Rachel is the author of *Listening to Ayahuasca: New Hope for Depression, Addiction, PTSD, and Anxiety*. She's currently working on a book based on interviews with psychedelic women elders who have been working underground for more than two decades. Visit Rachel at her website, www.listeningtoayahuasca.com.