

Anecdotal Report on Two MDMA-Assisted Therapy Sessions

First, an historical context. My childhood was filled with what would now be considered prolonged psychological abuse. I also had many health issues and considerable physical pain from, I was told, the earliest days of my infancy. Both the pain and the abuse were persistent and chronic. I have virtually no memory of being truly comforted as a child and no memory of EVER feeling safe. My mother was the primary source of trauma and my father, though innately nurturing, never stood up to her nor defended me. Not surprisingly, I suffer with an anxiety disorder and other persistent psychological issues these many years later and despite having made an almost non-stop effort to outgrow and overcome these symptoms, I remain debilitated and stymied by what is now diagnosed as chronic PTSD that has been resistant to medications, therapy, and other treatments over a 40 year period.

Having learned about some of the research now underway with treatment-resistant PTSD veterans, I inquired about being included in one of those studies but when told that without a military background I would not be an acceptable candidate, I decided to embark on an unsanctioned program of guided MDMA-assisted therapy sessions modeled on what I could learn of the protocol followed in the authorized studies. My hope was to work through some of the traumas that have dogged me for decades.

My first session was extremely positive. I became aware of the depth of my love for others, felt powerfully connected to the people in my life, more forgiving of myself, and more tolerant of life as it is. This resulted in a sense of calm that allowed me to deal effectively with a difficult circumstance that soon arose in my life, and this mindset persisted for much of the next week. Unfortunately, the immediate aftermath of the session also included two unexpected family crises which probably diminished my ability to fully incorporate the many positive affects of the first session.

I expected to build on this foundation in my second session several months later but, to my surprise, found it to be quite different. The issues that arose -- distractibility, depression, anxiety, profound shame, panic, and the fact that I've never felt truly safe for even a moment of my life and have spent my entire existence trying to make myself "acceptable" to others -- had also arisen in the first session but my perceptions and reactions this time around were a world apart.

In this session, I became hyper-aware of the fact that my self-rejection recurs on a moment to moment basis. I was keenly attuned to my ever-present desire for someone to tell me how to live my life; to save and protect me. This tendency to find myself and my very existence inadequate, coupled with extreme distractibility, results in a pattern wherein I reject my here and now in search of something better almost on a on a second to second basis. And in this session, much of my time was preoccupied with my awareness of this ever repeating pattern.

Though perhaps more gentle with myself than I would be in my everyday life, in this session -- even on MDMA -- I felt helpless or unwilling to stop my pattern of self-

rejection and to embrace or even comfort myself. I could not let go of my fears and panic long enough to relax into a sense of safety, self-acceptance or self-comfort. Needless to say, this fact was extremely disappointing. Indeed, my most prominent take-away from the session was a sense of disappointment that remained with me for weeks thereafter because I felt that if I reject myself even in the midst of an MDMA-assisted therapy session, what hope is there of overcoming this pattern under normal circumstances.

So what to make of it? Was it a negative experience which ought not to be repeated? At first I reluctantly thought that this might be the case. Perhaps I am just so tense, fearful, and self-loathing that even in the midst of an MDMA-assisted therapy session I am unable to break through my defenses and even partially heal my traumas. This is certainly a possibility.

As time passed, however, it slowly dawned on me that since these sessions were at least in part self-guided, I did not have a well-tested protocol, and that meant that there were at least several factors that undermined the potential therapeutic benefit of the session. For starters, there is no doubt that my expectations were unrealistically high. I would have benefited from more tempered expectations because I was seeking a major breakthrough - - something along the lines of enlightenment, salvation, a sense of oneness, God -- and anything short of such a breakthrough was likely to be experienced as failure. I also realized that I fed my hyperactivity and distractibility by jumping from one activity to another every few minutes during the session. In retrospect, I realize that I would almost certainly have had a more healing experience had I just stayed with some of those experiences for longer time periods of time.

That being said, the passage of time has also allowed me to recognize that several very positive events transpired in what I otherwise perceive as a disappointing session. For one, though I was jumping from one activity to another all too quickly, there was one activity that I did engage in at some length, and doing so yielded the most positive moments in the session, moments whose significance should not be downplayed.

