



## Conscious Life presents

### Start Here: A Psychedelic Landscape Overview

**Guest: Alexander Beiner**

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#### **[00:00:05] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today, I'm delighted to be speaking with my co-host of the Psychedelic Super Conference, Alexander Beiner. He's an author, journalist, and facilitator whose work focuses on bringing new ways of seeing and being from the margins of Culture into the Mainstream.

He's the author of *The Bigger Picture: How Psychedelics Can Help Us Make Sense of the World*, and he writes a popular Substack on philosophy, popular culture, and psychology. He's an executive director on Breaking Convention, which is Europe's longest running conference on psychedelic medicine and culture. Ali, thank you so much for being with me today.

#### **Alexander Beiner**

It's my pleasure.

#### **Meagen Gibson**

I want to start by asking you, what inspired you to become an expert and facilitator of conversations about psychedelics?

#### **Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, what inspired me? Well, I would say the psychedelics inspired me. Probably like most people, I would say in this area of research, I was inspired by my own experiences. I think that's true and something I've noticed, even if they might not talk about it a whole bunch from people who are researchers or clinicians or scholars, it's the actual experience itself that really opens people up to just a really deep curiosity.

**[00:01:32]**

That was definitely my experience of really wanting to understand and also for other people to check out this incredible experience. I often wonder about the first human beings, maybe on the Savannah, who picked up a mushroom and ate it. I think one of the first things you might do after that experience is go back to the tribe and say, "You guys have to try this. This is really something else. This is incredibly magical and powerful".

That was the initial point. Then I got really into the academia and the counterculture and everything I could get my hands on. This was in the mid 2000s, maybe 2006 or 2007. And so there had been this break in research for a long time. Of course, psychedelics have been used by Indigenous people and the underground for a very long time before that. So there was a break in one sense, and there was not a break in the other sense.

Then I think what really informed me was thinkers like Terence McKenna or Ram Dass or Ann Shulgen, who had kept the flame going. And then early internet forums where I used to have a podcast, before podcasts were really a thing in 2008. And there was a little podcast network around psychedelics and other similar topics.

And there, I really felt deeper in love just the whole culture around psychedelics and this culture of real free exploration of ideas and philosophy and how the world could look if it was more interconnected and there was a deeper creativity at the heart of things. So it brought me to other areas beyond psychedelics, studying systems change and being very interested in meditation.

I got into meditation because of psychedelics as well, and then eventually, breath work. So yeah, so that has been my experience. And then over the years, I've run a big conference called Breaking Convention. I'm one of the co-directors of. It's Europe's largest conference on psychedelic medicine and culture.

And I have a book out called *The Bigger Picture*, which is around how psychedelics can help us make sense of the world. So instead of how to change your mind, how to change culture. That's the question I've been interested in from the get-go.

And it's been really a privilege and a little bit mind-blowing to be part of something that has gone from being really very fringe when I got into it, even more fringe when people, older than me got into it, to now being increasingly socially accepted.

And just as we're having this conversation, potentially months away from being made into medicine in the US already, psilocybin, MDMA, are medicines in Australia as of a few months ago, and the tide is certainly turning.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Definitely. And that's why it was so that you came on to help us with this conference and this exploration, because I think a lot of people have a really deep curiosity, and yet the landscape is super overwhelming. As somebody who can say that... I started this research probably about nine months ago when we were thinking about maybe doing a conference on this subject.

**[00:04:50]**

My overwhelm has just recently tamped down because of all the interviews, and now I understand more. But it is, it's really overwhelming. For the people in our audience that are psychedelic curious, but beginners, can you give me a brief description of all the different substances that people may be referring to under the umbrella of psychedelics?

You've just mentioned a few of them, but which ones are plant-based, which ones are chemical compounds, and then after that, we'll talk through legalities and things like that.

### **Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, sure. There's what's called the classic psychedelics, which are LSD, psilocybin, DMT, there's mescaline. So there are within those, I'm going to try and make this as not complicated as possible because as you said, there's a lot. And I think part of what we're trying to do at the conference as well as help guide people through this whole process and really get an understanding of what they do.

But within those classical psychedelics, there's a split between two different types. There's tryptamines, and tryptamine is a molecule, LSD is a type of tryptamine and psilocybin and DMT, and they're all very closely related to serotonin, which is a molecule in your brain that mediates lots of different things, including mood, motivation to some degree.

So they slide into the serotonin to one of the serotonin receptors in your brain, almost like they were made for it, like a lock and a key. So they fit really nicely in there. And there's other psychedelics as well that are classed as...they're called phenethylamines. And that's MDMA is one of those. Mescaline, they have a different chemical structure, and they're all related to one another as well. And then, just to make things a little bit more confusing, there's also iboga.

