

## Chapter Nine



# SPIRITUAL AFTERCARE

After I had recovered my physical and mental health and begun building my connections and relationships, the last element of my life that needed healing was my relationship with God.

I said before that when I learned I would have to go through chemo, I was angry with God. The reality, though, is that I was angry with anything I *could* be angry with. I couldn't deal with the reality of my diagnosis, and I shut down completely—I shut down mentally, I shut down with my family and friends, and I shut down my relationship with God.

On one particular visit to my folks while I was going through treatment, they suggested I needed to go to the temple with

my family to pray. This wasn't an unusual thing; my family is extremely religious and spiritual. They often go to the temple on their own, participate in religious activities, and observe religious holidays.

I never fully espoused our religion, but that doesn't mean I wasn't spiritual. I was reluctant to go to temple and practice my parents' religion when I was younger, because I felt like I was being forced to do it by my parents. Additionally, when I was younger, I was often teased for my Indian heritage, and it had a negative impact on my willingness to practice or acknowledge my family's religion. I rebelled, and my rebellious mentality stuck through adulthood.

When I was diagnosed with cancer, it reinforced my non-spiritual mindset. "Well, if I had practiced religion," I thought, "it still wouldn't have changed anything; I would have ended up with this diagnosis anyway. Screw it—I'm not going to temple. I'm going to be angry." That anger became my necessary fuel to survive.

It was only after a few years had passed in remission that I was finally able to start letting go of that anger and hostility. Maybe I was tired of being angry. I needed to move on and promote positivity if I was going to be healthy and experience a true sense of well-being in my life.

I realized that the essence of living is a balance between the

mind, heart, and spirit, and I was disconnected from my heart. I could feel a piece was missing. I was working hard on my physical well-being—eating well, taking supplements, and exercising—but I was neglecting two elements of my health: my emotional and spiritual well-being. I didn't necessarily need to practice religion, but I did need to invoke God back into my life. I felt that connecting to God would help me heal further.

As I would learn, experimenting in the realm of spirituality and trying to balance the mind, body, and spirit takes time. In a society where we seek immediate gratification, patience and persistence can be hard to come by. Changes don't occur overnight but take months and years—and I was just beginning on a journey that is still unfolding.

My first step was to have a talk with God in my head. I had always felt like whenever I would talk to myself, I was really having a conversation with God. I had neglected that practice for a long time, but as I healed, I returned to my meditation practice and began to connect with my spirituality again. I felt that meditation would ground me and get me back into a sense of living more presently and not worrying about the future or reflecting on the past.

## **THE SCIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY**

Research examining the physical, mental, and social health of

cancer patients showed that spirituality had a positive effect on all three areas. A large meta-analysis showed that people who were dealing with cancer and maintained spiritual practices reported better physical health and recovery, lowered levels of anxiety and depression, and an increased ability to cope.<sup>44</sup> Specific religious behaviors, such as attending church, didn't matter—it was the patients' overall positive spiritual belief that allowed them to experience better physical and mental health throughout their cancer. If they were disconnected with God, they experienced greater distress and poorer emotional well-being.

A second study showed that *positive* spiritual belief was important. People with a variety of health conditions were studied, from brain and spinal cord injury to stroke and cancer. Participants who held *negative* spiritual beliefs, such as a belief in punishment from a higher power, experienced worse pain and mental and physical health than those who held *positive* spiritual beliefs.<sup>45</sup> Even participants who held a mix of positive and negative spiritual beliefs experienced worse health outcomes than those with positive beliefs.

More studies are needed to safely conclude that spirituality has a positive correlation in fighting cancer and leading to a

---

44 John M. Salsman, et al, "A Meta-Analytic Approach to Examining the Correlation between Religion/Spirituality and Mental Health in Cancer," *Cancer*, August 10, 2015.

45 Angela Jones, et al, "Relationships between Negative Spiritual Beliefs and Health Outcomes for Individuals with Heterogeneous Medical Conditions," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, April 28, 2015, 17(2): 135-152.

positive outcome, but as I looked into this research, I came to understand the power of mindset. One negative thought can affect your outcome for the worse. Conversely, the more positive your frame of mind, the better your experience will be. Cultivating positivity is a spiritual practice.

