

FAQ GUIDE ABOUT PSYCHEDELIC ASSISTED THERAPY (PAT)



The Signs of Life
PSYCHOLOGY

Integrating science and the sacred

WHAT IS PSYCHEDELIC ASSISTED THERAPY (PAT)?

Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy (PAT) is a therapeutic approach in mental health that combines intensive psychotherapy with the administration of a psychedelic substance. In Australia, the only legally prescribed compounds for this therapy are MDMA and psilocybin, and they must be prescribed by an authorised psychiatrist.

This treatment typically comprises three phases: preparation, the psychedelic experience or dosing, and integration.

WHAT IS PREPARATION?

Preparation occurs in the weeks leading up to the psychedelic experience. The therapy team, often composed of two practitioners, works with the client to explore their intentions, history, symptoms, desired outcomes, and any other queries they may have. The preparatory sessions serve as the groundwork for the psychedelic dosing sessions, fostering a therapeutic bond and understanding between the patient and therapists.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED SESSIONS?

Psychedelic-assisted sessions typically span 6-8 hours and are conducted in a specifically prepared treatment room designed to optimise the therapeutic experience. This psychedelic journey or dosing sessions are characterised by several elements that contribute to its unique and transformative nature.

The sensory environment within the treatment room is meticulously considered. A specific scent is selected, recognizing its potential as a trigger for memories associated with the psychedelic experience. Lighting also plays an essential role in fostering a therapeutic atmosphere. Warm and comforting lighting creates an ambiance that promotes feelings of security and relaxation. Music takes on a dual role as both an anchor and catalyst for the psychedelic journey. A thoughtfully curated playlist of music guides the client's emotional state and thought patterns.

Crucially, the client is accompanied by a therapy team, typically consisting of two trained practitioners. These therapists create and maintain a safe, neutral therapeutic space. The practitioners adapt to the client's needs, providing guidance when required and listening when the client seeks to express their thoughts and emotions.

WHAT IS INTEGRATION?

Following a dosing session, the process continues through integration sessions. These post-experience sessions are essential for maximising the therapeutic benefits of the psychedelic journey. During integration, the client and the therapist team collaborate to explore the contents of the psychedelic experience. Together, they delve into the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that emerged during the journey, seeking to extract profound meaning and understanding.

Challenges that may have arisen during the psychedelic journey are addressed in a safe and supportive environment. Therapists assist clients in navigating and processing difficult emotions or memories that may have surfaced, fostering a healing process.

The goal of integration is to translate the insights, new perspectives, or sensations gained during the psychedelic session into the client's everyday life. By identifying the meaningful revelations and applying them to real-life situations, clients initiate long-term, meaningful change.

CAN NON-PSYCHEDELIC THERAPY COMPLEMENT PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED SESSIONS?

Non-psychedelic therapy sessions play a crucial role in the overall psychedelic assisted therapeutic process, contributing to both the safety and effectiveness of the treatment. Non-psychedelic therapy sessions can assist those preparing for psychedelic experiences by discussing expectations and possible challenges of an upcoming journey. Non-psychedelic therapy emphasises the potential for emotional and psychological growth, complementing the benefits of psychedelic-assisted sessions. By providing a supportive space, individuals are able to make sense of their experiences in everyday life.

WHAT ARE PSYCHEDELICS?

Psychedelics received their name from the Greek words 'psyche' and 'delos' which translates roughly to 'mind-manifesting'. Psychedelics have the potential to bring subconscious thoughts into conscious awareness, facilitating transformative changes. These substances, when used appropriately, can create an environment in which deeply ingrained and rigid thought and behaviour patterns can become more flexible and adaptable.

Psychedelics are substances capable of altering perception, cognition, mood, and behaviour while active in the body. Much like many other psychiatric medications, they are psychoactive, exerting their effects by interacting with processes in the brain and nervous system.

One notable aspect of psychedelics is their tendency to induce mystical experiences, which research suggests are linked to the long-lasting psychological benefits observed in psychedelic therapy. From a biochemical standpoint, psychedelics primarily interact with serotonin receptors and various neurotransmitters, depending on the specific substance. These interactions can lead to changes in neural connectivity and activity, both during and after the psychedelic experience.

WHAT IS PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED THERAPY USED FOR?

