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Psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy might help to reduce attachment anxiety

by [Eric W. Dolan](#) — November 1, 2021 in [Mental Health](#), [Psychedelic Drugs](#)



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Scientists have begun to examine whether the psychedelic drug psilocybin, the active component of “magic” mushrooms, can help people who feel insecure in their attachments to others. Their preliminary research, published in [ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science](#), suggests that psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy might help to reduce attachment anxiety.

People can be secure or insecure in their attachments, and insecure individuals can be either anxious or avoidant. People with an anxious attachment style are fearful of rejection and abandonment, while people with an avoidant attachment style tend to distrust others and shun intimacy. Though attachment styles tend to be relatively stable, there is evidence that they can change over time.

“Therapeutic changes toward more secure attachment often correlate with reduction in psychiatric symptoms. An intervention that could rapidly and durably revise maladaptive working models of attachment are also likely to reduce the symptoms of a broad range of psychiatric disorders,” study author Christopher S. Stauffer and his colleagues wrote in their study.

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The researchers conducted a secondary analysis of data from [their open-label pilot study](#) of

characterized by poor coping and a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and a loss of meaning and purpose in life.”

The study included 18 male AIDS survivors who underwent three hours of individual psychotherapy, 12-15 hours of group psychotherapy, and a single eight-hour psilocybin session. Examining attachment styles in this sample was particularly relevant, the researchers said, because the openly gay participants had experienced a variety of attachment-related traumas, such as the loss of loved ones and rejection from their families.

The new analysis found that participants tended to have lower attachment anxiety scores three months after completing the program, but attachment avoidance was not significantly changed. In other words, participants were less likely to agree with statements such as “I resent it when people with whom I feel close spend time away from me” in the wake of the psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy program.

The researchers also found that attachment insecurity predicted qualities of the psilocybin experience. Higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with more mystical experiences during the psilocybin session. On the other hand, higher levels of attachment avoidance were associated with more challenging experiences during the psilocybin session, including grief, fear, physical distress, and paranoia.

“These findings have important implications for the general treatment of psychiatric disorders as well as optimizing psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy as a broadly applicable treatment modality,” Stauffer and his colleagues said.


But the findings should be interpreted with caution. The pilot study was focused on examining the feasibility and safety of using psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy to treat illness-related demoralization, and is limited by its small sample size and absence of a control condition.


“Because of our lack of a control group, we are not able to state that these changes in attachment insecurity are psilocybin-induced versus induced by other aspects of the intervention, such as participants’ expectations or the group psychotherapy intervention,” the researchers explained.


The findings, however, provide a foundation for additional research.


“The suggestion that a brief intervention — psilocybin-assisted group psychotherapy — might aide in the development of a greater sense of attachment security is clinically intriguing,” the researchers concluded. “If replicated, these findings could affect treatment for a wide range of psychiatric disorders, against which attachment security is protective.”


The study, “[Psilocybin-Assisted Group Therapy and Attachment: Observed Reduction in Attachment Anxiety and Influences of Attachment Insecurity on the Psilocybin Experience](#)“, was authored by Christopher S. Stauffer, Brian T. Anderson, Kile M. Ortigo, and Joshua Woolley


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