



Conscious Life presents

Meditation, Mindfulness and Psychedelics

Guest: Dr Ronald Siegel

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[00:00:05] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host.

Today, I'm thrilled to be speaking with Dr Ronald Siegel, Assistant Professor of Psychology part-time at Harvard Medical School. He serves on the Board of Directors and Faculty of the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy.

Dr Siegel is the author and editor of many books and his co-director of the annual Harvard Medical School Conferences on Meditation and Psychotherapy, as well as Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy.

His exploration of Psychedelic Medicine began early in life and led him to become a long-time student of mindfulness meditation. He teaches internationally about the application of mindfulness practice in psychotherapy and other fields, and the relationship between mindfulness practice and psychedelic medicine, all maintaining his private clinical practice in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Dr Ronald Siegel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Thanks so much for having me.

Meagen Gibson

I want to start by asking you, why do you imagine people have turned to psychedelic medicines for healing throughout history?

[00:01:19] Dr Ronald Siegel

Well, it's a great question with a little bit of a big answer, but I'd say the main reason is because we didn't really evolve to be happy. Most of the propensities of our brain evolved for survival. If you take it that we came about through some process of natural selection, then it was those propensities of the brain that helped us to survive, survive long enough to reproduce and then successfully reproduce, that would be the ones that were passed on.

And a lot of those, while they're very good for survival and very good for reproduction, or at least were, back in the day when we evolved on the African Savannah, actually caused us to be very unhappy today. Interestingly, psychedelic medicines, as well as many other methods for cultivating non-ordinary states, can, at minimum, give us perspective on some of those propensities of the brain so we don't just go with them each time and get stuck in the unhappiness they bring.

Sometimes they can serve as real antidotes so that those propensities of the brain really quiet down for us and we're able to live richer, more present, more loving, and happier lives.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I have to say, we've spoken before for several conferences because you're a guest that I love to have. The thing that I quote that you say the most, out of everything that you say is, "We did not evolve to be happy". I think I have repeated that several times to friends, to family on these sessions and whatnot.

I think it's a point worth repeating. Even though the meaning of our lives tends to be about creativity and curiosity and play and all of those things give our lives meaning, it isn't what we evolved to have as our primary directive, did we?

Dr Ronald Siegel

No. We did evolve instincts for those, too, luckily. Indeed, when we turn more toward those for well-being, that well-being is much more enduring. But we've also got an awful lot of instincts, like to grasp after pleasure and to flee from pain, to get stuck in constantly thinking and strategizing about how to be okay in one way or another, to see everything is solid when it's actually super fluid.

The big enchilada is we grew up with this idea that we exist as separate organisms, that we're somehow separate from the rest. Of all the things that psychedelic medicines tend to disrupt. It is that sense of separateness. Their transformative power lies in dealing with many of these propensities. But that's a big one that's not necessarily touched by other things like conventional psychotherapy and the like.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. I want to come back to that in a second. But I want to loop back to something that you said earlier, which is a term that I started hearing a lot when I started researching for this conference because I heard a lot about psychedelics and have done some research. But this term kept coming up, which is 'non-ordinary states'. For people who haven't heard that term before, what does that include? What does that mean?

[00:04:40] Dr Ronald Siegel

It's pretty broad. If we think of human history, people have been doing things to induce non-ordinary states for a very long time. Things like chanting, and drumming, and sweat lodges, and fasts, and vision quests and the full gamut of meditation practice.

Concentration meditation practices, mindfulness practices, compassion practices, yoga techniques that are designed to calm our normal impulses in the nervous system and open to other ways of seeing.

And a very wide variety of plant medicines that people have discovered serendipitously throughout history and have relied on and often have integrated them into spiritual and psychological growth practices or have actually used them to enhance wisdom, so it's to get insights into what we should do about this problem?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I love all of that framing. Also, it makes me consider the individual versus group. When I'm trying to talk to people about non-ordinary states, I always talk to them about a concert. You can listen to music on your own and have a state experience and transform your state, and get into a mood or induce a mood. Then there's another situation where you're at a giant concert and having a shared experience with a bunch of people that are all having similar state experiences.

As you just outlined, I think one of those things... When we're talking about duality and non-duality or our connectedness to other people, I think that might be the most accessible example of knowing how we're connected to other people, even if it's fleeting and over pop music.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Well, it occurs in other contexts, too. It occurs in lovemaking. There's sensory pleasure, but there's a merging with the other that happens. It can occur in caring for children, in which the boundary between us and them is softened. It occurs in a wide range of religious experiences. It occurs in intimacy broadly, as well as in things like the concert, or chanting together, or dancing together. There are so many ways that this can occur.