Psychedelic-assisted therapy has a rich history rooted in indigenous healing practices. Early Western research in the 1950s and 60s saw benefits for a variety of conditions. In the modern context, it has shown promise in addressing various mental health conditions. Recent research, including well-controlled clinical trials, has indicated its potential effectiveness in treating conditions like Treatment-Resistant Depression (TRD), end-of-life anxiety, addictions, eating disorders, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Additionally, it's being explored for its impact on neuroplasticity, potentially opening new avenues in psychiatry as well as the betterment of well people. Notably, regulatory agencies including the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) have permitted the prescription of psychedelics; Psilocybin for TRD and MDMA for PTSD, by accredited psychiatrists in select cases, acknowledging their therapeutic potential.

IS PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED THERAPY SAFE?

Psychedelic-assisted therapy is generally considered safe when administered under clinical supervision. These substances, compared to other mind-altering drugs, have a low potential for harm, as they are non-addictive and not prone to abuse. They typically have minimal physical effects on the body and are well-tolerated by most individuals. However, it's crucial to conduct a medical assessment to determine suitability, as certain medical conditions may be contraindicated with specific psychedelics. Additionally, some medications may be incompatible with psychedelics, requiring individuals to either exclude them from treatment or taper of medications before therapy begins.

Misuse or improper use of psychedelics can indeed lead to harm. Vulnerable individuals who are unprepared to navigate the experiences they may encounter or lack adequate support to make sense of these experiences can potentially suffer psychological trauma, often referred to as "bad trips." However, such adverse outcomes are rare when psychedelics are administered by well-trained therapists in controlled settings with careful attention to preparation and the environment.

In clinical and supervised settings, psychedelics have demonstrated good safety and tolerability profiles. Toxicity risks are negligible, and when prescribed appropriately by qualified psychiatrists, they are unlikely to lead to addictive behaviours. In fact, some psychedelics are being investigated for their potential to reduce or eliminate substance abuse.

ARE PSYCHEDELICS LEGAL IN AUSTRALIA?

From 1 July 2023, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) amended the Poisons Standard to allow the controlled use of MDMA for PTSD and psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression. Only authorised psychiatrists who have obtained approvals can prescribe these substances under specific conditions. All other psychedelic drugs remain in

Schedule 9, meaning they are classed as having a high risk of misuse and remain restricted to clinical trials.

IS PSYCHEDELIC THERAPY LEGAL IN AUSTRALIA?

From 1 July 2023, psychedelic therapy is legal with MDMA for PTSD and psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression. Only authorised psychiatrists who have followed the prescribing pathway can prescribe MDMA and psilocybin. All other psychedelic substances used in therapy remain illegal and are restricted to clinical trials.

HOW CAN I ACCESS PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED THERAPY?

Psychedelic therapy is legally accessible for patients who have PTSD or TRD. You will need to be referred to an authorised prescriber psychiatrist after being assessed by your GP of a full medical history. The authorised prescriber psychiatrist will prescribe the medicines within the context of an approved treatment program. This involves therapists with specialist training in facilitating psychedelic therapy.

You may also access psychedelic-assisted therapy if you are a suitable candidate to participate in a clinical trial that is scientifically testing the effects of a psychedelic for a certain indication.

HOW CAN I DECIDE IF PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED THERAPY IS RIGHT FOR ME?

Deciding if psychedelic-assisted therapy is suitable for you involves careful consideration of multiple factors. Firstly, you must meet the criteria for PTSD and TRD to be prescribed MDMA and psilocybin, respectively. Secondly, it's crucial to understand the substantial time commitment required, including 1-3 in-clinic dosing sessions separated by several weeks, each lasting up to 8 hours. Additionally, regular non-drug psychotherapy and psychiatry sessions are typically part of the process. Financial considerations are important too, with the anticipated cost for psychedelic-assisted therapy being around \$18,000 per patient, although there's hope that affordability and accessibility will improve over time.

Having a strong support system is essential; you'll need someone to accompany you home from the dosing clinic to offer support and monitor your well-being after the psychedelic session. Furthermore, being able to set aside time from your usual duties and responsibilities to process your psychedelic experiences is important.

If you're facing extreme psychosocial disadvantages such as homelessness or living in an environment with family or domestic violence, it may be advisable to engage in support services first to address fundamental needs like safety and stability before considering the intensive program of psychedelic-assisted therapy.