I define spirituality as reducing self-centeredness and feeling more connected with the universe. Being religious is one way of being spiritual; having a sense that there is a God enables you to feel connected to a higher power. You can be spiritual without being religious; the core of spirituality is in connecting with the universe that is larger than your individual sense of self.

## **THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE**

Mindfulness was the first practice I turned to as I reconnected with my spirituality. Mindfulness is defined as a non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness. It can be practiced by focusing your attention on an object or the breath or your body or thoughts. Focusing on one particular element allows you to keep your attention on the present and not be chased by memories of the past or anxiety for the future.

It's essential to maintain a positive mindset during the whole process of cancer or any health crisis. The more positive your

frame of mind, the better the outcome will be. Negative thoughts can pile onto each other and become a downward spiral, and mindfulness can be a helpful practice to counter that process. When you focus on the present moment, you're not dwelling on negative issues. As you become more practiced with mindfulness, those negative moments will occur less.

Research shows that mindfulness improves stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>46</sup> It also helps in battling addictions<sup>47</sup> and reducing the emotional components that exacerbate chronic pain.<sup>48</sup> Mindfulness also reduces your fight-or-flight response and physical manifestations of stress, including blood pressure and stress hormone release. With stress reduction comes reduced rumination, increased focus, improved memory, and less emotional reactivity.

A study even determined that mindfulness practice can help people who are exhausted from stress and lack of sleep. In a survey of entrepreneurs, researchers found that those who slept more or engaged in regular mindfulness practices

---

46 "The Evidence," *The Center for Mindfulness Studies*, accessed May 1, 2019.

47 K. Witkiewitz, M. Lustyk, and S. Bowen, "Re-Training the Addicted Brain: A Review of Hypothesized Neurobiological Mechanisms of Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention," *Psychology of Addictive Behavior*, July 9, 2012, 27(2): 351-365.

48 Rajguru Parth, et al, "Use of Mindfulness Meditation in the Management of Chronic Pain: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials," *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, February 21, 2014.

reported lower levels of exhaustion.<sup>49</sup> Exhaustion is commonplace for entrepreneurs—I certainly experienced it as I ran my business—and mindfulness assists with that problem. It doesn't replace the need for sleep, but it alleviates the stress and resulting exhaustion.

In the beginning, it can be difficult to see progress on a day-to-day basis. (Think of monks who, despite years of practice, are still constantly working on the hard task of staying in the moment.) Our brains are cluttered with so much judgment and thoughts of the future and the past that we're not able to connect in the moment with people. Being mindful helps to reduce judgments, stereotypes, and biases and be present with what is.

## BASIC MINDFUL BREATHING

Simply paying attention to your breath is a very easy way to access a state of mindfulness. Breathing is the only function we can perform both unconsciously and consciously; it can be completely involuntary, or completely voluntary. Because of this, we can create powerful effects by learning how to control it.

When we're stressed, our breathing becomes shallow and rapid, and our heart rate accelerates. Deep breaths activate

---

<sup>49</sup> Oregon State University, "Mindfulness and Sleep Can Reduce Exhaustion in Entrepreneurs," *ScienceDaily*, February 4, 2019.

the *parasympathetic nervous system*, which governs relaxation and repair. Your heart rate slows, and anxiety and stress are reduced.

When I feel my anxiety and stress levels are high, literally taking a minute or two to breathe deeply is very effective. Many people are used to breathing shallowly, and it takes practice to learn to breathe using your diaphragm. When you take full, deep breaths in and out, you use a lot of muscles that aren't normally utilized. You get much more oxygen into your blood, and you're able to eliminate more toxins. Because breath work enables the parasympathetic nervous system, it reduces our fight-or-flight response and calms the body.

I learned a powerful technique from my program director, Dr. Andrew Weil. He teaches an exercise called 4-7-8.<sup>50</sup> The numbers each correspond to a specific action. You take a deep breath for four seconds, hold it for seven seconds, and exhale for eight seconds. You repeat the cycle four times. He advocates doing it twice a day. Practiced twice a day over a period of weeks or months, this exercise has been shown to reduce blood pressure and heart rate. Dr. Weil has described how doing this breath work exercise helped people with an irregular heart rate return to a regular rhythm. By training you to take deeper breaths, this practice promotes relaxation and counteracts stress hormones that are produced when we're in survival mode.