And iboga is a West African root bark, which is used traditionally and is an incredibly powerful psychedelic, which medically is used for the treatment of opioid addiction. It's really fascinating because it actually resets the brain's opioid receptors overnight, as well as giving a pretty profound personal experience. It also looks like it can heal traumatic brain injury and really help people move through their traumas. It's really fascinating. It's really a fascinating psychedelic substance as well.

And then there's other ones on the edge, like ketamine, which is more of a dissociative psychedelic and acts on different receptors. There's also plants like *Salvia divinorum*, which is used in Mexican shamanism traditionally and somewhat recreationally sometimes in the States and Europe.

And then there's a bunch more research-y chemicals and other ones around the edge there. The ones that are used for medicine and that we mainly talk about with our guests here would be psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, to a lesser extent, LSD, MDMA, and then also DMT. They're not exclusively those, but that's generally where most of the research is at the moment.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And some of my guests have talked to you about ketamine as well.

**[00:08:11] Alexander Beiner**

Yes, likewise. Which is already illegal medicine in most of the world. So that's been one of the first ones to be used for psychedelic-assisted therapy, for example, because it was really easy to get off the ground and can be very, very effective, also has some downsides as everything does. But yeah.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Just a clarifying point. Like you said, ketamine has been legal and been used in medical practice, especially in contexts like surgery and things like that for years and years and years. So if you've had surgery, you may have already had exposure to ketamine, just not in the context in which we're talking about it.

In psychedelic-assisted therapy, it's literally all you're getting is ketamine for the purposes of your trauma healing journey and such.

**Alexander Beiner**

Exactly.

**Meagen Gibson**

Then I keep hearing these other words tossed around as well, which is - and I'm going to mess it up because I mess it up every time - but it's ethnogenic or ethneogenic? Is that the T-word?

**Alexander Beiner**

Entheogenic, yeah. Entheogenic, yeah. So there's different words for psychedelic. So the word psychedelic was coined by Humphrey Osmond, a British writer, philosopher, in a letter to Aldous Huxley, who wrote *The Doors of Perception*, amongst many other really pioneering psychedelic books. And psychedelic means mind manifesting or soul manifesting.

So psyche-delic, so it means manifesting our minds or our souls to ourselves, which I think is a pretty decent - there's a reason it's stuck as a term - it's a pretty decent term. Entheogenic means generating the God within or generating the divine within. So it has more of a religious or sacred quality, which is, of course, probably the most powerful and healing aspect of psychedelic experiences is a connection with something greater than yourself.

And that correlates very often towards lower depression scores or lower anxiety scores. It's what's called the mystical experience. But it's important to note there isn't just one mystical experience. There's many types of mystical experience that we can have.

Different guests here have talked about a number of them as well. So it's more interesting than just a single moment where you become one with everything. You can have various different mystical experiences. Yeah.

### **[00:10:22] Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. And those, I'm sure, are being informed by the culture you come from and the information that you've been exposed to, your previously existing beliefs and contexts that you held before you had the experience, too.

And as you were talking earlier and talking about the class of psychedelics that bond to the serotonin and fit in there like a key, it's hard not to imagine that all of this is exactly as it should be. When we talk about the context of God and soul and mystical and the way that people - the two themes that I hear out of my interviews is that people experience a sense of connectedness and a sense of meaning-making.

And when we combine those two things with serotonin and how nicely it all fits together, it's fascinating to me. It's like it's all supposed to be integrated, and yet we've been avoiding it and what's the word? Not legalizing, but trying to control our interactions with it for so long.

### **Alexander Beiner**

Absolutely, yeah. And that quality of psychedelics is why this is all happening. It's what we need in many ways, especially in the West, I would argue. There's something really astonishing about the psychedelic experience in that it feels both completely new and really familiar at the same time.

And that's something I've talked to cognitive scientists about. It's something that I find has got this quality of the mystery, but it's a homecoming as well. And there's nothing... There's very few things that are quite like that, certainly things that we can ingest. There's other spiritual practices that can elicit that feeling.

And then beyond the mystical experience in the sense of deep connectedness or alongside that, let's say it all comes together, there's this huge potential for psychedelics in helping us to tap into our creativity, even conflict resolution. We have Leor Roseman and Sami Awad, Israeli researcher and a Palestinian peace activist who've run an incredible study where Israelis and Palestinians have drunk ayahuasca together for healing conflict.

