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Integrating Psychedelic Experiences Through Touch

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Title: Integrating Psychedelic Experiences Through Transformative Touch

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Introduction

In the autumn of 2019, thanks to having listened to the audiobook of Michael Pollan's excellent *How to Change Your Mind*, I felt compelled to act. I went onto the social media page for a local group who call themselves *The Psychedelic Society of Edinburgh* asking for volunteers for a project I had in mind. Why did I do this? What possessed me to get in touch with these people, and what was the project?

Michael Pollan's book was recommended to me by a good friend who knew I had an interest in its subject matter. The book details the history of psychedelic use and the current renaissance that's taking place thanks to recent scientific research into these compounds. This research is truly compelling, representing a potential and much hoped-for paradigm shift in mental health treatment, including and not limited to the treatment of addictions, post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Psychedelics, I am sure you are aware, are substances which induce altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness. They are famous, perhaps wrongly so, for giving people visual experiences that do not correspond to physical reality. Used in a therapeutic setting, these substances can be a catalyst for personal insight and healing.

One theme is consistent, however: the long-term success of the therapeutic use of psychedelics is dependent on how well the subject is prepared for the experience and how well the psychedelic experience is integrated.

My theory is that, using conscious touch, it's possible to connect with the person's psychedelic experience – its qualities, to be more exact – and help ground it into their literal and metaphoric bones. Doing so would help them integrate these qualities into their everyday life.

You see, the psychedelic experience is internal and whilst the resulting insights can bring changes in perspective, the changes in perspective don't necessarily change one's external behaviours. The inside out approach of psychedelics is reliant on how well connected one's inner life is with one's outer life. Touch-based therapies, such as Zero Balancing, which I have studied and practiced for some years now, work from the outside in. Skilled touch calls forth that which is internal and can bring it into the external. This is why I think such therapies can be hugely beneficial for those who are struggling to integrate their psychedelic experiences. And that is why I set about asking for volunteers.

The Psychedelic Society of Edinburgh is one of many Psychedelic Societies across the globe – groups of like-minded individuals who share an interest in psychedelics and their potential. The Edinburgh group just happens to be my nearest one. My proposal to them was along the lines of, “I think that bodywork has a clear role in assisting psychedelic integration. If you use psychedelics in a therapeutic manner and would like to explore this, then I will offer you three Zero Balancing sessions in exchange for a written report of your experience.”

And, rather wonderfully, three brave souls stepped forward.

The Sessions: Volunteer #1

The first volunteer was a woman in her early fifties. She had had previous psychedelic experience and she was curious about my request for volunteers. We agreed to do one session a week for the first three weeks of October 2019.

The first session was used to lay the groundwork – an introduction to me, to Zero Balancing and to build the therapeutic container. It also occurred before an upcoming psychedelic experience. In her write up, she mentioned:

“During the session if there were any ripples I was seeing and feeling, then I could be sure that they were my own, caused by me. He wasn't adding anything into the mix. It's not often that I am with another, or get the focus of another human being, without their ripples meeting my ripples and causing a whole lot of action in the water. This rippled water is then too unclear to see through well, and to know what is mine and what's theirs. Zero Balancing allowed me to see some of my ripples with support, and then calm them so that the water cleared.”

That weekend, the volunteer had a psychedelic experience with magic mushrooms and was keen to integrate the experience. In her words:

“I have recently become interested in Scotland's own teacher plant medicines. They grow wild right on our doorstep at this time of the year. I understand how to hold my own ceremonial space now and so I came to the second session with a recent new experience to integrate. I had experienced quite a profound connection with the native teacher plants a few days before the session and I'd had the somewhat baffling experience that my ancestors worked with them and they had knowledge to pass to me. Knowledge that had been lost when my ancestors and others like them were wiped out by persecution. Wow! This was a lot for me to take in, even by my standards it was weird and wonderful. The session with James helped me to take this experience a step further, firstly he was just a calm, non-judgemental witness to the information, and secondly with bodywork. I had a little more understanding by now that Zero Balancing allows energy to flow more freely in a person's body so that they can come home to their true spark and essence. I left feeling lighter and more aligned in my body with less aches and stiffness.”