---

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Weil, "How to Perform the 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise," *YouTube*, May 23, 2014.

## MODALITIES FOR PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

I was first exposed to meditation when I was in residency around 2003. I practiced transcendental meditation, which is a specific type of meditation in which you're given a personalized mantra by a teacher. You sit in a comfortable position and recite this mantra to yourself, for twenty minutes. Many people are under the impression that you have to clear your mind and let it be blank for "successful" meditation, but that's not the case. Transcendental meditation uses a mantra to center your mind as thoughts come and go.

Guided meditation apps can provide an easy way to begin a mindfulness practice for the first time. There are many options available for download. I like Head Space, a free app that offers guided meditations with an option to pay a subscription for additional practices and techniques.

There are a lot of modalities outside of seated meditation available for a person to practice mindfulness. It's important to have a guide to help you reinforce positive behaviors and mindset. It's not uncommon to have a negative thought come up in your mind, and then beat yourself up over it; that cycle can negatively influence your thought process and outlook. For that reason, it's helpful to practice with a guide or a teacher. A guide can help bring you back to observing the moment and promoting positive well-being.

### *Therapist-Supported Mindfulness Practices*

Many styles of therapy involve mind-body practices and working with a therapist or practitioner in these modalities can deepen your spiritual exploration.

Hypnosis is one modality that helps people focus their intention inward. This can be aided by visualization and imagery. A trained therapist helps encourage inward reflection over outward attention.

Music therapy is used to help people with anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and even chronic pain to manage symptoms and promote relaxation.

Massage therapy and acupuncture can also promote relaxation and offer symptom relief for people undergoing cancer treatment. Massage is often recommended by oncologists to alleviate depression and mood disorders.<sup>51</sup>

### *Movement-Based Mindfulness*

Some mindfulness or spiritual practices incorporate movement to develop mind-body awareness. Yoga combines breathing techniques, physical movement, and meditation to promote health and relaxation. There are a variety of styles you can explore; I do Kundalini yoga, which is a type of yoga that helps move energy through the different chakras

<sup>51</sup> "About Mind-Body Therapies," *Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center*, 2019.

or energy centers of your body. I feel the energy movement throughout my body, and it helps me focus and become more mindful.

Qi Gong and Tai Chi are two more mind-body practices that help people connect with their spirituality through conscious movement, breathing techniques, and moment-to-moment mindfulness.

### *Selflessness as a Mindfulness Practice*

Another way we can begin connecting to our spirituality is to connect with others in selfless service. A selfless act could be something as simple as listening to a friend or as organized as donating your time to volunteer at a charity. When we assist others in fulfilling their needs, we connect to a purpose greater than ourselves.

As we provide empathy for others, we also connect to our own self-love. When you love yourself, that gets conveyed in the way you are with others.

As I developed my own spiritual practices, I looked for ways to deepen my sense of self-love. For me, the most powerful method to connect with myself—and ultimately, to understand better how to be of service to others—was by exploring psychedelic therapies.

## THE POWER OF PSYCHEDELICS

I was drawn to explore psychedelics because of the stories I'd heard from people who had profound, life-changing, and positive experiences. The possibility of using psychedelics to aid in PTSD, depression, and anxiety is being explored more and more by the scientific community; in fact, a 2016 study explored the effects of psychedelics on cancer patients who had been given a life-threatening diagnosis and were suffering from anxiety and depression. Participants were given both low and high doses of psilocybin, and 80 percent of them showed clinically significant decreases in depressed mood and anxiety. They also reported improvements in their mood, relationships, spirituality, and outlook on life.<sup>52</sup>

After my personal trauma of cancer, divorce, and disconnection from people, I wanted to find a therapy that could help me reconnect to myself and to others. Psychedelics seemed like a great place to begin.