We have Bruce Damer talking about a project to create a psychedelic incubator for people to generate new ideas, whether that's a new type of solar panel or a new society, potentially, who knows, and to figure out, okay, well, how do you actually bring this into the world in some way?

So that, I think, is the cutting edge and something that I'm really excited about and have been excited about in all the conversations I've been with our guests, is just seeing the scale, which I was aware of, but not as aware of as I am now, of just how broadly, psychedelics, I think, are rolling out for different uses and for different people in different cultures.

### **Meagen Gibson**

The potential of application is not just individual and introspective. That's not the only intention, purpose, and use, is what I hear you saying. Is that right?

### **[00:13:29] Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, exactly. And I think it's...psychedelics are known as nonspecific amplifiers. That's a Stanislav Grof's term, which means that whatever's there, they'll dial it up to 11 or probably like 11,000, realistically. So that means, you know... I don't think that's the only thing they do, but it's very interesting because there's so many different groups of people on all sides of the political spectrum and all different backgrounds who take psychedelics, and it doesn't make everyone think the same.

It makes people connect more deeply to their environment, whatever that is. Sometimes it might, very often, it'll flip the script and give us a completely new perspective. But often, they are these nonspecific amplifiers.

So in that sense, a lot of well-being culture in the West, because it's very commoditized, is really focused on the individual. And it's like, "Okay, what's your mission? What's your goal? How are you going to get there?". And so as psychedelics have come in, initially, that culture has also been influencing it.

Whereas in Indigenous cultures, psychedelics, in most of them, weren't really taken alone. And also the other side of it is that when you went for healing for psychedelics in, say, Peru, a few hundred years ago, the shaman is the one who took the medicine and diagnosed and treated you instead of our model of medicine where we take the medicine.

So it's not that one model is right or wrong, but it's just to point out that there is an incredible range of how psychedelics are used now and have been used in the past. There's a lot of potential for things to be experimented with, played with, done differently, which is in itself quite a psychedelic quality, in my view.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah. That was one of the things that I had to check about my own assumptions when I started doing the research was that I think I had a previously existing bias that anybody that took psychedelics would shift their thinking in a specific way. And that, coincidentally, is no surprise, my way, right?

And I think that that's a naivety that a lot of people hold, and that nonspecific amplifier is such an interesting point because you're right, it will probably make you...it's like confirmation bias, almost, for previously existing beliefs or spiritual traditions.

Lots of people report seeing things that are new and having their beliefs questioned or opened or expanded. But overall, you're going to come out emotionally, cognitively similar to that that you were before, maybe even more strongly, huh?

**[00:16:11] Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, often. Also, they are really unpredictable in a lot of ways. And there's a wisdom. Again, Grof talked about this inner healing intelligence that we have, and there is a wisdom within each of us that responds with the psychedelics, and we often go where we need to go.

I don't think they're just nonspecific amplifiers. I also think the drug does a particular thing and does connect us certainly to whatever's around us. And very often people will have an experience of seeing the world as interconnected and really crucially alive, that the world is a living place and we're within it and we have a place in the Cosmos and we're part of a much bigger process.

That does seem pretty consistent, not with everyone, but pretty consistent across different contexts. And it's also it's useful to see, to get a... If you look back at the 60s, and I think our idea about how psychedelics make people think, there was a reaction already, and this is a term Gregory Bateson and the philosopher used to use schismogenesis, that we define ourselves against other people.

And of course, teenagers will define themselves against their parents. So the youth movement of the 60s that got into psychedelics, they were ripe to be defining themselves against the kind of solidity and grounded and traditionalism of the 50s.

And it was like, "No, one religion? No, we want multiple religions. One gender role? No, we're going to have multiple gender roles". Which is a natural, I think, evolution of humans to greater complexity, so I think that probably would have happened anyway. But what's important to remember is that the psychedelics were amplifying and interacting and influencing that process. And so we got the hippies movement, right? And so ecology, a sense of...

**Meagen Gibson**

Anti-war against conflict.

**Alexander Beiner**

Anti-war, yeah. Civil rights, connecting more to models of spirituality that weren't individualistic, that actually were around moving beyond the individual. That became popular. And even the idea right now in psychedelic research of the mystical experience is influenced by those researchers being like, "This is what a mystical experience looks like". It looks like the Zen Samadhi, "I'm one with everything" experience.

And this is something Rick Strassman talks about, who's one of our guests, a DMT researcher. If you look at mystical experiences in the Bible, they're prophetic mystical experiences, which means that you are still you, but you are connecting and talking to the divine.

