

## Need for a broader discussion on psychedelic therapy

### Potrzeba szerszej dyskusji na temat terapii psychodelicznej

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Address this letter to the Editorial Board of the “Journal of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology” as an advocate of a critical yet hopeful approach to psychedelic-assisted therapy for the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. Global mental health is a key challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the available therapies are currently facing well-known limitations. The introduction of novel approaches, which focus on prevention and show efficacy regardless of diagnostic boundaries, could be a milestone in improving mental health on a global scale.

Recent years have witnessed a renaissance in research on psychedelics, which has not only provided important insights into the mechanisms of action of these substances, but also demonstrated their broad transdiagnostic therapeutic applications. This paper aims to shed some light on the evolving landscape of psychedelic research, highlighting the implications for psychiatric treatment.

My main aim is to encourage our community of mental health professionals to take more interest in the topic and actively engage in research, decriminalisation and dissemination of knowledge on psychedelic therapy (other name: psychedelic-assisted therapy, PAT).

Psychedelic substances such as psilocybin and lysergic acid diethylamide (commonly known as LSD) were extensively investigated in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; however, this line of research was abandoned prematurely due to social and political concerns. The contemporary renaissance of interest in psychedelics is driven by a growing body of evidence suggesting their efficacy in the treatment of various psychiatric disorders (meta-analyses by Luoma et al., 2020 and Galvão-Coelho et al., 2021).

The scale of the use of psychedelics (note that the possession of these substances is still illegal in Poland), as well as the motivation to use these substances are some of the indicators of the aforementioned renaissance. **Research on a representative group of Poles ( $N = 1,053$ ), which we conducted in December 2022, showed that nearly 6% of the Polish**

**population, or about 2,000,000 people, have taken psychedelics at least once in their lifetime** (Holas and Kamińska, in preparation). Curiosity (62%) was found to be the most common motivation. Other important reasons reported by respondents included a desire to improve their general well-being and their mental health (13% and 11%, respectively).

#### CLINICAL TRIALS AND PUBLIC INTEREST

The sharp increase in the number of clinical trials assessing the efficacy of psychedelic-assisted therapy may signal a paradigm shift in psychiatric research. Aday et al. (2022) and other researchers highlight the growing scientific and public interest in the therapeutic potential of psychedelics. The growing openness to these substances that we see today requires a solid basis in the form of large-scale clinical trials that meet high standards and provide sound scientific evidence allowing for ethical exploitation of the therapeutic potential of psychedelics. Current research findings, although quite promising, still form an insufficiently solid ground to draw conclusions on the documented clinical utility of psychedelics. However, they do raise legitimate hopes, expressed by both scientists and the public. Since a number of large clinical trials on PAT are presently being conducted in many centres and countries around the world, the coming years should bring conclusive results. It is to be hoped that Polish researchers will also become involved in this research; as far as I am aware, first studies on the use of psychedelics in the treatment of psychiatric disorders in our country are to be launched soon.

#### THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL AND MECHANISMS OF ACTION

A recently published meta-analysis of placebo-controlled trials ( $n = 9$ ) on psychedelic-assisted therapy for

various psychiatric disorders has shown its efficacy in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, depressive and anxiety disorders associated with life-threatening conditions, and social anxiety in autistic individuals (Luoma et al., 2020). Another meta-analysis of randomised trials assessing the treatment of mood disorders ( $n = 257$ ) with psilocybin ( $n = 8$ ), LSD ( $n = 3$ ) and ayahuasca ( $n = 1$ ) showed significant moderate effect sizes for the reduction of depressive symptoms in acute, medium-term (2–7 days post-treatment) and long-term psychedelic treatment (Galvão-Coelho et al., 2021). It is worth noting that studies has resulted in 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) and psilocybin being granted “breakthrough therapy” status by the US Food and Drug Administration for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Although the above data come from the still quite few randomised trials, a growing body of scientific evidence shows the potential efficacy of PAT in a wide range of psychiatric disorders, including substance dependence, eating disorders, psychosomatic syndromes, obsessive-compulsive disorder, dissociative (conversion) disorders or even personality disorders (see e.g. Kočárová et al., 2021).