In general, I'm a skeptical person, and I look for results. Over the course of ten months of psychedelic therapies, I saw deep-level changes, little by little. My brain chemistry shifted; I no longer get stuck in the whirlwind of self-pity and negative self-worth. Combined with my meditation and

---

<sup>52</sup> Roland R. Griffiths, et al, "Psilocybin Produces Substantial and Sustained Decreases in Depression and Anxiety in Patients with Life-Threatening Cancer," *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, December 30, 2016, 30(12): 1181-1197.

yoga practices to integrate these experiences, I feel a much deeper connection to the universe and to other people.

No prescribed path will work for every individual. What I hope to relay with my experiences is the way this particular path affected me. From my first experience with psychedelics, I began to open an important door to help me trust people again.

#### SET AND SETTING

The trees were so green and the sky was so bright as I drove home on a road I had traversed hundreds of times. I saw buildings on the side of the road that I had never looked at before. I took notice of the various designs of the numerous homes I was passing. Why didn't I notice this before? It's as if I was driving on this road for the very first time. Additionally, I felt burdenless; I felt lighter and my mind was blank. This was the very first time, in as long as I could remember, that my mind wasn't ruminating. I wasn't thinking of the future, or the past, I was just focused on the present. This was the experience I had coming home after my first underground psychedelic experience.

It was almost as if my brain had slowed down from 100 mph to a nice cruise speed of 45 mph. Rumination is defined as “a mode of responding to distress that involves repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possi-

ble causes and consequences of these symptoms.”<sup>53</sup> Evidence now suggests that rumination is associated with psychopathologies including depression, anxiety, binge eating, binge drinking, and self-harm.<sup>54</sup>

The area of the brain where these processes occur is collectively known as the default-mode network (DMN). The DMN also houses the construct we call self or ego. To put this in a more relatable perspective, this area lights up when a Facebook user receives a lot of likes for a post. Under the influence of psilocybin, otherwise known as magic mushrooms, there is reduced activity in the DMN due to reduced blood flow during acute exposure.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, this quieting of the DMN is also seen in folks who are expert meditators. The lasting effects of psilocybin can vary and it is proposed that the psilocybin functions as a “reset mechanism” for the brain turning the DMN off and back on again, directly improving symptoms of depression.<sup>56</sup>

As I write this, I’ve had under a dozen or so psychedelic experiences. Each one is different. As I’ve navigated each

---

53 Berman, Marc G. et al, “Depression, Rumination and the Default Network,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2011, 6(5): 548-555.

54 S. Nolen-Hoeksema, B. E. Wisco, and S. Lyubomirsky, “Rethining Rumination,” *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, 2008, 3(5): 400-424.

55 Robin L. Carhart-Harris, et al, “Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic State as Determined by fMRI Studies with Psilocybin,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 2012, 109(6): 2138-43.

56 Robin L. Carhart-Harris, “Psilocybin for Treatment-Resistant Depression: fMRI-Measured Brain Mechanisms,” *Scientific Reports*, 2017.

experience, I can conclusively say that “set and setting” is of utmost importance. Timothy Leary describes this in his book *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, “set” is the mindset or expectation one brings to the experience, and “setting” is the environment in which it takes place.<sup>57</sup> I found out the hard way how important these two facets are in influencing an experience. Some of my worst experiences occurred when I didn’t feel safe or when I was in a group setting not knowing anyone. I also felt unsafe in one instance when I didn’t know the person conducting the ceremony.

These poor experiences manifested because I went into the experience with anxiety, uncertainty, and a feeling of mistrust. These emotions were magnified during my psychedelic journey and were obviously unpleasant. Even though I had a suboptimal experience, the benefits of the medicine on my brain chemistry still took place. Rumination slowed, and my depressive symptoms decreased.

## **THE CEREMONY**

In my first experience, I signed up for a retreat in psychedelics without having read anything ahead of time; I just trusted the friends who recommended it to me. The facilitator had been conducting ceremonies with psychedelics for over twenty years. We were to be exposed to two medicines,

---

<sup>57</sup> Timothy Leary, *The Psychedelic Experience*, New York: Citadel, 2017.

each lasting anywhere from four to six hours, and we would sleep at the retreat space and have an integration session the next morning to discuss our experiences.

