

MDMA AND THE DEFAULT MODE NETWORK

Key words: *default mode network, anterior cingulate gyrus, complex post-traumatic stress disorder.*

After trauma many people can easily get stuck in troublesome moods, habits, compulsive behaviors, and even addictions. The trauma may be the core problem, the rest symptoms. Remember my oft-repeated motto: “The problem is not the problem.” This is to suggest we won’t get unstuck from our mental mud until we get to the root of things. Spray the fire extinguisher at the flames, not at the smoke.

First, one thing that keeps us stuck is an overactive *anterior cingulate gyrus* region of the brain. The duty of this upper area is to help us shift gears, to move from one way of thinking to another. When it is not operating properly (hyperactive) we often get stuck on memories of what was done to us and, with blame and judgement, repeat our story endlessly – perseverating and ruminating. Atop that we may make conclusions about our unworthiness based upon *why* the trauma occurred. “Maybe I picked the wrong person to hang out with and because of that choice she abused me.” Or, “maybe I wasn’t an adequate sexual partner, so my husband strayed.” Perhaps, “I’ve always known that I am badly flawed from top to bottom.”

Second, there is a larger network of connections across the brain that when overused can lock us into negative, habituated thinking. The *default mode network* is our automatic “fall back” place, where our thinking goes when we self-reflect -- like any time there is a quiet spell or an undistracted moment. If we unknowingly fall into this rut over and over again, the groove just keeps getting cut deeper and deeper as we hear our own self-imposed propaganda over and over again. Our inner gremlin says, “I am a loser, a loser, a big loser!”

Then the neural connections – because they are used so often – wire the brain in a patterned way of neuronal activity that is difficult to escape. It becomes second nature to think in this unhelpful way. We get stuck in negativity, depression, and anxiety. Worse still, we accept these errant thoughts as truths because, after all, they arose within us; certainly we wouldn’t lie to ourselves.

So what can help us break free? What can alter the *anterior cingulate gyrus* and the *default mode network* deeply ingrained patterns? MDMA and psilocybin may help, especially when matched with psychotherapy (like “The Work” by Byron Katie) that encourages us to examine our thought processes as sometimes the problem is within, not just outside of us where we normally think deceptions and danger reside.

From brain scans at Imperial College in London and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, we have learned that new connections (rewiring) in the brain occur with the careful ingestion of these reset or rebooting medicines, *psychoplastogens*. It is like old and ineffective wires are pruned and many new wires are formed, often in a matter of hours.

When this happens, the brain is freed up to navigate into new thought processes or realms without the anchoring of the *default mode network*. This can be liberating. It can allow old trauma-generated moods and affect (what some call *complex post-traumatic stress disorder*) to expire. And CPTSD is different from PTS and PTSD in that it is more than just physiological reactions to trauma (insomnia, flashbacks, panic attacks, etc.), CPTSD is about negative alterations in our worldview where distrust, cynicism, and self-disdain reign supreme.

Patients have been shown to break free from old ruminations, old fears, addictions, and trauma by creating new neuronal roadmaps – new informational roots to travel that access new thinking abilities. But pills can’t do it alone, psychotherapy before and after is essential to get full benefits. To accept professional help and move beyond “a pill for every ill” we must challenge our society’s revised serenity prayer: God grant me a magic bullet pill to take away my addiction to magic bullet solutions.

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MDMA, TRAUMA, AND DISSOCIATION

Trauma is expected over everyone's lifespan. In that sense it is a normal human phenomenon. When money can be made from supporting individuals recovering from adversity, that culture will, not too surprisingly, discover more trauma and have stronger reactions to it. But to "serve" a patient we often pathologize them through a diagnostic naming process. At that point insurance companies might pay for clinical mental health care, our profession's alternative for a loving community embrace.

