

Psychedelic Emergency Services: Report from Burning Man 2007



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SINCE 2001, when we operated our first “Psychedelic Mission Control” station at the Hookahville festival in Ohio, MAPS has organized teams out on the field in places where large numbers of people use psychedelics. We have assisted in several locations, including the Boom festival in Portugal and the North Carolina regional Burning Man, but our largest and most successful event by far remains our services at the Burning Man festival in the Black Rock desert of Nevada, where we have been organizing a volunteer effort since 2003. Burning Man, unlike the other venues where we have provided services, is more than just a party. It is a full-fledged city that exists for one week out of the year—run by its own rules of radical self-reliance and a gift-based economy—and complete with a post office, medical center, and plenty of participatory activities.

Sanctuary is a safe space created by the Black Rock City Rangers, Burning Man’s girl/boy-scout-like non-confrontational mediators, to temporarily shelter people who are having a tough time at the event, including many having challenging or difficult psychedelic experiences. MAPS recruits and trains volunteers for Sanctuary who are interested in sitting for people undergoing difficult psychological experiences. To do so, we bring together psychiatrists, therapists, experienced peers, shamans, and researchers who work with psychedelics on FDA clinical trials. Sanctuary operates for the full duration of the event, 24 hours a day for seven days. Many of the people we work with in Sanctuary are undergoing psychedelic-like crises even though they did not ingest any drugs, since the environment—with its 100 degree days, “white out” dust storms, and radical self-expression—can be overwhelming at times.

While we do bring some of the world’s foremost psychedelic researchers to the event to work in Sanctuary, the environment is more analogous to a teaching hospital than to a research

facility, where people share and compare techniques for helping people to maximize the value and healing they get out of their difficult trips. Our volunteers bring with them expertise based on their own healing and therapeutic work using psychedelics, western psychology and medicine, bodywork, breathwork, art, and different eastern tools, like meditation, Zen koan study and nature work. Many times our service is as simple as providing a loving presence, someone to talk to, or a hand to hold. Of course, because this is such a small field and so much of the knowledge exists underground, we often find that everyone plays the role of both teacher and student during their time volunteering in Sanctuary. In order to give respect to all of these voices, we encourage an open-ended conversation using peer education techniques during the training sessions.

Our approach to working with visitors at Sanctuary stems from the principles of psychedelic therapy. First of all, we subscribe to a “talk through” not “talk down” approach, meaning that we are willing to work with people as they explore their difficult experiences instead of pushing them to act normal, which isn’t always possible or even desirable. We give people permission to be where they are at and go deeper, if they choose to do so. We see ourselves as facilitators, not guides, meaning that it is not our role to guide or attempt to direct someone else’s experience. Not knowing each person’s history or even much about their present circumstances, we are in no position to decide what is best for them. Instead we are guided by the direction of their experience. Not every visitor wants “therapy,” and we don’t pressure people to talk or do anything else.

For those who do want more active help, we encourage them to stay with their emotions, accepting what comes even if it seems frightening at first. In a supportive environment, what seems to be a “bad trip” can be transformed into a healing

experience, often quite spontaneously. An important part of the process is integration; we place special emphasis on talking with someone after they come down, inviting them to return later if necessary, and encouraging them to write or create artwork reflecting their experience.

Our approach differs from traditional medical treatment of psychedelic crises in that we try at all costs not to employ sedatives, especially not major tranquilizers such as Haldol, which is commonly used in emergency room settings. The administration of tranquilizers can lead to an individual becoming stuck in the trauma and can prevent the therapeutic process from running its course.

Likewise, if an individual is distracted, as in the traditional lay technique of trying to “talk someone down” this can prevent the individual from gaining the maximum healing and growth potential from their experience.