The first medicine used was a 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) analog, which is also the active ingredient in ecstasy. I was a little worried about how that would affect my brain, but the doses given were not the same as those in recreational use. Additionally, the medicine was a pure form of MDMA, not something obtained off the streets. MDMA is nicknamed the “heart opener,” leaving you more open to people, to interaction, and the experience of the psychedelic that would come next. Before its prohibition in 1985, psychotherapists were using MDMA as an adjunct to psychotherapy. Under MDMA, there is a significant reduction of metabolism in the brain’s amygdala, a region shown to be involved in maintaining the “fear network” of the brain. Additionally, there are elevations in levels of the hormone oxytocin and the neurotransmitter serotonin. This increase translates into an increase in trust and bonding toward others and reductions in anxiety and fear.<sup>58</sup>

I didn’t feel much of an effect from the MDMA, at first. As time passed, I was more talkative, a little less anxious, and feeling pretty relaxed. MDMA was definitely kicking in.

---

58 S. B. Thal and M. Lommen, Thal, “Current Perspective on MDMA-Assisted Psychotherapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 2018, 48(2): 99–108.

An hour and a half after the dose of MDMA, we were given the second medicine of the ceremony: psilocybin. Within another half hour, everything felt unsteady. I was seeing double and triple; the floor was moving up and down. I went to the bathroom, thinking I would be sick. Psilocybin can often reduce one's ego and in some extreme cases can dissolve the ego and create a sense of oneness with the universe. I felt a terrible sense of fear because I was beginning to understand how strong my ego was, and how difficult it was to relinquish control and simply let go.

People often describe having amazing visuals and images on psilocybin. Mine were dark: I had a visual of falling down a tunnel, trying to grasp at anything to get my bearings. I saw another vision of a curtain in front of me, blocking my view of the world, and for what felt like hours, I went through the motions of trying to look behind the curtain, and not succeeding.

After the experience, I slept for three or four hours, and when I woke up, I felt no stress. This was atypical of me. Usually if I know I'm not going to get enough sleep, I experience intense anxiety, wondering how I will react in front of people and whether I will be able to function without enough sleep. Generally, I have nagging thoughts in my mind about whether people will be judging me. I carry stress in my shoulders, and they tend to feel extremely tight.

But when I woke up after the ceremony, none of those sensations were there. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt so light. I started to feel an openness and intimate connection with everybody. I felt like they were all my friends. And I was curious—why hadn't I felt that way the night before?

We began our integration discussion, which was an opportunity for each individual in the group to share the experiences they had seen or felt while under the medicines. This is typical of a ceremony: the guide helps interpret the participants' experiences and the messages we received during the ceremony to help us integrate these messages into our daily lives. People shared incredible experiences: visions of family members that had passed without the opportunity to say goodbye, and other deep, meaningful experiences.

I was last. When it was my turn, I answered honestly: I felt gyped. In comparison to the experiences people were sharing, mine was horrible. I told the group how nauseous I'd felt, how out of control, and how isolated and ashamed I felt as a result.

The facilitator asked. "Are you the type of person who typically needs to be in control, and has a problem asking for help?"

"Yes," I answered.

“I wish you would have talked about these experiences while you were having them,” the facilitator continued. “We’re here for you, to help you and guide you through that.”

She was right—I hadn’t asked for help. I didn’t realize that until she pointed it out.

“You’re very hard on yourself,” she said.

I told her that I knew that—I just didn’t realize it was that apparent. It helped me shift my perspective on my experience.

She went on to explain that my experience hadn’t been “horrible;” it was an experience tailored to me and my own body. There was no reason to compare it to another person, because each experience is individualized, and we all perceive our experiences differently. The sick sensations I’d felt were my body’s way of purging negative energy and negative stress.

She recommended I watch a movie, *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* to help me understand the visions I’d experienced. The movie dives into quantum physics and discusses different dimensions, and how we typically see in 3D, but that multiple dimensions exist at the same time. The movie also points out that our brain processes 400 billion bits of information a second, but we are only conscious of 2,000 bits. We take in an incredible amount of sensory input, and we

cross-check all that data through our own perceptions and filter out patterns that aren't recognizable or familiar. "It's like we're really walking around blind," the facilitator said. When you change those filters of perception, you can begin to see different meanings as a result.

