Cancer at the Dinner Table: Experiences of Psilocybin-Assisted Psychotherapy for the Treatment of Cancer-Related Psychological Distress*

Thomas C. Swift, Alexander B. Belser, Gabrielle Agin-Liebes, Neşe Devenot, Sara Terrana, Harris L. Friedman, Jeffrey Guss, Anthony Bossis, Stephen Ross

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The New Science of Psychedelics

Recent studies are finding that drugs such as LSD and psilocybin can help to alleviate depression, and that profound things to teach us about how the mind works.

By Michael Pollan
May 3, 2018 11:08 a.m. ET

Ecstasy as a Remedy for PTSD? You Probably Have Some Questions.

By Dave Philipps
May 1, 2018
- Existential Confrontation with Death
- Trauma from Cancer and Tx’s
- Loss of Identity and Physical Capacities

Obsessive Ruminative Problem Solving
Collapse of Normative Life Meaning
Depression
Hypervigilance to threats
  (Cancer Recurrence / Death)
Activated CNR
Unable to Slow-Down (or meditate)
Shame/ Blame “why me”
Unable to take in new data
Closed to psychic nourishment
There was never counseling or anything after chemo. It was just—‘Here are your antidepressants,’ and ‘Have a good life’ kind of thing. There was nothing to help you go back and deal with this trauma that’s affected your life.

— Vandana, aged 36, diagnosis: lung cancer
The keynote of the mystical experience is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity.

— William James (1902)
History/Safety

- Considered most promising psychiatric tool
- 40,000 patients treated in three decades between 1950’s-70’s
- Political backlash ceased funding for research
- All privately funded research since early 2000’s through Heffter Research Institute and MAPS
- Recent studies: Over 400 with psilocybin, No Serious Adverse Events (SAE’s)
Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance

R. R. Griffiths • W. A. Richards • U. McCann • R. Jesse

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Results Psilocybin produced a range of acute perceptual changes, subjective experiences, and labile moods including anxiety. Psilocybin also increased measures of mystical experience. At 2 months, the volunteers rated the psilocybin experience as having substantial personal meaning and spiritual significance and attributed to the experience sustained positive changes in attitudes and behavior consistent with changes rated by community observers.

Conclusions When administered under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences. The ability to occasion such experiences prospectively will allow rigorous scientific investigations of their causes and consequences.
At the 14-month follow-up, 58% and 67%, respectively, of volunteers rated the psilocybin-occasioned experience as being among the five most personally meaningful and among the five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives; 64% indicated that the experience increased well-being or life satisfaction; 58% met criteria for having had a complete mystical experience.
Rapid and sustained symptom reduction following psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized controlled trial

Stephen Ross1,2,3,4,5,6, Anthony Bossis1,2,4, Jeffrey Guss1,2,4, Gabrielle Agin-Liebes10, Tara Malone1, Barry Cohen7, Sarah E Mennenga1, Alexander Belser8, Krystallia Kalliontzi2, James Babb9, Zhe Su3, Patricia Corby2 and Brian L Schmidt2

Acute, Substantial, and Enduring Reductions of Anxiety and Depression in 80% of N=80 Cancer Study Participants, after Single High-Dose of Psilocybin in Supportive Setting.

Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: A randomized double-blind trial

Roland R Griffiths1,2, Matthew W Johnson1, Michael A Carducci3, Annie Umbricht1, William A Richards1, Brian D Richards1, Mary P Cosimano1 and Margaret A Klinedinst1
Increased activation in prefrontal cortex, with decreased CBF in limbic region (hippocampus and amygdala) during psilocybin dose. Carhart-Harris R L et al. PNAS 2012;109:2138-2143
fMRI data from Imperial College London showing increased functional brain connectivity and novel neural networks on psilocybin.
Cancer Patient Narratives
You realize you’re going to die. I don’t know that you realize that until you’re told. I was told that I had a 50/50 chance of being alive in five years…. As soon as you think about having limited time for [living], it changes everything.

-(Erin, aged 54 years, diagnosis: ovarian cancer)

It triggered something that I seemed I could not get out from under… I just said it, “I’m dying”.

-(Brenda, aged 65 years, diagnosis: ovarian cancer)
It wasn’t until I started getting toward the end of my treatment that I started having real problems with anxiety. . . . There was a part of me that couldn’t really believe that it was over. . . . The first time I had a follow-up CT scan I was freaking out, I was just a mess.

(Chrissy, aged 54 years, diagnosis: lung cancer)
It was a feeling beyond an intellectual feeling—it was a feeling to the bottom of my core...that’s one reason that it’s hard to talk about...it’s beyond words.

- Erin
Feelings of being connected to everything, I mean everything in nature...it wasn’t like talking about it, which makes it an idea, it was experiential...Words fail me. I was at a loss for words because it all was so beyond words then.