Because of tension and shame, I am someone who had never before danced voluntarily. Even on those rare prior occasions when I did dance, it was only at the insistence and guidance of others and then, with a stiffness that left me feeling self-conscious and ashamed. In fact, the predominant feeling on each prior occasion, even when somewhat intoxicated, was a desire to run away. I loathed the exposure that I felt while dancing with or around others. This time, however, I danced solo and in front of my therapist/guide for perhaps 30 minutes -- and I danced to the music's rhythm! I was rhythmic, fluid, and in sync with the music, something that I never before allowed myself to experience. More importantly, it was

done of my own volition, without anyone dragging me out to dance,
done without any sense of shame,
something that has stayed with me and that may be repeatable.

It is now two months later and though I am neither more comfortable with myself nor more patient with others, there have been some lasting positive effects. For one, I am fairly certain that were I to find myself at a party, I would be able to dance somewhat more freely. (This might not be a big deal to others but it is hugely important to me.) In addition, for the first time in my life, I am actually able to quiet my mind somewhat while meditating (and I attribute this largely to my two MDMA sessions). I am also sleeping somewhat better and while this development might be attributable to other factors, as a 20-year insomniac, it is quite welcome. Most of all, the very experience that I found so disturbing during my second session, namely my hyper-awareness of my tendency to reject myself and my experiences on a second-to-second basis, seems to be slowly turning into a positive. As time has passed, it has allowed me to understand how I am never present to what is happening to me at any given moment because I am always looking for something better or safer. While I've not yet figured out how to stop this pattern, I feel like I'm groping, if still blindly, toward a greater presence with my here and now. In other words, I'm noticing how my self-rejection does not allow me to even enjoy the coolness of a breeze on my face or the warmth of the sun on my skin and this awareness might allow me to relax and enjoy some of the small blessings that happen to me each day.

Conclusions:

1. The first MDMA-assisted therapy session left me feeling truly hopeful that the process could help me begin to cope with the debilitating emotional traumas that have been with me since childhood. The second session, in contrast, seemed to thrust me more deeply into some disruptive thought and behavior patterns that, despite the undeniable breakthrough that allowed me to dance freely, left me feeling disillusioned that even MDMA-assisted therapy cannot help me.
2. As I considered the disappointing results of my second session, it occurred to me that there are different causes of treatment-resistant PTSD. In the studies with military veterans, the patients' symptoms most likely resulted either from a single or a series of psychological traumas that occurred once they were adults. But what if the trauma started in infancy and persisted throughout the patient's childhood? What if the patient, like myself, never developed a sense of self-acceptance and has no memory of any external adult- or internal self- comforting sufficient to be a safety net in the face of trauma? It's possible that the veterans who are most responsive to MDMA-assisted therapy are being reconnected with healthy parts of themselves that they lost touch with in the face of their trauma, but that were there all along. It is also possible that when the trauma starts in infancy, an inner core of self-acceptance may not exist, in which case it may be the case that even MDMA-assisted therapy would not be helpful because there are no prior experiences of "safety" to return to for self-comforting. That is one of the possibilities I considered for myself following my second session.

But, perhaps, that is not the case at all. Perhaps the real benefit of MDMA-assisted therapy is that it allows even the most scarred PTSD patients to get in touch with something so profoundly deep and innate to our experience as human beings that it is the source of real healing.

In the end, I cannot deny that my second session did not yield the results I was seeking. That fact notwithstanding, the second session still yielded some positive and long lasting results while the first session was so positive both while on MDMA and for days thereafter that I have little doubt that continued MDMA-assisted therapy will be beneficial, even for someone like myself whose emotional scars go back to infancy. And since I certainly now have a better understanding of how to use subsequent sessions more effectively (e.g. set realistic expectations, have a clearly defined issues to address, avoid jumping from one activity to another every few minutes), I am expecting that future sessions, if they occur, will be at least as productive as the first.

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