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Study suggests psychedelic users reframe “bad trips” into positive experiences through detailed narratives

by **Beth Ellwood** — July 5, 2021 in **Psychedelic Drugs**



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A study published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* asked psychedelic drug users to share their experiences with drug use, and particularly, their experiences with “bad trips.” An analysis of

these narratives revealed that many psychedelic users turn to storytelling to reframe challenging trips into positive experiences.

Psychedelics or hallucinogens are psychoactive substances that trigger altered states of consciousness, affecting mood, perception, and cognition. While hallucinogens are considered non-addictive and have low toxicity, they do come with a major pitfall. The drugs occasionally induce bad trips – intense negative reactions that can include anxiety, paranoia, panic attacks, and frightening hallucinations.

Interestingly, many users of psychedelics seem to embrace the positives in these challenging trips, despite describing them as intensely frightening. Researchers Liridona Gashi and her team proposed that one way psychedelic users might find meaning in such bad trips is through storytelling. Narratives might allow drug users to reframe these adverse incidents into valuable experiences – the same way that humans commonly make sense of the world by telling stories.

To explore this, the researchers conducted interviews among 50 Norwegian psychedelic users, most of whom were in their twenties or thirties. The majority of participants had used hallucinogens between 10 and 50 times and the two most common drugs cited were LSD and psilocybin. The participants were asked open-ended questions to elicit details about their experiences with bad trips, including how frightened they were, whether the experience had changed them, and how they felt the following day.

All but two participants described experiencing a bad trip. In line with previous findings, many stories included experiences of paranoia, confusion, panic attacks, and troubling visions. Gashi and her colleagues say that many subjects described particularly intense feelings of going insane or losing their sense of self. For example, some described “how seconds or minutes could be experienced as an eternity, and that they were spinning around problems they were unable to solve.”

Despite describing these highly distressing experiences, many participants seemed to look back on bad trips with gratitude, suggesting that the experiences had offered them deep insights and opened up repressed feelings. The trips were regarded as having helped them work through personal emotions or having improved their outlook on life. Even those who described having experienced a psychotic episode during a trip still saw value in these experiences.

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Many subjects also alluded to the distinction between experienced and non-experienced drug users, maintaining that bad trips arise due to a drug user’s lack of competence and are no fault of the substance itself. The study authors note that some participants even blamed themselves for a bad trip, showing an unusual loyalty to the drug.

“While psychedelic experiences often have ineffable characteristics, the bad trip stories our participants told were typically rich and detailed,” Gashi and team write. “The psychedelic users were skilled story-tellers, with comprehensive vocabularies, sometimes drawing on sophisticated language from both literature and philosophy.”

The authors propose that these narratives might partly explain why bad trips can be construed as both negative and positive experiences at the same time. Like trauma narratives, storytelling might serve as a coping mechanism, helping psychedelic users process their emotions and draw meaning from negative experiences.

The study, “[Making “bad trips” good: How users of psychedelics narratively transform challenging trips into valuable experiences](#)”, was authored by Liridona Gashi, Sveinung Sandberg, and Willy Pedersen.

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