-Augusta, aged 69 years, diagnosis: breast cancer
I was watching everything disintegrate . . . my past, my relationships, my personality, everything that makes me feel like [me]. . . . That was terrifying

-Dan, aged 32 years, diagnosis: renal cell carcinoma
It really hit me very strong. And it was terrifying... Absolutely nothing to anchor myself to, nothing, no point of reference, nothing, just lost in space, just crazy, and I was so scared.

Then I remembered that Tony and Michelle were right there... and I reached out my hand and just said, ‘I’m so scared.’ And I think it was Tony who took my hand... and said ‘It’s all right. Just go with it. Go with it.’ And I did.
It was an intense, intense struggle, and that’s where it became medicinal because it allowed that struggle to happen. It didn’t coat it, it wasn’t an antidepressant…it brought it all out.

Mike, age 57 years, diagnosis: prostate cancer

It wasn’t pleasant, but part of it is like I know I can get through anything…that was very real to me.

Allison, aged 57 years, diagnosis: breast cancer
I was not here anymore, I was not with my body...I thought to myself that that is death, and it was scary, but I remember I said to myself ‘Oh if this is death, it’s not that bad—at least there is something’...It was exotic and unknown, mysterious, something I would not mind being in because I would love to explore that.

—Victor, aged 18, diagnosis: leukemia
I felt like this was really dealing with death...I’m in the forest and there’s this beautiful, loamy, woodsly, green lush kind of woods, and I’m down below the ground. ...
...And it felt really, really good, and I thought:

‘That’s what happens when you die.’ I am going to be reconnected with this beautiful world. This earthy world that we live in…it was just simple. It was gorgeous.

-(Brenda, aged 65 years, diagnosis: ovarian cancer)
One of the really vivid images that I had was there was a sketch of a dinner table—

It was almost this round circle that represented a dinner table—and at the table was cancer. But it was supposed to be at the table. And the feeling I had was cancer is a part of everything. It isn’t this bad separate thing; it’s something that’s part of everything, and that everything is part of everything. And that’s really beautiful. It was just a sort of acceptance of the human experience because it’s all supposed to be this way.

…it felt unified.

-(Erin, aged 54 years, diagnosis: ovarian cancer)
And then I kind of came to the epiphany that these lumps...you should accept them. They are part of you, they are part of your past, they are part of what happened, but there is no reason why you should hate them....accept them as part of your history, and you take care of them

–Adam, aged 23, diagnosis: lymphoma
If I were religious, it definitely would have been a religious experience, I would have said bathed in God’s love. And I don’t think English really has a way to say this without using that word “God.” Maybe bathed in transcendent love. Bathed in universal love. It was such a strong feeling.

-Edna

A very heightened sense of gratitude that despite, let’s say, despite the cancer and the diagnosis and the surgery, I’m alive right now.

-Caleb
[The psilocybin] just opens you up and it connects you...everything is interwoven, and that’s a big relief...I think it does help you accept death because you don’t feel alone, you don’t feel like you’re going to, I don’t know, go off into nothingness. That’s the number one thing—you’re just not alone.

- Erin
Outcomes
It was surreal because I never remember my childhood… [During the psilocybin session] I got that sense, that whole feeling of, like, ‘everything is just right’…. there are no insecurities, there are no life responsibilities, there’s no daily grind, there’s no cancer, there’s no nothing. It’s just this pleasant childhood where I ran around after school and played... That feeling of freedom of just not having that weight and burden of dealing with life and death.

—Vandana
The percentage of my life that I am able to be present in just a moment has increased dramatically . . . just to lose yourself in the moment . . . it is unique and monumental.
It allows in a broader, a greater appreciation of that which is around us all the time. I don’t know I just feel like it’s a part of me, anything I experienced [with the psilocybin] I don’t see it as a drug having an effect on me, it’s all part of me.

-Dan
I feel like a whole bunch of crap has been dumped off the surface. This stuff that made my world shut down so much and made me look at the ground and watch the clock numbers clicking by. There’s life and so many things going on, just watching that tree over there blowing in the breeze, seeing people in the street, and all the different people in vehicles rushing by! I just feel good about being alive. . . It’s like waking up in the most profound way, that this is really what life is.

-Augusta
It’s not like all of a sudden I’m cool with death… but I’m just not as obsessed with it.

-Dan

Before I thought, if this recurs… I don’t want to die in misery, and I will just figure out how to kill myself and not deal with this. And truthfully I don’t even think about [cancer recurrence] now. I really don’t... But it is not a decision, it is a feeling, it is a change in how I feel that I can speak this way and be this way.

–Edna
It’s not something I focus on anymore. I don’t focus on cancer . . . I don’t run to the doctor right away to make sure I’m going to make it, or whatever. Since [the psilocybin treatment], I know for a fact that that was a huge change for me. It’s not a priority; it’s not the thing that controls my life.

-Vandana