In the third session, I remember clearly how the volunteer felt like she had been plain crazy during the previous session – on a high from the insights she had received from the psychedelic experience, and completely out of touch with reality. From my perspective, however, it was clear that she had deadened her excitement for the potential she had been exposed to. A bit like how a child may be told to put away childish things now that they are growing up, it was as if her sense of play and fun was no longer permitted. Again, in her words:

“Week three was unexpectedly emotional. I arrived feeling like a lot of what I had experienced during my psychedelic experience the previous week was just crazy talk and impossible to integrate into my life in Edinburgh. The persecution of psychedelic knowledge continues to this day and how could I get involved in working with what is (unbelievably to me) a class A drug [the highest schedule for restricted substances in the UK]. James was skilled in helping me to identify what I DO want in more general terms, thereby giving us a focus for the

session. During the body work he hit a few points in my right shoulder that were tender and sore, but the kind of pain that feels sooooo good. When he explained to me what they represented, a lot of emotion welled up in me and I could see the root of some self limiting beliefs that are blocking me. It was a powerful experience and I spent the rest of that day and evening contemplating and integrating this new insight. It involved a lot of sobbing. I'm good with that though, it's life flowing through me, it's me evolving. I've never had good experiences in intimate relationships before, but now (I think, as a result of all the healing I've done) I have a wonderful boyfriend and he made me a nest on his sofa and looked after me while I sobbed."

The Sessions: Volunteer #2

The second volunteer came for three sessions, also a week apart, in December 2019. The volunteer was a male in his early fifties. He wrote of the first session:

"I spoke with James about my recent psychedelic experience, and also about my nicotine addiction (as I'd heard that psychedelic experiences could be useful in helping to quit). We noted other health issues that centred around my throat including thyroid issues. I hypothesised that I had been subconsciously blocking emotions, stopping them from arising in my awareness by "clamping-up" with physical tension in my throat and upper chest - possibly leading to illnesses centred there, and that this might explain my keenness to feel the nicotine "bite" at the back of my throat. (A little physical pain might stop me from feeling anything deeper.)

Immediately after the first Zero Balancing session I felt calm and focused. Within the following days I set myself a date to quit nicotine."

After that session he had a second psychedelic experience. In that experience he had had a vision of a subconscious block that hindered his growth and self-development, located in the upper chest and throat. And so:

"James paid additional attention to my neck and upper chest. He located a painful area in my chest that I hadn't been aware of until his touch pointed it out. It felt a little like taking boots off that were too tight, I felt pain, but a pain that I now realised had been there all along. I felt great relief.

After the session I could only describe how I felt as "like a jar, who's lid has been loosened".

I didn't have an overflow of emotion, however in the following days, at odd moments, new memories (previously never remembered) came to me from my childhood - mostly happy ones.

Later in the week after session 2, I gave up nicotine."

In the last week, he reported having given up nicotine and that he found it difficult to rest and find the space that he needed to fully honour the previous Zero Balancing session. The third session went as follows:

"In this session again I asked James to put additional focus on my upper chest area, I consciously tried to allow any emotion to surface, but little came. As soon as James shifted

focus away (to my left leg) I felt clear and sudden emotion rising in me. I imagined the emotion itself as an object that could travel up through my now unblocked chest and throat (where previously it had been restricted) to my head, allowing me to 'feel' it with precision. My mind, now free to grapple with the new emotion then related it to thoughts and memories of my father (I felt angry with him for not being with me in my childhood, and sadness for my younger self). It was entirely new for me to experience feelings of anger towards my father, I'd previously held him in high regard. Even so, I was able to calmly inspect and feel the emotion without becoming overwhelmed.