So you're talking to God in the form of a burning bush, or you're receiving messages downward. And that's an equally valid, different type of spiritual experience. But that's one that comes more traditionally from the Abrahamic religions and is the West's version of spiritual experience.

So we have this huge fascinating clash of philosophies that happens with psychedelics. And one of the aspects of the experience and one of the things that's going on in the brain is that we know

that there's networks connecting and talking to each other in the brain that weren't previously talking to each other.

**[00:19:23]**

So we get this sense of deeper connectedness and also a sense that - and this might also be happening in the brain - of what Aldous Huxley called the reducing valve of consciousness being lifted. So normally you're tuning out most of what's going on because that's how you get stuff done in the world. And don't get eaten by a tiger because you're not so distracted by every bird that's singing and like, "Oh, the smell is so amazing". So that means that...

**Meagen Gibson**

All the colors and yeah...

**Alexander Beiner**

Well, you are, though, if you're on psychedelics.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. But what I'm saying, normally, we're receiving much more than we actually attune to because it would be impossible to not get if we perceived and attuned to everything.

**Alexander Beiner**

Exactly, yeah. The experience of lots of different philosophies coming together, lots of different ideas coming together, lots of different potentials coming together, that's very psychedelic. That's what the psychedelics do. In psychedelic culture and even in psychedelic medicine, that gets reflected. The drug experience flows out into the culture itself, which I find absolutely wonderful and fascinating.

**Meagen Gibson**

For people that are psychedelic curious is what I just keep describing them as, what is the thing that you would want people to know before they even think about dipping their toe into this world and exploring it at all, whether that be in an underground sense or in a therapeutic sense?

**Alexander Beiner**

I would say that the most important qualities are curiosity and discernment. And that's true of being with...that's true of navigating a psychedelic experience. And it's also true of navigating the world around psychedelics because there's a lot of information. There's a lot of good information. There's a lot of bad information. There's a lot of good retreat centers. There's a lot of bad retreat centers.

Generally, clinical trials are pretty solid because of the nature of what they are. But there's also a lot about the clinical trial that's not conducive to a psychedelic experience.



**[00:21:22]**

So I think going in with a sense of curiosity and crucially not landing on meaning making too early. That's something that you mentioned earlier, this heightened sense of meaning and making connections between things.

That can be really powerful, but it can also lead us into all sorts of unhelpful cognitive loops or rabbit holes or deep into conspiracy theory land, which is something you see in the psychedelic community at times, or even just into a sense of certainty about, "Okay, this is what I've got to do with my life. I got this message in my experience, and this is what I've got to do". It's like, "You've got to slow down". That's usually the right answer.

And then if you still feel like that in a month, then that's something to really work with. So it's also about this slowing down process, and that's where the discernment also comes in of like, "Okay, let's take it slow. Let's get lots of different information from lots of different people", and crucially, check in with your own sovereignty, your own sense of yourself, your own what do you really think, what do you really feel, following your instincts. Those would be the main qualities I would encourage people to play with.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, I really like that, too. I remember it was one of the guests that we spoke to said "No sudden moves". That was their advice afterwards.

### **Alexander Beiner**

That's great.

### **Meagen Gibson**

No sudden moves. Also because you can't come out very clear, like "I need to change careers, and end my relationship, move to a different country". It can be, it feels all very, very clear and just no sudden moves. And then the other thing that they said was to really consider before, what am I willing to come out with a different clarity about, and do I actually want that clarity?

This person, I think they said it off the record, or I would tell you who it was, but they had a partner who was battling cancer, and they were the primary caregiver of that partner. And they said, "What happens if you have a psychedelic experience and you come out and you decide you no longer want to be that person's caregiver? Is that a risk you're willing to take?".

And I thought that those two things were both really good context. Like, what are you willing to risk going into it? And then no sudden moves afterwards.

### **Alexander Beiner**

Absolutely, I think that's great advice. Having a sense of like, you know, it's work. To do it well and to really give yourself the best opportunity for meaningful change, which there is so much potential for. I mean, they really are incredible. They are dangerous as well, which is really important to say, if used incorrectly.

**[00:23:58]**

I often liken it to psycho-spiritual skydiving. Skydiving is really safe if you know what you're doing, but it also gives you a massive view of things you couldn't see before. It's exciting, and it's fast, and it's intense, and it makes you feel completely alive. But if you don't know what you're doing, it's really dangerous. So it's similar to that, I think.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It carries risks as well, right?

