

Can psychedelic drugs change your religious or political beliefs?

Psychotherapy assisted by psilocybin, the psychedelic compound in “magic mushrooms,” seems to be remarkably effective in treating a wide range of psychopathologies, but also causes a raft of unusual nonclinical changes not seen elsewhere in medicine.

Although its precise therapeutic mechanisms remain unclear, clinically relevant doses of psilocybin can induce [powerful mystical experiences](#) more commonly associated with extended periods of fasting, prayer or meditation.

Arguably, then, it is unsurprising that it can generate long-lasting changes in patients: studies report increased prosociality and aesthetic appreciation, plus robust shifts in [personality](#), [values](#) and [attitudes to life](#), even [leading some atheists to find God](#). What’s more, these experiences appear to be a feature, rather than a bug, of psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy, with the [intensity of the mystical experience correlating with the extent of clinical benefit](#).

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These are undoubtedly interesting findings, but should any of it matter? However unusual a treatment’s consequences, shouldn’t we prioritize the preferences of an informed, consenting patient? Yes, I understand that this might change me in strange ways. But my depression is debilitating. I will roll that dice.

Putting aside the matter of how well-informed one could really be about such radical transformations, political realities make things more complicated, with the case of psilocybin— currently a Schedule 1, highly illicit drug—showing vividly how values, politics and social narratives can influence the development of biomedical science.

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