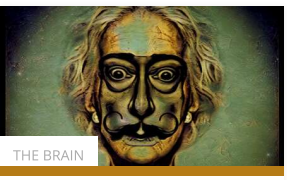

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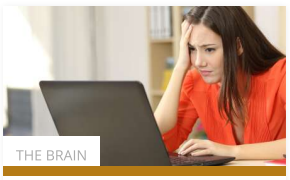

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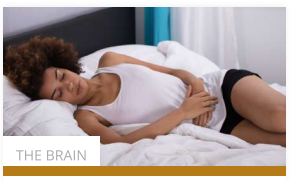

Can You Feel Pain In Dreams?

How Do Psychedelics Change Your Personality? These Researchers Tried To Find Out

PSYCHEDELICS ARE INCREASINGLY USED TO TREAT MENTAL ILLNESSES, BUT IT TURNS OUT THEY CAN HAVE BENEFITS FOR PEOPLE WITHOUT MEDICAL ISSUES TOO. IMAGE: DED PIXTO/LOCAL_DOCTOR/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM/IFLSCIENCE

By Katie Spalding

10 DEC 2021, 13:01

It's a brave new world out there for those of us with anxiety or depression. Gone are the days of physicians trying to beat or starve the sadness out of you; these days we have things like DBT and drugs. And by drugs, we don't just mean the prescription kind: ever since that fateful Friday in 1943 when pharmacist Albert Hoffman accidentally dosed himself with LSD and spent the next few hours chugging milk and tripping balls, scientists – and quite a few non-scientists too – have suspected that psychedelics might hold the key to treating certain psychiatric problems.

But what happens with more, let's say, *typical* use of these substances? Let's face it: not everybody who uses psychedelics is doing so in the therapy room. While more and more evidence is being found in support of the drugs as therapeutic tools for mental illness – psilocybin, for instance, which gives mushrooms their magic, is turning out to be something of a wonder-drug when it comes to treating depression, and may even be able to stop addicts relapsing – what, if anything, happens to your regular joe schmo who just wants to commune with the universe on a beach somewhere?

That's what a recent paper published in the journal Frontiers in Psychology aimed to find out. Using the five-factor model of personality – Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness – a team of researchers set out to measure how psychedelics use could affect your personality.

“If there are changes, the Five-Factor model of personality should pick it up,” study lead author Brandon Weiss told IFLScience. He’s something of an expert in personality and personality disorders – an area which “is incredibly useful,” he said, “because it encompasses so much of the manners in which people think, feel, and behave in the world and differ from each other.”

“There are even new systems of mental illness that seem to fit into the framework of Five-Factor model of personality,” he explained. “Given this, personality is a useful tool for understanding how human beings psychologically and behaviorally change following psychedelic experience.”

Looking for a candid view, the team put out a call to recruit people who were planning a psychedelic experience in the near future. Participants were asked to complete specialized personality questionnaires – “we focused on personality traits that are related to building and keeping up harmonious relationships with others,” Weiss explained – first before their experience, and then two and four weeks afterwards.

Given psychedelics’ growing reputation as a therapy for psychological disorders, the team had some expectations going into the experiment – “we hypothesized reductions in neuroticism and agreeableness,” Weiss told IFLScience, as well as “increased social connectedness”. But did the results support their assumptions?

“We found that on average, there were two traits that showed meaningful change after their experiences,” Weiss told IFLScience. “First, people seemed to report that they were not as quarrelsome or critical in their interactions with others. Second, people reported that they were less easily upset by things and anxious.”

But that wasn’t all: true to their etymology, it seems psychedelics can grant those who take them an increased ability to empathize with others and a greater sense of “belonging” in the community and society.

“And finally, because our sample is fairly large and if anything there is a bias in our sample toward positive changes, it is notable where we did not find changes,” Weiss told IFLScience. “We did not find changes in compassion, openness, or conscientiousness.”

Although the results were encouraging, Weiss stressed that they need to be taken with caution. The study had quite a high dropout rate – more than 650 participants started the experiment, but fewer than 150 made it through all four weeks – so “we cannot say that this is a fully representative sample of the general population,” Weiss noted.

“It could be that mostly those who had good experiences stayed in the study whereas others dropped out,” he added.

And while the original hypotheses were supported, it wasn’t necessarily by much: “People did not show lasting increases in emotional stability or calm,” Weiss explained, and the increase in social connectedness, while present, “was very small.” This again points to a wider problem with psychedelics research, he added. While the amount of clinical research into psychedelics has never been higher, “there is quite a bit of inconsistency in how, across studies, samples tend to change,” Weiss told IFLScience.

Nevertheless, Weiss said, the study did turn up some “extremely intriguing” results. The researchers’ finding of reduced quarrelsomeness and criticalness is something that hasn’t been seen much in the literature before, and it “opens up possible effectiveness of psychedelics on the antagonistic externalizing spectrum of mental illness,” Weiss explained. Those are the personality traits related to criminality, intimate partner violence, aggression, and physical violence, he told IFLScience, and future studies could focus on the potential for psychedelics to reduce these traits.

“It's early days, but there could be something here,” Weiss said. “Should the changes we observed here find replication, countless interesting questions emerge, most intriguingly, what are the mechanisms for why these changes are taking place in people's psychology and in their neurobiology?”

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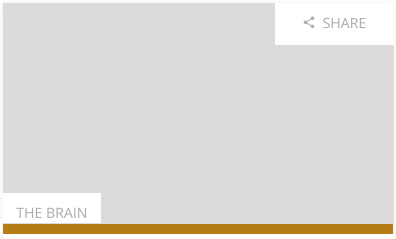

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