Since the session, many new feelings have emerged, including new clarity on how I, as a father, relate emotionally to my own son. So, for the good of everyone, I'm once again moving strongly forward on my self-development path."

The Sessions: Volunteer #3

The third volunteer was another female in her early fifties. The three sessions were about 10 days apart during December 2019. A few weeks before the first session this volunteer had had an MDMA experience. MDMA is the psychoactive compound found in the drug known as ecstasy – very common in the dance scene and, more recently, in PTSD and couples therapy. Regarding that session, she wrote:

"My first session with James was a few weeks after that ceremony. I was aware that James spent quite a lot of time asking me just a few questions, but really listening to my answers, and letting me relive what I needed to relive of the experience. He then does a really wonderful job of summarising your story, which is a true skill, particularly when your story comes out as a kind of mish-mash, and reflecting it back to you, allowing you to see it more clearly and any links or relevant connections you might have missed. He then asks you what your intent is for this particular healing session.

The treatment is very soothing, very relaxing, very calming, with maybe an occasional subtle feeling somewhere that James might just have hit on something, but no pain, no discomfort, just ease and surrender. As he goes about his work, I found I gradually felt very settled, my breathing slowed down significantly, and as is usual for me, I released and shifted energy blocks through very deep breaths and yawns. After my first session, I felt very light in weight, very slow, a bit low on energy, a bit spacey, but like a beacon of bright light walking through Edinburgh, and although I don't like cities, I was calm and unflappable, even in the chaos around the town."

She then had an ayahuasca ceremony before the second session. Ayahuasca is a psychedelic brew used by shamans in the Amazon. She said of the second session:

"The session was the same structure, with a very fulfilling chat first. I noticed one of the other volunteers described James as a calm still pond, that he had no ripples converging with her ripples, there was no muddy pond of information or emotion, she knew everything was hers. And that's exactly what it's like with James. The benefit of that initial chat is absolutely significant. He creates true, personal, loving space, holding you in such a revered place of dignity and respect that that alone, I found to be incredibly healing. It's a rare and beautifully nurturing quality.

I felt more energised after the second session than I had after the first. When James finished the treatment, I was lying on the bed feeling like a vibration. Like I was just energy - which I am - but I had no feeling of a body mass or density, it felt like I was just aura, fractal patterns and frequency.”

In the third session, the volunteer expressed what appeared to be anger, however in further discussion it transpired to be a deep sadness and pain about the state of the world:

“James helped me to validate and accept these feelings as a huge part of the integration process, also suggesting that they were showing me something about myself that I either no longer needed, or that was giving me a message in some way. This third session was, for me, the most significant. Perhaps by this time there was something soothing in the familiarity. In the third session, as James released some dense energy in my chest, my right hand felt like it went numb and I got the sense of a black splot of tar moving out of the front of my body. James then gave my right arm and hand some attention, the numbness changed to pins and needles and then as the session continued my hand was very cold. James told me after the session that he felt we'd reconnected my head and my heart, and he also gave me a message about my expectations of love which, later on when I had the chance to process the message, made so much sense and which I went on to discuss with my partner. This was a new understanding, something that hadn't come up anywhere in my life until now, and it explained to me a lot about how my emotions had been recently, and perhaps for quite some time. I felt very tired after this session, but so very grateful to have had the opportunity to meet James and become a little bit more whole from these sessions.”

Reflections

The substances mentioned are all controlled substances in the UK and to be in possession of them is illegal. Although they never had these substances in their possession during the sessions, the volunteers nonetheless showed great courage in coming forward to an unusual request on social media from someone they did not know. I want to take this opportunity to thank them for their participation in this project and for trusting me.

In essence, working with psychedelic integration is no different from any other Zero Balancing session. If I were to highlight an area that might be different, however, it's in the framing of the session. This is the period before any bodywork takes place and the Zero Balancer discusses with the client what they might like to gain from the session. As you might imagine, these conversations are quite different from, say, someone who is coming in for stress relief.