It may offer insight into the trauma experience by noting that during frightening events, no matter your age, there is a tendency to "go away," what psychologists refer to as *dissociating*. Commonly, children who have undergone sexual abuse have reported observing the experience, for example, as if they are floating above their bed and from that elevated perspective are somewhat detached from the horror. All of us have the innate ability to pull back from a potentially harmful event. This may lead to cognitive repression, or what Paul Pearsall calls a "healthy forgettery," documenting and holding it in the body until, at a later time, we are strong enough to examine it.

This skillset (vs. pathological reaction) helps buffer us from scary experiences. It is built into our psychophysiological system and can be understood as a form of self-preservation. Let's try to understand it as being in *observer mode*, which makes trauma somewhat easier to manage than being fully in *participant mode*.

Psychologists have long regarded *dissociation* as unnatural and unhealthy. They seem to believe that by not being fully in this reality we are avoidant, running away, or even "pre-psychotic." Maybe this enduring, primal survival mechanism is built into our system because it can serve a useful purpose. Could it be that psychologists are slightly detached from the reality of the mind and body? Who's got the "problem?"

Beyond *dissociation* (splitting off or momentarily disconnecting), there are gradients and subtypes. For instance I have observed *partial dissociation* that athletes experience when they are "in the zone." I've heard sex abusers tell me because, at some level, they knew they were engaging in something that was so

terribly wrong, they had to stand back a bit while the abuse was being perpetrated. Simultaneously, their victims may have been doing the same.

Then there is the subtype called *derealization* (feeling this can't be real) in which the disturbing event is so unnatural and so unfamiliar, that one wonders if we are in touch with reality. During treatment, many MDMA participants are exposed to scenes and insights within an expanded consciousness that initially, on an intellectual level, may seem slightly unnatural and unfamiliar. On a feeling level, they can be vaguely familiar and quite comforting. Ultimately it becomes a recognizable and retrievable state that can be tapped at will, again and again. It is a "go to" state for anchoring that can replace an old default state of fear, guilt, and shame.

Another subtype is *depersonalization* (my thoughts and feelings don't seem to belong to me). Perhaps, during an MDMA treatment, you intercept stored memories, the collective unconscious from your human ancestral line, or from the animal world of which you are a part but unfortunately *disassociated* (different from dissociation) from long ago. For example, if a relative you never met on this plane appeared and offered some nonverbal *knowings* that are ineffable (difficult to put into words), the experience could be labeled as a psychological disorder OR a possible growth experience – you pick.

All MDMA participants, in one way or another, stand back and notice during their treatments. The *observer mode* is common. It is like a dose of Buddhism, when you observe from a momentarily detached position and figure out what your life, including the traumas, have been about. This allows objectivity to occur, not psychosis.

When I have observed this helpful process it has shown up in a variety of ways, all of which have something in common. Examples:

- I was riding atop a giraffe, looking down on the people below.
- Maharaji, Ram Dass's guru, referred to being a "50 foot tall monkey," who could see things from a very elevated perspective in the trees.
- "I flew like Eagle, up into the sky and onto a nest, and looked down on the people below from this perspective." Then insights arrived.
- Hippo's appearance might be about going down into the underworld, eyes coming up like periscopes, to check out the middle world, but not feeling fully comfortable there...yet.

- Soaring into outer space and meeting up with “Sky Mother” who buttresses us, lovingly comforts and reassures us, and sends us back to the earthly realm to continue our middle world existence more effectively.
- One person said, “Butterflying was carrying me off. Other moments I was like Hummingbird, darting around checking everything out.”

All of these examples reflect our “built in,” but previously dozing ability, to observe our life with added clarity. Indigenous art constantly accentuates this common theme – usually as a bird taking flight out of a human head. Or, in ancient Mayan culture, a human head arising from a frog. Humans and animals guiding each other.

This type of distancing from a traumatic past is not necessarily psychosis and doesn’t always need to be medicated away. The process gets complicated when we try to talk about being the observer of our lives while observing our observer observing. Sound crazy? Or elevated? With clarity the next recovery step is successful integration of all our life experiences so they can fit more lucidly and compassionately into an updated narrative. At that point we embrace our Great Story rather than just the first edition when we fought monsters.