I realized that a huge part of my own personal lens was judgment and bias. I have a history of being very judgmental that connects back to my early attitudes around achievement and how I grew up. The medicines had helped me unleash trauma and repressed stress that had been buried in my subconscious. Slowly, I was seeing how to take on a different lens.

I was beginning to connect the dots and be more connected with people. For a few weeks after my experience, I was on a high, feeling love for nature, and more importantly, for people. I wondered, *am I going to feel like this every day?* This feeling of connection was new for me; I was so used to experiencing other people as my enemies. I went on to have several more experiences, and each one deepened my sense of connection and spirituality.

## OPENING THE DOOR TO CONNECTION

One of my more memorable experiences occurred when I felt safe in the environment where the ceremony was held and I had no expectations. In a ceremonial setting, one is

often expected to declare an intention prior to ingesting the sacrament. An intention is an aim or goal you want to center your experience around. It can provide an anchor to return to if you find yourself venturing into frightening territory. An intention can be something serious—like to understand the nature of an addiction that’s interfering with your life—or it could simply be play, fun, or joy.

My intention before one experience was to forgive and forget any lingering issues that I harbored against my parents. During this specific journey, I remember traveling back in time to my birth. I witnessed myself being born in a hospital to my young parents, my mother nineteen and my father twenty-four. It’s difficult to put into words, but I felt the unconditional love my parents had for me as soon as I was placed in their arms after being born.

I could feel how big my parents’ hearts were, when accepting me as their own. Witnessing this experience warmed my heart and renewed a sense of love towards my parents. As this dream-like image faded, another image appeared. I was talking to my parents. I saw myself having a conversation with my parents. I heard myself asking, “Why were you so hard on me growing up? Why didn’t you love me more and express your love in ways that I needed?” My dad replied, “We did the best we could given the circumstances we were in. We were young adults in a new country with no friends, no family, and no clue how to raise a child. We thought

what we were doing was right. All of our actions were out of unconditional love. There was never malicious intent. You were, are, and always will be loved by us.”

The next morning, our group gathered around our guide to share our experiences from the night before. When it was my turn to share, I gave a vivid picture, to the best of my memory, of what I saw and heard in my vision. The guide said that now that I have this gift of a message, I should be able to release any disdain or anger against my parents and reframe it. I should be understanding of the predicament they were in and realize that in the end, they are my parents and love me no matter what. Having the guide help reinforce the meaning of my visions really helped me to let go of my anger.

I felt so much lighter in the days and weeks after. I found my personality had shifted. I felt a sense of connection to people that I didn’t have before. Was it because my brain chemistry shifted or was it because the rumination had lessened?

My interactions with my parents became more meaningful and I was able to be present with them instead of rehashing old arguments or feeling old unwanted emotions.

One particular day, I went to my parents’ house for dinner. I was tired and my dad and I were discussing some needed modifications to their house. I had just gone through a similar modification to my own home and felt what I had to

suggest should be taken seriously. Instead, my dad in usual fashion dismissed my perspective and went on to do his own thing.

Normally, I would be triggered, and I would get angry and resentful and the rest of the evening spent at my parents' home would be awkward and in silence. But on this day, I just let the emotion roll off. I was aware of the emotion surfacing, but I held it in check. I was in tune with the turmoil that was going on in my mind, but I consciously decided to stay present in the moment and not let these old emotions of inadequacy surface.

At that moment, I remembered my message from my magic mushroom experience: that my parents love me regardless of who I am or what I've done. Instead of arguing or having a scowl on my face, I simply accepted the circumstances for what they were and didn't analyze it any further. I didn't ruminate over this like I normally do, nor did I dwell on this for days after. I stayed present.

On another day leaving my parents home, they extended a hug. Growing up, these hugs or other overt signs of affection were not the norm. My parents now will hug us, but it's a weird side-hug. They don't hug in the frontal plane. Whenever they initiated a side hug, I'd always think in the back of my head that this was fake and ingenuine because it wasn't what I wanted or how I thought a hug should be expressed.

On this day, I told myself, “It’s a hug. Accept it for what it is and enjoy it. It’s their way of expressing their unconditional love for me. It’s unique and it’s from my parents. How could I second guess this intention?” This revelation was spawned by my psychedelic experience, which I was integrating into my daily life. I’ll always be indebted to the wisdom the plant medicine provided me that night.