The volunteers talked about their psychedelic experiences which included extreme emotions, visions and deep insights about themselves and their place in the world. They were a joy to work with because they had great clarity about what they wanted. Zero Balancing doesn't shy away from working with existential crises or blockages within the body – indeed, this is an area in which Zero Balancers often thrive, myself included.

I am also struck by the similarity between the therapeutic use of psychedelics and Zero Balancing. Both of these methods free up potential and enable a person to experience other ways of being, beyond their humdrum way of life. In that sense, it is perhaps even more likely

that Zero Balancing can assist with psychedelic integration because we can facilitate the flow of latent potential that the psychedelic journey, for whatever reason, had left somehow incomplete or unfinished.

For example, volunteer #1 had great insight into her potential as a receiver of past knowledge and wisdom but was blocked from expressing and embodying it because of her conditioning. So in that last Zero Balancing session, we were able to identify the block and free up her potential to pursue that goal.

I had the pleasure of seeing the first volunteer again recently and learnt that she has since re-trained as a somatic embodiment coach and facilitates psychedelic integration sessions with her own clients. She attributes the three sessions as being critical in helping her to take the path to become a healer in her own right.

Whether it is from psychedelics, conscious touch or some other approach, the root of healing – to my mind, at least – is the same. It comes from within.

Whilst Zero Balancing is the bodywork modality I am qualified in, and one I envisage continuing for the rest of my life, I do not believe the ability to integrate psychedelic experiences is limited to one modality. That said, there are several important factors behind why I think Zero Balancing is excellent in this application.

Firstly, in Zero Balancing we use a way of touching that we call *Interface Touch*. Or, simply, *interface*. The first and third volunteers picked up on its power when they talked about ripples – the therapist's 'stuff' doesn't interfere with the client so they can experience themselves more clearly. My sense is that *interface* enables the combined awareness of the therapist and the client to highlight tensions, whether physical or energetic. And, in highlighting them, enable them to shift and change.

But *interface* isn't purely limited to touch. It's also how we approach the whole session with the client. As a practitioner and as a human being, I do not have the answers to their unique situations. They are perfectly capable of making up their own minds and are the experts on their own lives. We have no power or authority over another. So, when we talk to the client, we listen without interjecting with our opinions and beliefs.

Interface makes no judgements or assumptions. We see the client in a way that embraces and acknowledges not just how they present themselves to be, but in their full potential. We see them as who they can be, who they want to be – not limited by self-imposed restrictions. And in so doing we create space for them to change and transform as individuals. To grow into who they want to become.

Secondly, in Zero Balancing we also knowingly work with expanded states of consciousness. Every Zero Balancing session is effectively a guided journey to states of mind that differ from the ordinary day-to-day ways of thinking. This is not the place to write extensively about the subject but suffice to say that during a Zero Balancing session it is not uncommon for clients to have creative insight, to rediscover forgotten memories, to process old hurts. Some even report mystical experiences. And all of these states are similar to what a person can experience after ingesting a psychedelic. Invariably, too, Zero Balancing sessions involve integration of these expanded states, so the client can walk out of the treatment room and back to their everyday lives.

Lastly, and this isn't talked about much, I believe Zero Balancing to be superbly versatile. We can work with physical aches and pains, emotional states, thought patterns, hopes, dreams, pain and pleasure – and everything in between. It is my experience that the whole human experience can be worked with in Zero Balancing. And that includes psychedelic states and all they bring to the table: energetic blocks, archetypes, visions, to name just a few. We can integrate these, just like we can someone's grief, for example.

It is my understanding that psychedelic assisted therapy will become increasingly common in the near future and there will be many seeking help with integrating their experiences. I would therefore very much encourage bodyworkers who are suitably qualified and willing to work in this area to do so, assisting those brave souls who venture into the psychedelic realm and ground their experiences in their bodies.