Consciousness is awareness of awareness. MDMA may help us to become conscious of our various realms of consciousness. We become more fully alert and alive in this layered existence. No longer are we trying to avoid or escape, but we dig into life, or soar above life for a short time, so that we might make sense of it all. The paradox is that I may have to momentarily “go away” to gain comfort in being fully present with my fully authentic self.

“Being monkeys, when we encounter a translinguist [beyond one form of languaging] object, a kind of cognitive dissonance is set up in our hindbrain. We try to pour language over it and it sheds it like water off a duck’s back.”

Terence McKenna in *The Archaic Revival*

“A larger story is revealed by the wounding. When psychological energy is no longer bonded to social forms, then, uncensored, depth images and archetypes can have their day.” Jean Houston in *The Search for the Beloved*

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MDMA AND THE UP-DOWN, RIGHT-LEFT BRAIN

The MDMA journey can create *knowings* and *visions*; it may expand our previous understanding of *consciousness*. This sortie can lead us to *understanding, empathy, intuition, integration, creativity, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion*. All of these concepts are already residing within us, and within the universe. MDMA awakens these nascent parts of ourselves leaving us with an enhanced *connectivity*. This process is called *healing*.

But how does it do this? What parts of the brain are impacted by the Greater Consciousness, God, or whatever a person wants to call the guiding force of creation that is playing hide-and-seek with us?

I have previously explained the *up-down* theory of MDMA. Refreshing your memory, it goes like this. When trauma or a heredity factor causes our brain's deep limbic system (mood control center) to operate with high energy (causing low mood), the basal ganglia (our anxiety factory) and the two amygdala (fear centers) rev up and life becomes unpleasant. When this happens electrical firing in the brain goes straight up and activates the anterior cingulate gyrus (obsessing center). As a consequence we can't let go of unpleasant thoughts and emotions -- we struggle to shift gears and ditch the prevailing mood. At the same time, much like how a circuit breaker works, the orbital pre-frontal cortex (location of the brain's logical orchestra leader) shuts down because of the energy surge originating from behind and below. Bottom line, we react emotionally rather than with insight and wisdom.

The ingredients in MDMA calm the deep limbic and reroute energy away from the cingulate gyrus and toward the frontal region. The result is we become calm and see things more intelligently and people more compassionately.

The *left-right* theory of MDMA that I espouse goes this way. The left brain hemisphere (a very general term) has the duty of establishing beliefs and interpreting events with language, often with little regard for reality. It creates a separate and distinct version of who we are that is referred to as the *self*, which should be regarded more like a verb than a noun. In other words, it is constantly making up bullshit that we subscribe to and live by. While it wants to make sense of the world and keep us safe, it is this brain area that creates suffering by

“helping;” it creates patterns, categories, and stories that we tend to believe. After all, they originated in our own mind, with the help of our brain, so they must be true. Nope! Often not! Like a bumper sticker I once saw read: Don’t Believe Everything You Think.

Humans easily confuse language with reality. That is why other animals don’t seem to suffer from neurosis, illusions, and delusions quite like we do. Ram Dass suggested why we are drawn to gurus and religion for answers during times of confusion. He wrote: “All spiritual practices are illusions created by illusionists to escape illusion.” Because the left brain creates classifications, especially in dichotomous forms, and because it weaves together our repeated stories to form wild beliefs, it oversimplifies the world we live in. Nuances are lost. Understood this way, the suffering we are trying to resolve is actually a creation from within, creations of our left-brain interpreter. If we are not extraordinarily careful, we may over-identify with the interpreter of life and the faulty conclusions of the left brain.

This brain region also encourages complaining, namely objecting to things the way they are. And when we take these judgments too seriously, they become “the way things are.” Like the old Zen saying goes: “Right and wrong become the sickness of the mind.” Fortunately, MDMA can quiet this intellectual nonsense and allow us to find respite, and some real answers, spending more time in right brain activity.