### **Alexander Beiner**

It carries risks. Yeah, yeah exactly. And I think you have to be...or it helps to be willing to to really do the work, to really spend time integrating, to really put the hours in of, okay, let's say in your experience, you realize, "Okay, I'm not taking care of my body properly." So then it's like, "Well, are you going to change your diet? Are you going to start exercising? Are you just going to start doing the things you need to do?".

Because if you do those things, you will have that change. But if you don't do those things, you probably won't. And so psychedelics really often show us incredibly well what it is we need to do or change, what conversation we need to have with who, what we're hiding from in ourselves, what we're lying about, what our deepest longing is.

But no one can do those things for us. They're not going to... Nothing on Earth can overcome the human will and make us do it. It could really inspire us, right? But that's why you need, ideally, a community of practice or close friends or someone you can check in with to say, keep you accountable and to make sure you're not leaving your job three weeks later.

In the retreats I've run, we usually say, don't make any big life decisions for three months. That's usually a good rule of thumb. It's true of also going to a breathwork retreat or going to a really powerful yoga retreat. Just in general, it's a good rule. Then if you still feel like that in three months, you can go, "Okay, well, maybe I'll start bringing that into reality".

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. Because you can have profound state experiences in those types of environments, too. Let's talk about this integration piece a little bit because I know that you're... actually, a lot of the people that I interviewed have gotten into fields of non-ordinary states of consciousness practice, like meditation or mindfulness or yoga or herbalism, all kinds of things that people have gotten into in practice because they didn't have the legality to pursue...

It wasn't accepted to pursue a field like lots of people are doing now in psychedelics. And so they got into things like mindfulness practice. But the undercurrent of that is that they've all tried psychedelics, surprisingly to me.

**[00:26:35]**

In the context, both in the context of integration intention and also just in the pursuit of non ordinary state of consciousness, what are the things that are available to us and what do you see their role being in that integration and preparation phase?

**Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, it's a really important question. I'll start with preparation because it's like sequentially before. And I think preparation, and a lot of people have talked about this, like Mark Ajala, who's an expert in integration, he's talked about this, that preparation is as important, if not more important.

If you think of the skydiving metaphor, it follows through. It's like, check your kit. You're not going to be like, "That's probably fine". Similar with a psychedelic experience where it's very important to figure out, firstly, there's cognitive and emotional skills that really help, like mindfulness, and specifically, two of the aspects of mindfulness, non-judgmental awareness. So being able to perceive what's going on without jumping to conclusions about it or judging it or pushing it away or pulling at it.

And then also decentering, which is that ability to take a step back from what's going on. Those are crucial, I would say, in good psychedelic journeying, because we need to be able to do that so that we can stay centered and understand what's going on and really navigate well.

And also learning how to regulate your own nervous system through the breath. Really, really simple, really will save you in a tricky spot. You can always come back to your breath. It's also useful to develop anchors, which are that could be a smell, it could be a memory, it could be a movement that anchors you back into a remembering of yourself and a connection to your body. So embodiment is really, really crucial because your body is always here, and we are always embodied. So it brings us back to Earth, really.

And then there's the more personal things, which will be, it could be like, what are you actually going into the journey to find? What is it you want to explore? So setting an intention. And an intention isn't, "I must do this" or "I will find this" because they're tricky like that, and they won't give you what you want because it's usually much more profound and deeper.

It's more like, what's your North Star? What are you orienting yourself towards? And so it helps to really boil that down into like, "Okay, I want to learn, I want to learn to love myself", or "I want to develop my courage or my self-esteem".

And then you will have a whole, very likely, a whole bunch of fascinating insights around what is blocking that, perhaps, or what's standing in the way, and it will almost never be the thing you thought it was. That's the magic of it, right? Because, of course, if you did know what it was, you wouldn't need to do it in the first place. And that's always something I love about the experience.

And then integration-wise, after you've had the experience, I think it can be useful to look at practical integration, which is really active, which is, for example, "I'm going to do more exercise, I'm going to do this thing". And then there's integration that happens unconsciously and takes place over time.

**[00:29:43]**

And it can take years. I've had experiences where I'm sitting on a couch two years later and I just suddenly go, "Bam! Oh, that's what that meant! Oh, wow. Okay". And I just have this eureka moment that really is personally really helpful. And you can't necessarily control that.

But what you can do is you can create the right conditions for yourself, both in the active side of things to go, "Okay, how can I make... How can I choose three actionable things that aren't like, "I'm going to suddenly become a musician" or it's like, "Okay, well, maybe I'll start getting guitar lessons", or whatever it might be.