Lastly, successful outcomes often require ongoing integration after completing psychedelic therapy, which demands commitment and resources. Additionally, willingness to taper off

prescribed or herbal medications, including some psychiatric medications like SSRIs, is essential, as these may interact with psychedelic medicine. In summary, deciding on psychedelic-assisted therapy involves assessing your readiness, resources, and willingness to meet its requirements and potential challenges, and it's advisable to consult with mental health professionals for guidance in this decision-making process.

ARE THERE ANY CONDITIONS OR MEDICATIONS THAT MAY EXCLUDE A PERSON FROM PSYCHEDELIC ASSISTED THERAPY?

Psychedelic-assisted therapy may not be suitable for individuals with specific health conditions or those taking certain medications. Some medications used to manage mental health conditions can interact with psychedelics, potentially diminishing their effectiveness and increasing the risk of serotonin syndrome. Health conditions such as uncontrolled hypertension, cardiovascular issues, liver or kidney problems may exclude individuals due to limited safety data. Additionally, a history of borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder, psychosis, schizophrenia, or related psychotic conditions are often a contraindication. To participate in authorised PAT, individuals need to meet diagnostic criteria for conditions like PTSD or treatment-resistant depression. Clinical trials have strict eligibility criteria and will only include participants with specific conditions or indications. Individuals who can't provide informed consent, are unwilling to commit to the program's intensity, are regular recreational psychedelic users, or those at a high risk of suicide or also often excluded. A psychological assessment helps assess readiness and motivation for PAT, and proper preparation is crucial, ideally after exploring other treatment options like psychotherapy or medication. These considerations ensure that PAT is safe and tailored to each individual's needs.

ARE THERE ANY SIDE EFFECTS OF PSYCHEDELIC ASSISTED THERAPY?

Psychedelic-assisted therapy, while potentially beneficial, requires therapists to exercise utmost caution as patients can remain vulnerable during these sessions. Similar to any medication, even legal psychedelic substances can carry side effects. According to the TGA, psilocybin may lead to temporary increases in blood pressure and heart rate, with a risk of inducing psychosis in predisposed individuals. MDMA, on the other hand, can result in sensations of faintness, elevated blood pressure and pulse rate, panic attacks, and, in rare cases, loss of consciousness or seizures.

These potential risks and side effects are thoroughly discussed with patients, ensuring their informed consent. Patients who have concerns about the suitability of psychedelic-assisted therapy are encouraged to consult with their own doctors. It's important to note that some individuals may not be suitable candidates for this therapy due to an increased risk of experiencing the aforementioned side effects.

Furthermore, while psychedelics can facilitate therapeutic experiences, they can also induce negative experiences, commonly referred to as "bad trips," characterised by fear, anxiety, or an altered sense of reality, which may prompt individuals to behave in ways that put them

at risk. Therapists are trained to provide guidance and support to mitigate these potential negative outcomes.

HOW DO I TELL MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY I AM DOING/TRYING TO DO PSYCHEDELIC THERAPY?

Starting the conversation of psychedelic therapy with friends and family can be challenging and even intimidating. Given that psychedelic therapy is a relatively recent and evolving form of treatment gaining acceptance, each person has their own standpoint. It is important to discuss to your loved ones why you may feel psychedelic therapy will be beneficial to you. You can explain how psychedelics function, bringing subconscious thoughts into conscious awareness, creating openness and freeing expression of emotions.

It is essential to clarify that psychedelic therapy is administered under clinical supervision by qualified psychiatrists. As there are a number of criteria that must be met when prescribing medicinal drugs and treatment, this ensures individuals accepted for psychedelic therapy are most suitable.

If the conversation does not initially go as planned, be patient and understand that some people may need more time to process information. There are a number of resources available on the TGA, SOL and the Australian Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Practitioners (AMAPP) website for further reading. Providing family and friends with external resources and organisations can assist with their education and confirming any questions they may have.

Resources and useful information can be found below:

- Therapeutic Goods Administration website: <https://www.tga.gov.au/>
- Accessing MDMA or psilocybin: <https://www.tga.gov.au/products/unapproved-therapeutic-goods/mdma-and-psilocybin/access-mdma-or-psilocybin-consumers>
- Evaluation of MDMA and psilocybin as treatment: <https://www.tga.gov.au/how-we-regulate/ingredients-and-scheduling-medicines-and-chemicals/evaluation-therapeutic-value-benefits-and-risks-methylenedioxymethamphetamine-mdma-and-psilocybin-treatment-mental-behavioural-or-developmental-disorders>
- AMAPP website: <https://www.amapp.au/>