



## Conscious Life presents

### Fear, Addiction and the Future of Psychedelics

Guest: Andy Mitchell

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#### **[00:00:13] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm your host, Meagen Gibson. Today, I'm speaking with Andy Mitchell. He began his clinical career, first of all in psychology and later in neuroscience. Over the next 15 years, he worked across a range of mental health neurological settings, from intensive care to community rehabilitation.

With a long-standing background in meditation, he took a sabbatical in Asia to consider the ways in which different mindfulness practices might be applied to neurological patients. And it was during this sabbatical that Andy stumbled into his first psychedelic ceremony.

It was the beginning of *Ten Trips*, the title of his fantastic book, exploring limitless possibilities, and reveals a much-needed perspective about psychedelics, giving us his scientists' first-person experiment with ten different compounds in ten different settings.

Andy Mitchell, thank you so much for being with us.

#### **Andy Mitchell**

Hi.

#### **Meagen Gibson**

I want to start by just saying that your book, *Ten Trips*, is absolutely fantastic, and you're a hell of a writer and an even better storyteller, and was really, really gripped through your whole book. So for those who haven't had the pleasure of reading it yet, can you tell us how your interest in psychedelics began and when you knew you were going to write a book about it?

**[00:01:25] Andy Mitchell**

Well, I was working, first of all as a clinical psychologist and then as a clinical neuroscientist. I'd written a couple of books under a pseudonym, which were case studies. My publishers saw that I had a knack for bringing alive certain mental health and neurological conditions. I get quite involved in it myself, both at work and in terms of the writing.

So they sort of set me a challenge because psychedelics had bubbled up in the publishing industry following the success of Pollan's book, and they wanted to do some kind of updating and revision of that more orthodox format that Pollan had set out, but still included this experiential thing.

So they set me a challenge of going out there and sampling the entire psychedelic scene and reporting back on it. And this was particularly challenging for me because I had not taken any drugs for 25 years. Having done more than my fair share of school dinners up until the age of 25, I had to cut it out of my life entirely.

So to go back in for a psychedelic banquet meant having to decondition from all of the authentic and well-justified fears I had about drug taking. So we cooked up this idea whereby we take 10 different psychedelics in 10 different contexts, beginning in the neuro-imaging lab and then ending up in Indigenous ceremonies in South America and sampling all of the different schools and contexts in between. So that was where it came from, the original idea.

**Meagen Gibson**

You must really love writing to have accepted that sort of an assignment, not many people would accept that kind of an assignment.

**Andy Mitchell**

Yeah, I suppose even though I'd stopped taking drugs, I just definitely enjoyed adventure. And anything to get me out of an NHS hospital in London as well, an opportunity to get out of the day job.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. And with the psychedelic resurgence and research and acceptability and as moods and perception are changing because of all the research and development, there's a lot of maybe misconceptions about the possibilities for psychedelic medicine. I think people envision it being this magic solution to every illness that we have, especially trauma and mental health issues.

And so, I want to start by talking to you about bad psychedelic experiences, because I know you have a lot of stories in the book. It's not all just like this... First of all, there's an absolutely endless amount of different types that you go through a fantastic... You do a great job in the book of detailing all the different types of psychedelic medicine and methodologies, and then the different kinds of experiences that you might have with them.

And so, I know that you have a lot of both anecdotal experience, clinical experience, and then personal experience witnessing and having what we call bad trips. I'd love if you could tell me something about that.

**[00:04:47] Andy Mitchell**

Well, yeah, I suppose before, I definitely had some prejudices about the kind of science literature that I was reading beforehand. Having worked in long-term mental health and severe and enduring chronic conditions, I was deeply suspect about the utopianism.

And the utopianism seemed to fuse with a kind of ecological awareness as well. There was something about the fact that they were largely plant compounds that were delivering us from our mental health epidemic. Just felt too narratively schematic to be bought into.

So I definitely had this resistance. And also, just by nature, in terms of set, I'm from the north of England. And you know, if there are drugs, it's glue sniffing, it's not taking wacky psychedelics...it was just a very... So fast forward with me, with all of my prejudices and my Northern pub sentimentality, I'm in a maloca in Peru with a group from Malibu who are doing an ayahuasca retreat.