And then for the other longer term process, there are practices that really help. Mindfulness can be helpful, but there's no one size fits all because it could actually be that you really need to get to your body and you need to do some hard exercise, and that's what it's all about for you. And there's a deep personal reason, and that's really meaningful, and that's what you're processing is.

Or it could be you need to have a conversation with your sibling about something. It could be, and you just have to make that call that you've been avoiding and doing that is part of your integration. And you're like, "Aah, I've finally done it". And then I feel that liberation or whatever it might be.

So breathwork can be incredibly helpful, both for preparation and integration, because it really can help us process emotions unconsciously and through the body. It's actually one of my favorite, and I think one of the most important techniques we can use.

And also journaling is very, very helpful. Some way to actually get the ideas down. And of course, therapy. If needed, therapy is also really, really helpful on all sides of the process. But so there's so many different things, and probably the key thing on that is flexibility. And again, that curiosity, staying flexible.

And we know from other research in other fields that cognitive flexibility, the ability to think flexibly and to try new things out and not get stuck in particular ideas, generally is good for people healing from trauma, for example, and from just general mental well-being perspective, trying lots of different things and being experimental.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. It's really interesting that you might be willing to try things that seemed inaccessible to you before. I could think about myself and my 25-year battle with meditation. And Alex Howard, the founder of Conscious Life, is always saying, "The people who struggle with meditation the most are the ones that need it the most". And I'm always like, "Shut up, Alex".

But some of us, because of trauma or anxiety or past experiences or whatever, something like a psychedelic experience might make it more palatable and more comfortable is not the right word I'm looking for, but just you're willing to sit through the discomfort more having had an experience, yeah.

**Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, definitely.

**[00:32:38] Meagen Gibson**

So in the underground world, and we've had several researchers and guests who talk about underground use versus medical use. But in the underground world, I noticed they talk about it as harm reduction a lot. And in the research world, they talk about set and setting and best practices.

I see both sides really informing and influencing each other. What do these concepts mean, and why are they important to any psychedelic context?

**Alexander Beiner**

The set and setting and dose, we can start with first. That's really an old, tried and tested heuristic for psychedelics of what you should be thinking about. So your set is your mindset, like where you're at, how are you, what's going on in your life? Your setting is where you are physically.

I would also say that your setting is your culture. You're bringing your whole cultural setting in with you into any experience. But usually people mean it more immediately like, are you in the forest? Are you in the house? Where are you? And that has a huge effect on the experience. It radically changes it.

One of the best things to do to change a psychedelic, to get out of a sense of stuckness or discomfort with a psychedelic experience, in my experience, is to change your setting. Just get up and go outside. Or if you're outside, go inside. It's usually the other way around. Open sky. It depends on what's going on outside.

And then the dose as well. So set, setting, and dose. So the dose is how much you've taken. And of course, there's a weird thing with dose because it doesn't, everyone's body chemistry is very different. And you can have a really big guy who takes a small amount and he's really off. And then you can have a very small woman who takes a big amount and she needs more.

So it really depends on the person. It depends also on how open they're feeling in that moment, what they've eaten, a whole bunch of other things. But set, setting, and dose. There is a researcher, Betty Eisner, in the 60s and 70s, and she also added 'matrix' to that, which is the social fabric you're in the other people around you who you can share about the experience with and who you're in it with or in it together with afterwards.

So yeah, set, setting, dose, and then potentially matrix are all really important. So harm reduction is usually about getting those things right. So if you consider all of them, then usually you can create a safe container for people to go deep into a psychedelic journey.

And having run retreats for many people, I would say that's pretty much if you do get them right, you create a safe environment. Also, you need to have facilitators who know what they're doing and really know how to work with transference and know how to hold a group and to hold their own shadows and to be in process with each other the whole time.

**[00:35:36]**

So it really is highly skilled work. It's the most highly skilled facilitation work I've ever done, certainly, and the most exciting and the scariest, because you might have twelve people in a really deep altered state, and you're responsible for keeping them safe.

A guy asked me one time who was a chef if he could have a knife so that he could chop some vegetables. I was like, "Sometimes it's really simple". Sometimes harm reduction is just like, "Do you know what? Not right now. But I'll bring you...". Then actually, he asked me if I could bring him a single coffee bean, which I did, and then a single grape, which I did, which he had a lot of joy out of, which was really fun.

So sometimes it's practical and physical, but most of the time, I think when you're talking about it in retreat settings or underground settings, people are talking about mental health when they're talking about harm reduction.

It's how do you create a safe environment where people are who are in a very vulnerable state feel safe to go deep and are safe to do that, and that you provide enough care for them afterwards so that they're not just like, it's not just like, "See ya, have a good one". You have to provide...we will traditionally provide at least three group integration sessions and then one-to-one sessions as well.