The right hemisphere, unlike the left, is the big picture center. It processes the whole panorama of life experiences on a continuum where I am on the same spectrum as “jerks” and “abusers.” It helps us get beyond individual parts in the system so that we can see the relationships and connectivity between life energies. And like the Buddha said, “To understand everything is to forgive everything.”

Further, the right brain is about *being in* and *observing* reality versus repeatedly engaging in thinking, analyzing, or emoting. In essence, it operates without as much thought, by which I mean without so many words or distorted beliefs, fewer good guys and bad guys within their respective diagnoses. If reality were an ocean, the left hemisphere could only note one wave at a time, whereas the right brain can see the vastness of the sea all at once and stand in awe.

I’m reminded of Edgar Mitchell, the astronaut who had an overwhelming sense of universal connectedness while looking out the space capsule window while heading home from the moon. He intuited that the universe is in some way a form of consciousness and it was so large it defied verbal description. It was a *knowing*.

And it was ineffable. One might apply the Zen concept of *prajna* here: wisdom beyond wisdom.

William James, a founder of the field of psychology, over one hundred years ago wrote about a nonsensory form of intelligence he called “fringe consciousness.” It was a way of *knowing* that didn’t seem to have direct sensory, perceptual, or language content to it. He likened it to intuition; it didn’t always involve direct thought, was ineffable, yet believable. James believed it connected dots in a much bigger picture allowing our consciousness to expand to distant places, beyond the confines of the left brain.

In the right hemisphere there is a location called the *right temporoparietal junction* that does nothing but think about other people’s perspective to round out our picture of life events. MDMA seems to activate this area. And when we see the interconnectivity of all things, the right brain creates an immersing wave of empathy, compassion, and gratitude, even in response to “bad” things that have happened to us. Maybe this is what Joseph Campbell meant when he said, “When real trouble comes, your humanity is awakened.”

When the right brain comes online and stays online, thanks to the medicine, something else can happen. Many people become more creative. And with the basal ganglia quieted, even their handwriting, dexterity, and artistic abilities improve.

MDMA’s ability to expand consciousness makes us better observers of, and participants in, life. As Nisargadatta Maharaj said, “You are not in the world, but the world is in you.”

MORE READING: *No Self, No Problem* by Chris Niebauer

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MDMA, SOUL LOSS & SOUL RETRIEVAL

When a person is seriously abused as a child or adult part of their life-energy can split off. Psychologists call this *dissociation*. That part of their soul can become lost in non-ordinary reality, a region called the unconscious. We jokingly say of some people, “Nobody’s home.” But this is no joke. After most of us have been badly traumatized, indeed, large parts of us do not remain at home.

We may feel fragmented and lose part of our memory. Chronic depression is another symptom of soul loss, characterized by apathy, listlessness, emotional numbness, misdirected anger, emptiness, and being without joy.

The soul is our essence. When we are abused it as if someone steals that innate, trusting, and innocent part of ourselves (*susto*). It is as if the soul is catapulted from our body; it is an innate intelligence at work that is helping us to survive unmanageable and frightening circumstances.

To explore our inner being with a large part of it, the soul, being missing, can be fruitless. For the soul to be explored, it has to be in residence. For psychotherapy to succeed a person must be at home. So how does one do inner exploratory examination under such circumstances? That is when MDMA can be useful. It helps uncover and release trauma, calms the psyche, and restores self-compassion.

Inner sight can be allowed when MDMA calms the brain’s fear and anxiety regions. For a few people, particularly when employing an indigenously inspired form of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, the pineal gland can be impacted and the “third eye” activated. When this happens internal vision may develop. And with it, the possible appearance of guardians, including animals. Collectively, they can empower a person to confront and surmount difficult abuse memories, even years later.