It's in part because our experience of ourselves as somehow separate from the rest and all of our narratives about our importance and how we're doing and am I good enough or not? What do people think of me? And all of those narratives, they're all based around this idea that somehow I'm really separate from everyone else as opposed to part of a larger ecosystem.

We might think that a flower in the field isn't thinking about whether it's a better flower than the others, or what the other flowers are thinking of it. This is a mammalian propensity that we've got, not just mammals, birds, too, even some insects. But social critters tend to get very involved in concern for how I'm doing and what my rank is inside of the larger group.

Many of these non-ordinary states are designed to help us lighten up on that and feel some level of interconnection.

[00:08:17] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. You, in particular, have been involved in, obviously, mindfulness-based practices for a very long time, as well as psychedelic-assisted therapy. What do these two things directly have in common?

Dr Ronald Siegel

They've got a lot of synergies. My sense is that, in general, they're both pulling in the same direction and can be used to accomplish similar things only at somewhat different paces, but they're also very synergistic.

If we will, four things that both of these states help us to do are to relax our usual propensity to push painful things out of the mind so that whether we think of them as psychological defenses, or aversion responses, we all have an impulse to turn away from that which is unpleasant. Sometimes we turn away to such a degree that we actually block it out and repress it, and we have no awareness of it until we enter into a non-ordinary state, including a non-ordinary state of psychotherapy, by the way.

Just want to add this in here, something like a classical psychotherapy of psychoanalysis was when the patient would be asked to lie on a couch and say whatever came to mind. And if you could really say whatever came to mind, that was a rather, if you will, trippy state in which all sorts of images, all sorts of things that have been kept out of awareness would start coming into awareness.

We've done this in conventional psychotherapy as well. But what all of these have in common is beginning to turn toward and accept with the potential of integrating, usually painful things or things that have been prohibited in some way that have been pushed out of the mind. All of these states, mindfulness and psychedelic-assisted states, also help us drop below the level of our usual thought stream.

Usually, we walk around the world talking to ourselves about ourselves. "I'm hungry. Maybe I'll get something to eat. I wonder if I should call such and such. Did I make a reservation for my trip tomorrow?" Et cetera, et cetera. We're always planning, strategizing, thinking in that way.

Both mindfulness practice and psychedelic practices tend to drop us below that state and into a world which is much more fluid, where images come and go, sensations come and go, dream-like experiences come and go. And in the process, especially with mindfulness practice, we ground ourselves in moment-to-moment physical sensory reality.

My feet on the ground, my body in the chair, the breath breathing itself, and thoughts start to seem a little bit more like clouds passing through the sky or events arising and passing, or like they say in Zen traditions, "Invite your thoughts into the front door and out of the back door, but don't invite them for tea". Don't get stuck in them. In psychedelic experiences, thoughts come and go, but it's very, very fluid.

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In both of these situations, both with mindfulness practice and psychedelics, we see the consciousness is fluid. We realize that, Oh, nothing stable, is it? Next moment, next moment, next moment. It's like frames in a movie, and each time it's another one. And while there's some continuity of awareness, we could think of it as like a river, right? A river, yes, the river remains, but the drops of water are constantly new, constantly new. We start to actually appreciate that with both these non-ordinary states.

The final one, the one I alluded to before, which is so important, is that we stop believing in our stories about ourselves so much. We start to see where we got those stories from, how they were created, and ways in which they sometimes inhibit us or trap us so that we don't have full freedom. And through that comes experiences of awe, of gratitude, of love, of connectedness, all sorts of things that are often seen as the fruits of spiritual practices emerge in these states.

So they have this in common. But it's also interesting because they can, I don't know if you'd like me to go into this, they can be synergistic, meaning mindfulness practice can help in psychedelic exploration, and psychedelic exploration can help with mindfulness practice.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. I do want you to say something about that because you mentioned integration earlier, and there's not only the integration after an experience, but the preparation of your mind and your body.

You talked a little bit about our avoidance of pain and our avoidance of sensations. So much of what happens in our experience is when we develop difficult emotions and traumas and things like that is because we can't integrate and allow the feelings, whether it's our body is having a response that our mind isn't prepared to deal with, so we push it away, or our mind has thoughts that our body is trying to cue up sensations to help us have, so that we give ourselves enough attention to heal what's hurt, but not to dwell in the past and not to live there.

