Trying psychedelics [1]

Dear Alice,

I have two concerns:

My boyfriend claims psychedelics open your mind to new ideas/perspectives and help you experience the "spiritual world." I maintain that anything you see or think is just a result from a brain overloaded on chemicals. However, I am beginning to feel closed-minded, and I would like to have your opinion on psychedelics — are they beneficial if used for a one-time experience, and will they immediately/permanently alter the way I view the world and myself? Given that I have doubts, should I even try anything this mind-altering? I have read your answers pertaining to short-/long-term effects, but I wanted to know if there was any actual evidence of the beneficial effects.

— Psychedelically concerned

Answer

Dear Psychedelically concerned,

Lysergic acid diethylamide, (also frequently called LSD and acid), mushrooms (also called 'shrooms), and other members of the psychedelic family — sometimes called "club drugs" — can be powerful, mind-altering, and, for some, mind-expanding drugs. Ecstasy ("X" or "E") is a stimulant that can also have psychedelic effects. LSD and X are synthesized drugs, so out-of-body sensations associated with LSD and loving, touchy-feeliness associated with X are indeed chemically induced. Both LSD and X mimic hallucinogens that naturally occur in 'shrooms. While only you (and you alone) can make the choice to experiment with mind-altering drugs, the information in this response may help you make an informed decision.

Despite the fact that some studies are investigating the ways in which monitored, small-dose psychedelic use might be beneficial in the field of medicine, there are currently no known health benefits for recreational users. People are often drawn to psychedelics because of the spiritual awakening or mind expansion they hope to experience. Many people describe feeling heightened emotions or senses while they're on psychedelic trips. However, there isn't evidence that psychedelic drugs stimulate creativity, nor that they increase sexual arousal. What does the
evidence demonstrate? Psychedelics may produce a range of short- and long-term effects. 

Short-term effects include:

- Hallucinations, which distort a person's perception of senses and may include seeing, hearing, touching, or smelling things that may not exist
- Intensified sensory effects that include sharper and brighter colors, along with a heightened hearing ability
- Alterations in perception of time
- Increased energy and heart rate
- Nausea

Additionally, long-term effects include:

- Potential for persistent psychosis in the form of visual disturbances, paranoid thinking, lack of organization, and mood swings
- Hallucinogen persisting perception disorder (HPPD) [2], which includes significant visual disturbances such as halos or trails following objects in motion
- Memory impairment
- Recurrent flashbacks

Lists adapted from drugabuse.gov [3].

Effects of psychedelic drugs such as these depend largely on a person's mood, expectations, and level of experience with the drug(s). Users report that the environment in which these drugs are taken also plays a role in their effect. Noisy, stressful settings (such as raves or music festivals) are often more exaggerated with sensory overload, being more troublesome for users than quieter, peaceful settings. Psychedelics have also been noted to dissolve the barrier between an individual's perceived environment and their sense of self, meaning that information received from the visual field in the environment not only impacts their thoughts and level of consciousness but shapes their state of mind. For first-timers — especially those who are unsure about trying these kinds of drugs — sense of doubt during psychedelic use may magnify into extreme anxiety. For those those known to have symptoms of depression, schizophrenia, or paranoia, not trying or using psychedelics is strongly advised, as the drugs may aggravate any present symptoms.

In using psychedelics, you run the risk experiencing a trip which may lead to harmful situations. One concern of psychedelic use is overheating. Because these drugs increase body temperature (which can be exacerbated by hot, crowded environments), in extreme circumstances a user may have liver, kidney, or cardiovascular system failure. Users also frequently become dehydrated. This may cause them to drink toxic amounts of water (also known as water intoxication or hyponatremia [4]), which can be fatal.

As for you, these external pressures and internal doubts may be reasons to consider alternative ways of exploring your mind. If you determine that trying psychedelics isn’t for you, in what other ways could you expand your mind? How do you define mind-expansion? If it’s risk that you’re concerned about, in what lower-risk ways can you become less closed-minded? Would you consider seeking out the support of another person (family, friend, or even a mental health
professional) or experience that could result in some mind-expansion? Thinking through these questions may help you decide what might be a suitable alternative for you. There are all kinds of ways to open your mind, and you can choose the ways that appeal most to you.

Curiosity and open-mindedness abound,

Alice!

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