There are many views on the mechanisms of action of psychedelic substances and psychedelic therapy. According to Carhart-Harris, one of the leading researchers on psychedelics, their transdiagnostic effect results from their ability to enhance neuronal and psychological plasticity (Kočárová et al., 2021). The combination of psychedelic-induced plasticity with an appropriate psychotherapeutic context also has prophylactic potential as it can promote healthy adaptation and help build resilience, which are protective factors in the context of long-term well-being. Researchers have further shown that PAT can reduce the tendency to ruminate and other persistent forms of negative thinking by modulating the brain’s default mode network, as well as induce altered states of consciousness characterised by “ego dissolution”, which promotes flexibility of thought and disidentification with rigid beliefs – mechanisms also suggested for meditation (see Holas and Kamińska, 2023 for review).

It is worth adding that psychedelic-assisted therapy introduces a holistic approach to psychiatric treatment, placing emphasis on the importance of subjective experience and integrating pharmacology with psychotherapy. Combining psychotherapy and psychedelics can be conceptualised as the induction of a transformative subjective experience with positive long-term consequences for mental health rather than daily neurochemical correction of brain dysfunction, as in typical psychiatric treatment. **There seems to be a paradigm shift occurring not only in psychiatry, but also in psychotherapy** – by expanding its perspective to include neuroscientific insights and the inclusion of altered or deepened states of consciousness triggered by psychedelic substances (see also Schenberg, 2018).

## THE ROLE OF INFORMED PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Although the public discourse on psychedelics has evolved over recent years, misconceptions and stereotypes still persist. Our research on attitudes towards psychedelics in Polish society, which was conducted on a representative sample ( $N = 1,051$ ) in December 2022, showed a prevailing negative overall attitude towards these substances (43%) (Holas et al., in preparation). The attitude of Poles towards psychedelic-assisted therapy was slightly better (49% of respondents declared a neutral attitude). There is therefore much to be done to promote adequate, science- rather than stereotype-based knowledge of psychedelics in Poland (and worldwide). It seems that greater participation of mental health professionals in the discourse and open public communication are crucial to dispel myths and promote an informed public understanding of these substances and their therapeutic potential.

Openness and knowledge of PAT among psychotherapists are particularly important for the popularisation of psychedelic therapy. Meir et al. (2023) assessed the openness of psychotherapists to engage their patients in psilocybin-assisted therapy. Although 77.4% of therapists agreed they would inform eligible patients about PAT, most would still recommend traditional psychotherapy. Importantly, up to 76.5% of respondents confirmed that their greater knowledge of psilocybin would increase their likelihood to inform patients about PAT. Promoting knowledge about psychedelics is therefore also needed among mental health professionals. Optimistically, sessions with presentations on psychedelic therapy were held for the first time at the Section III Psychotherapy Conference in October 2023 in Warsaw, and they were met with very great interest among the participants.

Addressing the fears and anxieties associated with psychedelic experiences requires a nuanced, patient-cantered approach and improved therapeutic protocols. As highlighted recently in “Psychiatric News” (Zagorski, 2023), the unique nature of psychedelic therapy requires providing patients with much more information about PAT and an extended discussion about informed consent to therapy.

In this context, ensuring the safety of patients participating in psychedelic research is of paramount importance. Rigorous screening protocols, adequate preparation for substance administration and careful monitoring are essential to minimise potential risks. It is worth noting at this point that the most commonly investigated and used psychedelics, such as LSD and psilocybin, have a very high safety index and a very low risk profile, even under unsupervised conditions (e.g. Nutt et al., 2010).

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the renaissance of psychedelic research and therapies is a unique opportunity for the community of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychotherapists.

When navigating this territory, still only tentatively explored, collaboration between researchers, clinicians and policy makers, and clear communication with the public are crucial. It is my sincere hope that this letter will initiate further dialogue in your esteemed journal, and more broadly within our community, engaging in ongoing discourse and contributing to the dissemination of knowledge about the transformative potential of psychedelics in psychiatric care.

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