**Meagen Gibson**

Malibu, California, just to be clear.

**Andy Mitchell**

Yeah, Malibu, California. And they're all... Some of them have taken ayahuasca on more than a thousand occasions since they were eight years old. So vastly experienced. And we're there with this revered ayahuasquera, this lady who had learned as a young child how to sing the Icaros and to deliver medicine. And everyone's beautifully bedecked in embroidered white linen. And it's the fifth day of a seven day sort of marathon.

And for some reason, she calls the ceremony in the middle of the day, which is very unusual. In my limited experience, they usually start at dusk, and the night is where the magic happens, apparently. But this was... I think I'd sat in three ceremonies before, and this was in the middle of the day.

And the liquid, which normally is this brackish-brown olive thing, is now bright yellow. She's serving a bright yellow medicine, and it's just the wrong texture. Everything about it, in my limited experience, is just wrong. This is going to go wrong. So my set, my prejudices are already up. And these experienced ayahuasca takers drink the medicine, and within five minutes, all of them are puking all over their white costumes, and it's this bright yellow purge.

These are people that have hardly puked. I've been the only puker for the first three days. These are experienced...there's something about if we're West Coast and we're orthorexic, we're not going to puke, and they're just puking everywhere.

And this large man gets onto his all fours and starts groaning and groaning and he walks out of the maloca, accompanied by the ayahuasquera who's singing to him, and he falls on his back and falls silent. And I see her wafting something under his nose, but no, he's silent.

**[00:08:03]**

And so what I do is I make the decision that, unfortunately, the ayahuasquera has given us poison. On this day, she's got her medicine mixed up, and she's accidentally poisoned us, and we've already got one casualty, and she's just run off now to get an ambulance. So this entire story, and just as she's run off, she tells me, she whispers in my ear, that I have to keep singing while she goes to get the ambulance.

So I don't know any Icaros, but I do know plenty of pub songs. So I am now walking around the maloca telling people that, unfortunately, we've taken poison, we need to get out of our system while singing songs about how Leeds United won the FA Cup in 1975.

After about an hour, she comes back and just sees this total carnage with me singing, and she explains to me that I've been a lifesaver, that I've managed to keep the whole thing going, but she'll take it from here, thanks very much. And I realized that, in fact, I've totally got the wrong end of the stick. In fact, she just played a massive joke just for my benefit.

So for the last two hours of the ceremony, I'm just so glad that twelve people haven't just died and that this lady's back in control. I suppose what was clear was that for the remaining part of the ceremony, then the people, after they got sober from Malibu, just refused to engage me for the rest of the week, and I was sort of a social pariah from that point on.

I make a joke about it, but there was just something so uncontained about the experience. I don't see anyone as having anything as being responsible for that, but it's just necessarily it's very difficult to put limits and containers on these experiences. Even if you take some safety precautions, it's going to spill out at times and things are going to go a little bit wild, and people are going to make bad readings for sure.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I don't know what anybody else is experiencing as they were listening because I was trying very hard to be quiet so that the camera wouldn't come back to me, but I was absolutely astounded and just like, "Oh, my God".

### **Andy Mitchell**

Yeah.

### **Meagen Gibson**

By the way, if you like that story, you'll love Andy's book. But that sounds both... In the telling of the story, it sounds funny, but that sounds terrifying.

### **Andy Mitchell**

Yeah. To me, it was terrifying at that time. And then I'm sure to the people that I... I was literally saying to people, "Trust me, I'm a medical professional here. I think we've got poison. You need to get it out of your system", which is a really terrifying thing to be telling anybody who's supposed to be going through some spiritual quest.

**[00:10:56] Meagen Gibson**

Oh, gosh. Yeah. So what have you learned about integration? And making peace is the wrong word, but about understanding inexplicable experiences after the fact.

**Andy Mitchell**

At a practical level, at a clinical level, it's so important to have adequate safeguarding if you're going to give these medicines to vulnerable people. But there is a trade-off between over overly constraining and overly containing things within a traditional Western clinical model and allowing the kind of messiness and criticality that these medicines seem to...