What may result from abuse author John Bradshaw once called *toxic shame*. It can also be defined as soul loss. Shame is actually the sickness that results from unintegrated and unresolved trauma. Soul theft is the catalytic event. And all shame sickness is homesickness.

When MDMA returns a person to their pre-trauma state, I call it a *homecoming*. They are back where they started in life with a lighthearted essence and a sense of wonder and awe for the world they are a part of.

After MDMA treatment(s), soul retrieval feels like one's work is done. In reality, it marks the beginning. But now, with the mind fully online, and with emotions under greater control, psychotherapy becomes more brisk, more effective. Therapy changes a person's reality and, as a result, they feel empowered, the opposite of the helplessness that was felt during trauma.

MDMA is known as a *relational medicine* and as a *heart medicine*. As Sandra Ingerman wrote, "As we move into right relationship with ourselves, it is so much easier to move into right relationship with others."

Soul loss is a spiritual illness; MDMA is an empathogen and entheogen that reinvigorates the spiritual life.

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MDMA AND THE RELEASE OF TRAUMA

Trauma can be regarded as an intense, earth-shaking, powerful, life-changing, and unforgettable event that leaves us changed. Outside of our culture traumas can be regarded as a positive or negative event. Unwanted sex, in the West for example, is uniformly agreed to be a negative trauma for many. An MDMA spiritual experience is often regarded as a “positive trauma” that paves over a pre-existing painful event, mitigating its impact on us. Both can be powerful and life-changing experiences.

In the West we are labeled and sometimes stigmatized by our trauma(s): PTS, PTSD, or CPTSD. They are often regarded as chronic, enduring, and virtually unshakeable. Other cultures do not always regard powerful events as the prelude to a downfall but they can be regarded as a challenge that if carefronted mindfully, can lift them to a higher level of life satisfaction. Some cultures regard this phenomenon as *normality*, and a few psychologists in the West are now calling this uplifting phenomenon, *posttraumatic growth* (PTG).

Indigenous societies commonly have a word like *wetiko* that is described almost like a thought virus – an anti-information virus. It is likened to an unconscious bug in the mind that subverts clear thinking and blocks a full and accurate meaning behind events. Native peoples say it causes something akin to *psychic blindness* or insanity. It can arise from an individual’s long practiced way of thinking, or its origins may in a culture’s programming – a collective psychosis. It substitutes false information for the real thing, like a negative hallucination can do.

MDMA can cut thru this nonsense and, like a truth detector, help people arrive at a more accurate view of their past, present, and future. Much of what was previously unnoticed because of self- and cultural-programming can now percolate up. Compassionate discernment often results, followed by healing.

Commonly, victims of trauma in North American cultures are encouraged to attend “survivor” groups. In an attempt to heal the trauma, victims are referred to meetings when they tell their story of pain over and over again, recycling it from thought, to mouth, to the ears, and back into thought again. This self-generated and negative feedback loop (indoctrination) originates in our mind, is validated and

supported by listeners, and round and round it goes. With others attempts to help we can deceptively collude in the notion that this process will heal us. If we say something negative about ourselves long enough we come to believe it. We stay stuck in the mental mud of our making and conclude it is the result of what happened to us rather than what we did to ourselves in response. We may end up victimizing ourselves.

Jung concluded it is important not to settle for being “disturbed.” Rather we should actively disturb, or unsettle, the thinking that has left us feeling disturbed. He introduced the concept of *active imagination*. We are encouraged not to passively listen to everything our unconscious tells us – even from generations past – but to fully engage with and participate in a creative and challenging dialogic relationship with its contents. The goal is to move unconscious thoughts into conscious realms where they can be examined more clearly, not just reflexively.

Depression causes us to think unclearly because our brain’s deep limbic region is highly activated by feelings of anxiety, fear, and despair. MDMA, however, can spark a discerning dialogue with our subconscious and intergenerational unconscious minds. Literally, we talk to ourselves and, to put it bluntly, call out our own bullshit. But when MDMA does its work, it quiets this lower area, activates the clear thinking prefrontal cortex, and new insights come online. Patients become their own therapist, often with greater insightfulness than the person (often a total stranger) they had previously paid to do this work for them.

