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Study suggests psychedelics promote positive mental health through increased spirituality and emotion regulation

by [Beth Ellwood](#) — December 3, 2021 in [Psychedelic Drugs](#)



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A new study published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* sheds light on the mechanism connecting psychedelic use to improved mental health. The study found evidence of a pathway whereby the use of psychedelics increases spirituality, and in turn, leads to better emotion regulation. This improved emotion regulation then appears to reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and disordered eating.

Psychedelic drugs like psilocybin and ayahuasca have been used in spiritual ceremonies for thousands of years in non-Western cultures. More recently, psychedelics have captured the attention of Westerners, and scientific interest in the medicinal effects of these drugs has resurfaced. While studies have begun to uncover therapeutic effects, the mechanism behind these effects remains largely a mystery.

Study authors [Adele Lafrance](#) and her colleagues say that increased spirituality and improvements in emotion regulation have been revealed as key side effects of psychedelic use. The researchers proposed that the use of psychedelics may be connected to positive mental health through increased spiritual connection, which then facilitates emotion regulation.

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“I have long been interested in the mechanisms of action that make a therapy or a drug more or less effective,” explained Lafrance, a clinical psychologist and the author of [“What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work.”](#)

“Process research is often less sexy, or secondary in importance to outcome research involving controlled trials, but it’s through this type of research that we can answer the question ‘how?’ — which in my opinion is just as important as the question ‘is it better than placebo?’ When these substances become medicines, patients deserve to know not only that it works (in X% of cases), but also how it works. It will also inform the wrap-around psychotherapy so that a focus on spirituality and emotion regulation can be fostered, for example.”

Lafrance and her team distributed a questionnaire among 159 psychedelic users between the ages of 18 and 69. The participants reported their lifetime psychedelic use and rated their spirituality. They also completed measures of emotion regulation difficulties, depression, anxiety, and disordered eating.

The vast majority (96%) of participants reported using psilocybin in the past, and a third (33%) of participants reported having used more than one type of psychedelic. Using regression analyses, the researchers found that participants with more frequent psychedelic use reported greater spirituality, and those with greater spirituality had fewer difficulties with emotion regulation. They also found that participants with more difficulties regulating their emotions had higher depression, anxiety, and disordered eating scores. In other words, participants with fewer emotion regulation difficulties had better mental health. Finally, a mediation model revealed that psychedelic use was indirectly related to depression, anxiety, and disordered eating through spirituality and emotion regulation.

“Given it is a population-based study, the results point to the positive effects of psychedelics outside of therapeutic settings, which is important for policy- and lawmakers when considering the decriminalization and even legalization of these substances,” Lafrance told PsyPost.



The study authors say their findings add to the existing evidence that psychedelics offer therapeutic benefits. However, the study was cross-sectional, making it impossible to infer causality between variables. The researchers suggest that longitudinal and experimental controlled trials should be conducted to replicate their findings and help establish causality. They further point to the need to study more diverse samples and to increase the representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color — since psychedelics originated from these communities.

The authors point out the implications of their findings. “A focus on spirituality appears to be a powerful catalyst for the transformation of emotion processing difficulties which are thought to underlie most emotion-based disorders, including mood, anxiety, and eating disorders,” Lafrance and her team say in their study. They suggest that mental health clinicians may want to assist their clients in “cultivating a greater connection with self, others, the natural world or with spirit, and/or greater involvement with ceremonial or religious practices.”

“This study suggests that the field of psychotherapy in general should be much more focused on spirituality as a mechanism of action in conventional psychotherapy (without psychedelics),” Lafrance added. “Currently, many training programs suggest that spirituality should only be raised as a psychotherapeutic theme should the client express interest in doing so. In my opinion, this practice has more to do with the impact of religious trauma than it does sound clinical practice, especially in light of these results that suggest that increased spirituality leads to better capacities for emotion regulation, which is key for mental health. Spirituality can be understood and expressed in many

different forms and if our results hold true, it's imperative that we leverage this potentially powerful agent of change.”

The study, “[Classic Psychedelic Use and Mechanisms of Mental Health: Exploring the Mediating Roles of Spirituality and Emotion Processing on Symptoms of Anxiety, Depressed Mood, and Disordered Eating in a Community Sample](#)”, was authored by Adele Lafrance, Erin Strahan, Brian M. Bird, Michelle St. Pierre, and Zach Walsh.

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