We can't transport the jungle into the hospital to deliver these things. We can't have the same standards and openness that they have there, but nor can we squash it into traditional laboratorial settings either. So it's like we've got to invent protocols afresh that take into account Western attitudes and proclivities and at the same time allow for a certain, what would you say, risk to take place.

Particularly in terms of integrating those experiences, for me, it's difficult to be modular or protocol-driven about integration because so much of what was informative about my experiences with psychedelics was really just having my own self-deceptions exposed in astonishingly artful ways, ways that are so artful that you begin to think there is an agency beyond you that's doing the art making, that's telling the stories.

So I suppose integrating in the sense that you can be led by someone who's wise and curious as to how those kinds of exposures take form and what they may be pointing to. Yeah, I don't know beyond that.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. And I want to circle back to something that you said at the beginning, you kind of inferred to, and I want to go deeper with you about, which is that one of the reasons that I was so attracted to your book was because although alleviating addiction and substance use disorder are two of the many things being tested in trials with many psychedelics, as someone with an addiction history in my family, I have concerns.

Would you be willing to share with us your experience in that realm and what your concerns were and why you still wanted to pursue this self-experiment, if you will?

**Andy Mitchell**

I had a problem with, I guess in my 20s, what would be classified as addictions to alcohol, tobacco, and cocaine. I was a relatively high functioning addict, and I stopped in my late 20s and didn't go back. So when I engaged with psychedelics, there was an internal contract for me that I was engaging with them therapeutically or spiritually, at least non, not recreationally, and I was doing it for the purposes of work.

I set these parameters, but that didn't stop certain older fears bubbling up. I found that it's complex and nuanced because I did find that even though you read a lot in the clinical literature

about how these compounds are not physiologically addictive, if you've got a history of substance abuse in a way, then it's quite likely that it overlaps with sensation seeking, a high trait sensation seeking.

**[00:15:06]**

And in my case, I had to do a lot of condensed trips in order to...because of Covid and the way that the book was timetable for publishing, I had to do all of my research in six weeks or six weeks to two months. And I ended up, because there was ten different substances to explore, I ended up doing a vast number of evenings in those 60 nights on one form or another.

And even though all of them largely were supervised and well thought through, and I had an integration specialist, and I, on the whole, went with tried and trusted people, I did find this old nostalgia for getting high and the exhilaration and the sensation seeking were coming back in. I was taken to my edges in terms of physically and mentally, what I could handle.

And so I finished the experimental part of the book about a year ago, and I think I've sat once or twice with psychedelics in the last year, and I've made really sure that my intention around sitting with these things...because I do think it's one thing to have research scientists saying that there's no clinically addictive properties, but there are psychological dependencies that can form around psychedelics.

And I met a lot of people who, to my mind, rely on them in a rather thoughtless way and take them with a frequency that seems to be in excess of what you might regard as spiritual utility or therapeutic utility.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, it's interesting because, and I know that they're different. But for anybody who's watching this that hasn't had a psychedelic experience, I imagine it's like following your favorite band around. It's like you're chasing a state experience, or you could be privy to that, where it's tempting to just that the only place that you can feel this one contact with yourself or with a unifying principle of common appreciation is in this particular context.

And so you follow your favorite band around because all those people understand that band and they understand what it means to you and you all have this shared experience. I know it's not the same, but that's the closest parallel that I can draw on my mind.

### **Andy Mitchell**

I think that's a good parallel. And you're given, depending on...During a single trip, you're given a million bits of different experience are there, and you may be able to bring back only a small fraction, but it's still a significant amount of experience that you can bring back.

And it's there as a kind of...that experience, whatever experience it is that you bring back is there to be worked with, and it's there to be sort of negotiated with. And that negotiation takes sobriety, and it takes time, and it takes then converting into certain behaviors or mindsets or practices that hopefully will endure and steer you in a healthier direction or a more open direction or whatever direction.