In the past five years, MAPS volunteers have sat for or provided other services to nearly 500 visitors in Sanctuary. Just under half of those people were dealing with an issue directly related to ingestion of a psychedelic substance. The stories of how the visitors ended up there are always different, but so far the results have been the same. We have received overwhelmingly high amounts of positive feedback from our visitors, and many sincere words of gratitude for this space and the caring people who dedicate a part of their “burn” to helping others. Many of the people who were successfully attended to in Sanctuary would have likely ended up in the hands of police officers, had our services not existed. Psychedelic emergency services have proven to be an invaluable resource for participants at events where people are ingesting psychedelics, and they benefit the host organization throwing the event by decreasing the need for costly law enforcement and medical intervention.

In my past four years of coordinating this project for MAPS, I have made it a personal goal to decentralize the control of the MAPS volunteer effort in Sanctuary. Each year MAPS sends less “experts” to staff the space, and more Burners come forth to volunteer, each of whom offers their own expert knowledge to the team. By handing over the responsibility for the project, we have seen great results and been able to accomplish much more than we could have on our own. This year, over 50 volunteers came together to help with the Sanctuary. We have also seen our volunteers become more involved in the formal Burning Man organization itself, as several of our longtime volunteers have become Rangers over the past few years.

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This year we had one especially dedicated volunteer, K., who contributed over 75 hours in the months preceding the event to collect volunteer applications, create a schedule, and act as the general point of contact for all volunteer inquiries. Our volunteer summer intern, Louise, was also invaluable in donating 55 hours helping us with our general preparation for embarking on the journey to Burning Man.

Due to this substantial contribution of volunteer labor, and the brilliant suggestion of returning Sanctuary volunteer and shift leader Annie Harrison, this year we were able to create the first-ever Sanctuary Support Camp. This camp was dedicated to supporting the Sanctuary workers, providing a homebase for some of the core volunteers, and providing a place for Sanctuary-related meetings and inquiries. The Sanctuary Support Camp was located inside of Entheon Village, which also hosted many MAPS members and friends.

Our work has been so well-received, we are happy to continue providing this service at the model, yet temporary, community that is Burning Man. In light of our success and continued effort, we are pleased to release a new page of our Website dedicated to information about psychedelic emergency services (maps.org/psyems). Check it out for information on how to become part of our team, and for resources on the techniques of psychedelic therapy and sitting for someone having a difficult psychedelic experience.

Though MAPS' primary work is sponsoring government-approved psychedelic psychotherapy research, we have also devoted significant amounts of staff time and resources to assisting at Sanctuary. The people in our team have all struggled with their own difficult psychedelic experiences at some point and would like to give something back to the community. In addition, the work at Sanctuary enables researchers/therapists to meet and learn from each other, enhancing the transfer of skills in this field at the crucial stage of a global renaissance of research. MAPS' research is socially delicate and is put at some political risk by the public fears generated when people try psychedelics in non-medical contexts and encounter psychological difficulties, especially if these people experience long-term psychological problems and have their cases reported by the media. By helping to provide a model of psychedelic harm reduction, MAPS works to reduce the number of psychedelic casualties and in the process demonstrates its vision of a post-prohibition future. •



Photo: Felix Handlesman

A training workshop at the Sanctuary support camp.

Here are some tips from the Psychedelic Emergency Services (PSYEMS) team for working with someone who is in the midst of a difficult psychedelic experience:

- Honor and respect the person having the crisis.
- Sit quietly with the person, making them feel safe.
- Reassure them:
 - 1) This will pass, this is a process.
 - 2) This is an experience other people have had.
 - 3) There will be support afterwards.
- Wait and calm them down through talk, knowing the duration of the substance taken.
- Walk with them, talking or not.
- Have them express the experience through sound.
- Have them move through it, through a physical expression, holding a certain posture or letting the body go.
- If you know how, do some deep, intensive bodywork, or just hold them (meeting their needs) or gently massage them. Always ask for permission regarding any kind of physical contact.
- Have appropriate sitter regarding male/female, important when recall of sexual abuse or release of sexual energy takes place.
- Encourage the person to recline, eyes closed or blindfolded, and listen to comforting music.
- If their emotions are overwhelming them, encourage their expression.
- When the person is calm enough or has come back from their difficult psychedelic experience, have art supplies and writing material available.

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