And then, of course, it's not the kind of work where it's perhaps some forms of psychotherapy where it's like, "And that's time, and I'll see you next week". If someone gets in touch because they need to talk about something afterwards, I think a good retreat center, a good facilitator, or a good clinical trial will always have someone available to be there.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. On that note, there's acute safety of your body and your mind are safe and protected. Then there's like, I don't want to confuse that with comfort because there's no facilitator in the world or setting in the world that can guarantee your comfort or that you won't experience any discomfort during a psychedelic experience. Am I right?

**Alexander Beiner**

Absolutely, yeah. In fact, if you experience... Well, no, I shouldn't say that. What you need might be six hours of pure bliss because that's what's healing for you. And that is beautiful. And that happens as well, definitely.

But a lot of the time, what we need is to go into those places that we have been afraid to go into and do the work of untangling them, feeling what we haven't felt, and going through that process. That's mainly what happens.

It's also, it's called a trip. So it's very rarely that someone's in... if someone's stuck in that for a few hours, we will intervene, usually, at least in the way I work. You can tell from body language, you can tell from breath, you can tell eventually you can intervene. So I think that's also harm reduction. It's just not helpful for people to retraumatize themselves going to something. So occasionally, people do need that.

**[00:38:25]**

On the whole, though, people just journey. They just do the work. They go in there. There's a really interesting paper on the CBT model, cognitive behavioral therapy model applied to psychedelics. And one of the things they argue is that one of the ways psychedelics work is that normally avoiding emotion or avoiding something is not that painful, or it might be somewhat painful, but it's not as painful as just avoiding it.

And then psychedelics flip that upside down, and they make avoiding it more painful than not avoiding it. And so you have to look at it. And subjectively, that's very much what I would say my experiences have been pretty much on the whole.

And you get good at...you can start becoming a detective of discomfort as a psychonaut, as someone who's taking psychedelics for personal growth, where you feel like, "Ooh, I think I was lying to myself there", or, "Ooh, that's an uncomfortable thought", you immediately go into it because you know that you have to... Well, yeah, you should because it's going to be much more painful not to.

So in a way, it's quite like, you know, to your point about discomfort, you're not necessarily seeking out discomfort, but you're certainly welcoming it like you would in mindfulness practice. Again, why mindfulness is so useful for a psychedelic journey. It's the same, very similar principles apply.

**Meagen Gibson**

Well, and it's almost like voluntary discomfort because most people, as you said, we spend our whole lives accommodating avoidance of the things that hurt or are tough. Some of that's because it's unconscious, and some of that's because it's very conscious and we know how bad it's going to hurt.

And the only time we really do get into it and address it is when we're forced to. We lose a job because of our anger issues, or we lose a relationship because of our alcoholism, or whatever it is, there's some catastrophic something transpires and we're forced to face it head-on or continue avoiding it, and then things get worse.

But when you're in this situation where you're relatively protected and can be like, "Okay, it's time". You're going to get curious about it and look at it. Yeah, I like that context.

**Alexander Beiner**

I love that description you just gave because I haven't actually thought about those terms before, but in a way, it's like you're eliciting the crisis before the crisis has to happen. And interestingly, the word crisis from the Greek doesn't mean a terrible thing happening. It means decision point. It means you have to make a decision now. And that's what it's about in some ways.

That's certainly how I view psychedelics at times, where I'm like, "Okay, I've got a new phase coming up in my life, or something has to shift, or this is stuck, or I'm stuck, or people are giving me this reflection about myself. It's time to look at this thing". And they're incredibly powerful for that if you use them for that.

**[00:41:18] Meagen Gibson**

It's interesting that you said that because Britt Frank, who is not someone I have in the psychedelics conference, but who I've had at lots of the trauma and anxiety conferences and things, she always talks about trauma as the removal of choices.

And so in the context that we're talking about now, when you're giving yourself an opportunity to examine your unconscious and examine things that have been uncomfortable that you're avoiding, what you're really looking for is maybe an expansive way to find choices and to create choices where previously there were none.

**Alexander Beiner**

Absolutely. Yeah, that's really lovely. And that's actually Robin Carhart-Harris is probably one of the foremost psychedelic neuroscientists, if not the foremost in the world. He's one of our guests, and he talks about the neuroscience behind that, and it ties in with that. We get these rigid... We get stuck in rigid, what he calls canalization.