**[00:18:23]**

But unless it's given that space and the discipline is applied and the energy is brought to it, it's not really got a chance to breathe. And I often felt with some people, the rhythm and frequency with which they were taking it, you just create a mishmash of out-of-this-world experiences, which can start to become deeply confusing. Or you're just getting the same payoff each time like you do with the band. You know, "They're playing my favorite hits. This is my comfort zone".

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. And part of what I understand from the literature and from your book and things is that one of the ways that psychedelics work in loosening our grip on whatever it is that we are trying to work through and can't quite access, whether it's our shadow parts or the uncomfortable lessons we're trying to learn about ourselves and the way we're trying to grow is the role of the default mode network.

So I'd love if you could help us understand what that is, why it's important, and how it's affected by psychedelics in your understanding.

### **Andy Mitchell**

Well, you know what, I'm not going to pass on this, but the default mode network came into a neuroscientific parlance about fifteen years ago, where some midline structures were identified as being active when you turn an fMRI on. It links the frontal cortex to deeper structures.

And it became thought of as the brain's resting state. It's also known as the ego tunnel. If the mind is just left to itself, it's going to have...it's going to think self thoughts of its own accord.

And the early psychedelic literature that came shortly after the default mode network said, "Hey, guess what? The psychedelics rewires our default mode network and turns it down a little bit, and we get this escape from self. We get this ego death", depending on which university was publishing the research.

But I'm not really involved in neuroscientific research, but I have got friends that are close to it, and it's largely been abandoned as a term. People aren't really interested in it anymore. So I think there's a huge investment in neuroscientific structures and then a huge investment in psychedelic research.

And of course, they're just kind of fashions that come and go, and they tell us something and we hold on to it, and then ten or fifteen years later, it's moved on and those things are different. I think one thing about psychedelics is... one thing that's really enabled its promotion is that it's had this big backing from cognitive neuroscience.

And if people are desperate for the idea of being able to change their mental states and change their mental health. And if there's a neurophysiological account of that change, then people feel existentially guaranteed by it.

**[00:21:15]**

I think also just like, commonsensically, it's unlikely that by taking five grams of mushrooms, you're going to have a different brain for the rest of your life that's going to be liberated from the afflictions of obsession or depression. But people want...people are always going to want to feel that there is an answer to life's suffering.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I was talking to a researcher, I think it was last week, who's been doing this research on psilocybin for thirty years, and he told me off the record, (I'm not going to tell you who it was), but off the record, he said something like, we talk a lot about neuroplasticity and default mode network, and he was like, "You can get neuroplasticity from twirling around with your head on a bat ten times and then trying to walk straight".

He was like, "So we over inflate the value of neuroplasticity. There's a lot of ways...you can write with your left hand and engage neuroplasticity". It's interesting because as you're talking, it's like we create these situations, we get results, and then we make stories about those results to not necessarily... That's all marketing, but it's like to shore up the fact that we want to do more research. We want to understand more.

### **Andy Mitchell**

Yeah. It's such a fine line. That's why I think psychedelics is such a test case for other aspects of our culture and our understanding of things, because I think if you're reasonably literate, it's right to be cynical about a lot of the hype you hear about anything. And yet at the same time, you don't want to be too literate to become cynical about the real, authentic possibilities that are offered by these experiences.

And that was always the double take and the edge that I was having to tread with psychedelics. On the one hand, whether it's a medical model or a spiritual model or a New Age model, the claims that are being made for psychedelics are just hyperbolic. They're just unbelievable at one basic level.

And on the other hand, to just dismiss this as the latest black project by big pharma to hoodwink us all from our suffering is also just underselling the possibilities and the real unbelievable newness that they can bring into the world.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah. And you said it earlier, it was just skeptical, not cynical. Everything is true but partial. We're going to take what we're getting, we're going to receive...You, from your level, is even more interesting to me because you were also experiencing it and yet maintained your skepticism.

Were there any moments in this experience where you could feel your skepticism wavering?



**[00:23:59] Andy Mitchell**

Yeah, there definitely were moments. Part of my background set was that I was a monk in my mid-20s. I spent three years as a contemplative monk with a certain degree of religious belief, and then that lapsed. I guess for the last 20 years or so, I've been a diehard agnostic.