MDMA treatment can cause persons to develop a sense of oneness or connection with the rest of humanity, or even the universe. This *unity consciousness* disrupts our brain’s natural and unhealthy tendency toward duality. And in duality the world is made up of simplistic notions of “good guys” and “bad guys,” perpetrators and victims -- in other words, a very dangerous place we are inclined to disengage from. While that simplistic notion may momentarily feel good, it distorts reality and can delay healing. Rejoining the Whole, our larger community, or “all of our relatives” as Native Americans call it – with clear thinking and discernment, minus the heavy overlay of emotionality from the deep limbic region – we can unlearn and be restored. Many previous victims say the MDMA experience reset their minds to what feels like a more natural, calm, and balanced condition.

Albert Einstein: “It is the theory [that we have been indoctrinated with] which decides what we observe.”

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MDMA AND SOUL WORK

I have often thought of the MDMA experience as spelunking – cave exploration of a sort. A burrowing down into the inner workings of the heart. A spiritual exploration in the dark caverns of the soul. Searching for the core of our very being and for once, really knowing it.

This journey begins with an attempt to define the soul. While defining the invisible will always elude us to some degree, I'll take a stab at what it might mean.

Soul may be our essence, the sweetest core of our being. It may have an unreachable depth but when we get near it, we feel authenticity, vitality, and oftentimes a clearer picture of our purpose and meaning. Soul is a force that rises up after people have endured many adventures and many pains, always trying to make sense of life on the personal as well as the big picture levels.

A person in touch with their soul tends to radiate a glow. They seem to have a strong and contented demeanor. You get the feeling that they have really lived in a big way and have made sense of all the clutter, clatter, and confusion of life. They got the underlying message underneath it all.

Theologian and psychotherapist, Thomas Moore, has said that without a developed soul, we live a life of hollow emptiness, have a shallow and metallic existence, and feel lost. Without a soul we become preoccupied with ourselves and may be somewhat antisocial. When it is alive, however, Moore likened the soul to “the plasma in our veins.” Then a deep flowing connection to our best inner self exists, all the while being tethered to a giant world around us. In this way, soul gets stretched beyond our skin suits. Seen this way, soul could be regarded as a verb more than a thing.

It may take a relationship with another human to awaken to our deepest self. So, when folks reference a “soul mate,” I think it means they have found a duplicate *out there* that awakens part of themselves, *in here*.

MDMA heightens our awareness of that best Self residing inside of us. It focuses our awareness of the relationships we have had with others, the good, the bad, the ugly. Once that exploration wraps up, something else starts to unfold, namely a much bigger connection with society, Earth, and the universe(s).

I'm referring to the sacred kicking in. And when that important verb *religion* develops, it takes on a very personal form. No more generic creeds and doctrines to reflexively espouse, but an individually meaningful way of walking on Earth with each step kissing the Mother, as Thich Nhat Hahn would say, becoming more sacred with the passage of time. No more sleep walking "salad bar" religions; this is an entirely different way of navigating thru life.

What I have noticed in some of the patients who have gone spelunking with MDMA, one of the big differences between their old and new religion is that they become more focused on going deep rather than being right. Their response to previously unpopular beliefs is less judgmental, less harsh, and more compassionate. One person said that while they were "under the influence" they became "inebriated with the Divine."

A theology of unknowing is necessary for a theology of knowing. Sometime the closet has to be cleaned out, ideas must be unlearned, and with a little nudge from MDMA, we can become sophisticated enough to know what we don't know.

"The modern rational atheists and skeptics are like guardians at the temple gate ridiculing the idiotic away while themselves unaware of what lies within."

David Chadwick

READINGS:

A Religion of One's Own by Thomas Moore

Crooked Cucumber by David Chadwick

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