Over the ensuing month, I noticed that I also was more open-minded, curious, and even more imaginative. My experience is not uncommon: a study in 2011 demonstrated that those who participated in experiences occasioned by psilocybin often showed increases in aesthetic appreciation, imagination, and creativity. In fact, one year after the study, the personality trait of openness still remained above baseline in individuals participating in the study.<sup>59</sup>

## **USING PSYCHEDELICS TO FORGE CONNECTIONS**

Anyone who is looking for meaning in their life can benefit from exploration with psychedelics because their purpose is to give you a sensation of connection with the universe and with other people. Research has shown a connection between the use of psychedelics and improved emotional

---

59 Katherine A. MacLean, Matthew W. Johnson, and Roland R. Griffiths, “Mystical Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin Lead to Increases in the Personality Domain of Openness,” *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, September 28, 2011.

stability, fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression, and greater levels of spirituality.<sup>60</sup>

In my case, the traumas in my life had made me more introverted and isolated, and psychedelics have helped me open myself up a little more each time. My goal is to continue to do psychedelics until I feel I have put aside my distrust toward people and have a feeling of connectivity driving my desire to meet people. That's what the universe is all about and what we as humans are meant to do, whether we're connecting through our experiences of trauma or joy. Psychedelics are an efficient way of accomplishing my goals without having to endure endless hours of psychotherapy. These medicines do so much in so little time.

## INTEGRATING YOUR EXPERIENCE

If you choose to do psychedelic-assisted therapy, it's important to do it under a guide or facilitator to help integrate the day after the experience, as well as continuously in the weeks and months that follow. It's hard to gain a full perspective of your experience on your own; you will usually need a trained professional to help you process the feelings and emotions that come up.

---

<sup>60</sup> American Psychological Association, "Can Psychedelic Drugs Heal?" *Science Daily*, August 9, 2018.

Your guide will help shape the way you think during the journey and help you through the experiences you may have.

Over the experiences I've had so far, I've had multiple facilitators, and my experience with each was very different. I felt safe with the first facilitator and was confident that I would be guided through whatever visions I had. The other facilitators had good intentions, but their lack of experience or specific methods and different personalities didn't gel with me. If you're going to go through a psychedelic experience to process trauma and better yourself as a human being, there are several important factors to consider:

1. You need to make sure you're in a safe, comfortable environment.
2. If you're with others, make sure they're people you're comfortable with as you go through these intimate experiences.
3. You should have an experienced facilitator that you trust. Seek out referrals from people you trust.
4. It's important to have a positive mindset. The mood you have going into the session can influence your experience.

Psychedelics aren't a "quick fix," but they do change your brain chemistry in a positive way. They enhance neuroplasticity, allowing us to create new connections in our brains as well as repair old and damaged ones. This explains why

positive changes in mood and brain function persist even after the acute effects of the drug have subsided.<sup>61</sup>

I began my exploration into psychedelics with a goal: I wanted to discover my purpose. These experiences have helped to point me in a direction and light my path. They can help you tap into your inner guidance. It can be beneficial to follow up with a psychotherapist experienced in psychedelics who can help you process your experiences and continue with your spiritual enlightenment.

## **PRACTICING SELFLESSNESS AND TRUE CONNECTION**

Ultimately, my experiences have helped me be more present, more connected to myself, and more connected to other people. I learned that I am doing the universe a disservice when I am not fully present with people. My judgment of others and of myself had caused me to retract and retreat into my own isolation. My distrust had caused me to lose my sense of presence with other people.

You can tell when someone is listening and truly present; you can see it in their eyes. I now try hard to do that for people. There are many gifts we can give to others—financial giving

---

<sup>61</sup> Ly Calvin, et al, “Psychedelics Promote Structural and Functional Neural Plasticity,” *Cell Reports*, June 12, 2018, 23(22): 3170-3182.

is a common example—but the biggest gift you can give to someone is being present with them.

Psychedelics have helped me shed my judgment, and in that process, I've become more mindful, with non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness.

Now, four years into my remission, I've begun to understand how to shape my path for the present and for the future.