But there were three or four moments where I clearly got a sense that there was some powerful thing underlying the universe and generating wisdom and compassion in different ways. And it just made such self-evident sense to me.

And I would emerge from the trips and think about those experiences, and I was not able to crush them back into run-of-the-mill agnosticism. They still percolate around now, two or three years later after the effect.

And I think there's research that's shown that the more people do psychedelics, the more their beliefs about the nature of reality shift towards the more idealist panpsychic end of the philosophical spectrum, which is no surprise to me.

And it's quite a serious issue as well. If you're a doctor, you might want to get consent for the possibility that people's beliefs are going to change either side of these experiences.

**Meagen Gibson**

Interesting. Gosh, I can't wait to see the consent forms now. Even in the United States, it's all about privacy and risks and liability, and then it'll be like, "and your spiritual, religious sense of self might change entirely".

**Andy Mitchell**

"You're going to start believing in astral planes if you eat this tablet".

**Meagen Gibson**

Exactly. Well, it's so funny because you were like, "Eh, the default mode network is just a trend. It's out". So there go the next four questions. However, one of them has to do with... it's okay, I'm joking...the salience network, which is related to that, but the only reason I bring it up is because you tell a really hilarious story in the book about connectedness in your refrigerator.

Do you remember what I'm talking about? It's very specific, so if you don't I'll remind you...

**Andy Mitchell**

Yeah, there was the refrigerator, but there was also the washing machine.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yes...

**[00:26:29] Andy Mitchell**

So what happened was I wanted to get onto... Imperial College in London has been one of the industry leaders for researching the effects of psychedelics, and I wanted to get on one of their trials, which involved intravenous, either DMT or ketamine, on a large dose, and then being placed on a large dose and then being placed in an fMRI scanner.

And I got through the initial trial, but they changed the criteria halfway through the trial so that they wanted participants that were drug-naïve, meaning that they'd never experimented with psychedelics before.

And there's a big issue. There's a big conversation going on in research about why you would want drug-naïve patients, especially on for really intense experiences in fMRI scanners ethically.

But nonetheless, I wasn't allowed to participate in that study suddenly. So I needed to have the experience. So I went underground and I got my friend's daughter to score the exact same quantity of ketamine.

And I ended up taking it with her in her kitchen just because I've never taken ketamine before. And I found it was a really, really wonky experience. And at one point I thought, "I want to simulate what it would have been like to have been in an fMRI scanner".

And by this point, the normal Islington kitchen had come alive, and I'm aware of how hungry the fridge was and how angry the cooker was. And there's this washing machine, which to my mind, looks like the beginnings of an fMRI machine.

So in order to resimulate the Imperial protocol, I tried sticking my head in the washing machine supervised by my friend's daughter. But obviously, we just can't get it to turn on to give you that full fMRI effect. But, yeah, that was my experience in the kitchen.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yes. And it was the way that you write about it in the book also is this sense of connectedness, where I've never considered the thoughts, feelings, and needs of ordinary kitchen appliances.

**Andy Mitchell**

Yeah, it led me into rather philosophical speculation about how I'd spent my life neglecting and taking for granted these different objects. I think that was a pastiche, a kind of modern pastiche of connectedness.

But there is both an interpersonal and person to nature affiliation that seems to be built into psychedelic experiences. I mean, there's myths around that as well, I'm sure, but I definitely found myself becoming more disposed to the natural world as a consequence of my experiences.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Something that was interesting to me that I noted as well was that across all of the different types of psychedelic experiences that you had, your trips always seemed to begin with

fear. What did you learn about how we should process and integrate fear? And is that accurate for you? Is that consistent with your experience?

**[00:29:53] Andy Mitchell**

It's totally consistent with it. It's quite hard not to come up with a rather simple heuristic that you need a degree of fear in the first place as a fuel to get to the kinds of difficult places that you might need to go to on these...even that's a little bit mystical to say...

But I think having the experience of fear being converted, fear is really a hedge on uncertainty. And have the impossibility of knowing something turn into something that's just authentically strange and couldn't have been created by you.