It's like the pathways in the brain just got repeated so many times, we're stuck in them. And then the psychedelics can open this window of plasticity in the brain. So this window where it's like, "Ooh, we can make new connections". And so there is literally that, an opportunity for a new choice. That's what's happening probably on the physical level as well.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. It's beautiful. Okay. What do you hope people will get most from attending the Psychedelics Super Conference?

**Alexander Beiner**

That's a great question. I hope that people get a feeling and a sense of the range of what's going on in the world of psychedelics and with psychedelics themselves. A sense of how many different perspectives, how many different disciplines, how many different conversations are going on right now in it because it's a really exciting time.

We're at the cusp of a psychedelic revolution in medicine, potentially, perhaps in personal growth, in maybe even creativity, who knows, conflict resolution, all these different areas. And I think if people can get a sense of the wonder, awe and wonder, I think is something or words that I really associate with the psychedelic experience and with a lot of spiritual experience as well.

And so you can get that or wonder through so many different avenues. You could be listening to an Indigenous practitioner talk about the history of plants in their culture. It could be a scientist talking about the amazing ways that they've managed to see what's going on in the brain when people are on psychedelics, or it could be someone from the underground talking about incredible healing stories.



**[00:43:51]**

So my hope is that people get that sense of like, "Wow", a sense of like, "Wow", especially if people are unfamiliar with psychedelics or psychedelic science, that's my biggest hope is leaving with that feeling. And of course, a whole lot of information that they didn't have before.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. I want to know, from your perspective of all the interviews that you've done - because you've done a lot a lot - what was the most surprising thing that you learned? Because you're immersed in this world and you have a convention of your own that you put on in the UK.

And so I would think that you know everything by this point, but I'm sure that there's been something that you've heard or that somebody said that surprised you.

### **Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, definitely. I've learned actually quite a lot doing this, which has been quite fun and joyful for me. I think something that I'd never heard before came from Rick Strassman, who is a pioneering researcher on DMT.

And he said he was talking about why is it that DMT is produced in the human body and all mammals? We produce DMT, this incredibly powerful psychedelic, and no one's entirely sure why it might be involved in near death experiences and dreaming.

And so he used this phrase of psychedelics as super placebos, which I found really interesting. We've talked about already the sense of nonspecific amplifier. So whatever is there, they'll give it to you. You get more of it. So he was wondering whether, well, could DMT that is naturally in our bodies have a role in the placebo effect biologically? I'd never heard that before. I thought, "Wow". I also had never heard the phrase super placebos.

Actually, after the interview, I asked him, after we stopped recording, I was like, "How long have you been talking about that?". He was like, "A couple of years". So not that long. So it's a little bit newer. But that was really exciting to me because after that, I was just thinking about, it's one of those moments where it opened something up.

And I thought, how interesting the idea that there's psychedelics in all our bodies right now that are doing... They're doing something, otherwise, evolution wouldn't have bothered to keep them there. And if they're doing something around how we heal ourselves and how our minds interact with our bodies, that is very, very interesting. So, yeah, that was one of a few things that really stuck with me.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It is. It's very exciting. And I think the next 5 to 10 years are going to be really exciting. And this is not the last time that we'll be having these conversations. Hopefully, we'll revisit in a couple of years and be like, "Okay, everything has changed. It's so exciting".

**[00:46:22] Alexander Beiner**

It will have changed. Yeah, it's fast moving.

**Meagen Gibson**

And that's I think the last thing I would want to impart on people from this interview is that I'd love to tell you exactly what's legal and what's not legal, but that information won't be true in a month, much less a year. All I can say really is just do your research and make sure that you know in your city, town, state, country, what is legal, and then really, really vet the people that you're working with. Would you add anything to that, Ali?

**Alexander Beiner**

No, I think that's really well said. I think that the advice that one of those speakers gave you, no sudden movements. Just take everything slow, be cautious, look after yourself. Yeah.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Anything else you'd like to add before I let you go?

**Alexander Beiner**

No, just that I hope people have fun. It's also a big part of the experience, which often gets lost in all the medicalization. It's like the fun of just learning about all these wild molecules and medicines and plants that exist. The mystery for me never goes away of that these experiences and these substances exist in the first place is just fascinating.

**Meagen Gibson**

We were talking before we started recording that I don't think I've ever had as much fun in interviews as I've had in these interviews. Not to reinforce the trope, but this has been a lot of fun.

**Alexander Beiner**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Meagen Gibson**

Alex, thank you so much for being with us and for co-hosting this conference with me. It's been a delight.

**Alexander Beiner**

It has been a delight for me as well. So thanks, Meagen. See you soon.