That, in a nutshell, is the psychedelic experience, is that you cannot know it beforehand, it happens, and it happens without having any of your control over it... Even though it's got all your thumbprints on, you will revisit your birth, the birth of your children, your first kiss, the death of your father, whatever it is. It'll have your...but it's not under your narrative control.

So fear turning into that. So strangeness and again, an intensification of fear, of course. But eventually, you end up with the sum of these parts, and you've survived it, and you've been through something, and if it was in different... I think you often, particularly these group experiences with ayahuasca, you know that before the first evening, there's this excitement.

But this excitement is really just a socially acceptable expression of nervousness. The excitement and nervousness are so close together with it.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. That's what I was thinking of as you were speaking. So many of the characteristics that you're describing sound like the characteristics that we want people to build when we're talking about resilience.

And so what occurs to me is just that I've heard so many people speak of psychedelics as accelerants. It's like fuel, air to embers. It's going to necessarily take...

And one of the other things I love about the book is that you were like, "Listen, psychedelics aren't going to turn you into something you already aren't. It's going to just accentuate what you already are. It might make you feel more connected, it might make you feel a lot of ways, but you're not going to be fundamentally a different person in the way that you express yourself in the world afterwards necessarily. It's not going to turn you Democrat if you're Republican or Tory from...".

So yeah, and just this combination of accelerant resiliency factors and then also support, whether it be in the circle in which you're having the experience or in the circle that you seek for integration afterwards. I don't really have a question, I just wanted to say if that rings true for you.

**[00:33:03] Andy Mitchell**

Yeah, I think that's it. I mean, there's different ways in which they teach you, but there's that metaphor of psychedelics as teachers or as tricksters. But whatever the presiding metaphor is, you're being given an experience that's beyond unusual, and you have to cope with it.

Even if that coping means surrendering all of your normal coping methods and finding a capacity that you didn't believe that you had beforehand. It doesn't matter what the lesson is about or the content of the lesson. It's just the general abstract thing of encountering something that's beyond you, is potentially overwhelming, and you live to tell the tale about it.

That for me, rather than a particular insight about my mother's behavior or which horse to back in the Grand National, they're the enduring things, is that capacity to tolerate things.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I think that's probably the thing eventually we will come to say is the real value of it in my impression.

**Andy Mitchell**

It's all a precursor of what it might be like to die, something that most of us will have an inclination of happening before it happens and how we will digest that in those moments. You're getting that in micro form over and over again in psychedelic space.

**Meagen Gibson**

Practice exposure.

**Andy Mitchell**

Yeah.

**Meagen Gibson**

Andy, anything else that you'd like to leave us with before I let you go?

**Andy Mitchell**

Well, I do think that...I mean, it's a real cliché to say this, but all roads do lead to Indigenous practice. It's such a complex negotiation with cosmologies that are so different from our own.

Again, it's this knife edge between wanting to be open to the possibilities of other views of the world, and at the same time, i.e. rather than just dismissing them or pastiching them, but at the same time, recognizing that they're largely inaccessible to us and that we're always in danger of instrumentalising them in complex and belittling ways.

But I had never really encountered Indigenous tribes before this experience. And in a way, just that encounter was far more powerful as a psychedelic experience, meaning a mild mind-altering experience than taking the drugs that they were taking.

**[00:36:00] Meagen Gibson**

Meaning just being with and in those cultures you've been temporarily...

**Andy Mitchell**

Just learning something about how different it's possible for people with the same biology as you to experience the world. And while you might say that we're a thousand years ahead of them in X, Y, and Z, you can't keep that discrepancy going in lots of ways because they seem to have got such a richer, deeper sense of presence and being in the world than many of us have.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Andy Mitchell**

And then even that just lapses into a nostalgia. So it just becomes very, very tricky to talk about this.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I appreciate you acknowledging it, though, because it's the undercurrent of everything that we're talking about, and will continue to be after it's out of fad and medicine, right? Andy Mitchell, where can people find out more about you and your book, for that matter?

**Andy Mitchell**

I think there's a website, [andymitchell.org](http://andymitchell.org).

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Thank you so much for being with me today.

**Andy Mitchell**

Yeah. Nice to meet you, Meagen.