It's this nefarious, that's the wrong word, but fluid meeting of both being present and integrating the difficult things that keep us stuck in the past or worried about the future.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Allowing mental contents, if you will, whatever they are, whether they're memories, hopes, longings, moments of gratitude, whatever they are, really allowing them to come and go.

I just want to say one caveat. I don't want our listeners or viewers to take what I'm going to offer as, "Oh, now I know how to do psychedelics. I'm going to go out and do them on my own". There's a lot of caveats about this. People can get themselves into a number of different kinds of hot water with them. With that caution, one of the attitudes which is central in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is this attitude of open acceptance toward whatever rises.

A friend and colleague of mine, Bill Richards, who is the last psychologist to legally administer psilocybin in the United States before the war on drugs shut it down. He says, "Look, back then when we were doing our studies, same as now, very basic principle. We try to help people learn

how to trust, let go, and open to whatever rises". Now, that's a wonderful definition of an attitude of mindfulness, right? To be aware of present experience with loving acceptance is how we sometimes describe mindfulness.

[00:15:15]

We're talking about the very same attitude. So to the extent to which a person can learn how to cultivate mindfulness prior to a psychedelic experience, they're going to have some resources available so that when they have a experience, which may include difficult moments, encountering some of the things you were just describing, the difficulties in our lives that we tend to push away, or moments in which our conventional sense of self starts to come apart, starts to be deconstructed.

There's this liminal space, transition space between talking to ourselves about ourselves and believing, "I know who Ron is, he's a father, he's a psychologist, he's a husband". To move from that to really seeing just how fluid this organism is and how interconnected it is, that can be scary and difficult.

We really need to cultivate this attitude of trust and letting go and opening to be able to have a more useful experience with psychedelics. So mindfulness practices are super helpful for that. And as you said, they're super helpful on the other end that after, say, a medicine session, then there's a period of integration. Days, weeks, months, years, making sense out of, "Wow, what happened there? What does that mean? And how might I live a life more in concert with some of the insights that arose during that experience?"

If it's going to be useful, that's one of the ways in which it's useful. Having mindfulness practice, having a way to work with what comes up in an accepting way, allowing it to come and go, being curious about it, that's super helpful for integration.

We can also talk about ways in which psychedelic experiences can support mindfulness practice.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. Take it from there because one of the things that you touched on is just this principle of safety and openness. If that's the requirement in order to participate in psychedelic-assisted therapy, a lot of people aren't going to get that in time. That's why they're exploring psychedelic-assisted therapy to break apart that grip that they've got on their sense of control and safety and openness, because a lot of people haven't had that in their lives.

I assume that's where you're going with this, is how can psychedelic-assisted therapy help in fostering an attitude of openness and give people experiences where they do have safety and can explore and be curious?

Dr Ronald Siegel

I'll tell you a story. I won't name names, but I was with a friend and colleague of mine who is about 10 years my senior. She was in the world when all the folks who brought mindfulness practices to the West, to America, Europe, Australia, when that was first taking root and really getting started.

Not the very early Zen masters who did it, but when we started seeing meditation centers just cropping up and the like.

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And I said, "Okay, so out of the people you know who are Western, well-known Buddhist teachers", and she tends to know most everybody, "How many of them had a psychedelic experience as pretty much the inspiration for why they took up meditation practice in a serious way." She thought for a while and she said, "Almost all".

That was absolutely my story. I probably would have been a mechanical engineer. I used to like taking things apart and putting them back together. Physical things, not the mind. I had a profound experience when I was just 17 on a street corner in New York. Of one of these what we would call mystical or transpersonal or non-dual experiences, where... I'll describe it in a little detail because I think it'll be of use here.

At the time, two Harvard professors and a psychologist from elsewhere who became well known, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, who later became Ram Dass, and Ralph Metzner, had written a book called *The Psychedelic Experience*. It was a guidebook, roughly based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, for how to use these medicines.

It basically said there are three phases that people often go through. The first is a disorienting phase of encounters with the things we usually push out of our awareness, what Freud might call the personal unconscious. The fears, moments of shame, longings, all the stuff that we experience as humans is painful, and that's hard. Trauma is included.

Then, if you successfully open to that, the mind may open into a second phase, which is a more archetypal phase. We might think of this as the Jungian unconscious, for those of you who have studied such things. That's a phase that's much more mythopoetic, in which imagery, monsters, angels, all sorts of the kinds of things that the world's mythologies are full of, start to emerge. You start to see them spontaneously in the mind.

If you can stay open to that, you may hit this third phase where it all settles down and you're experiencing very ordinary reality, just things that look like things, only there isn't a sense of separate self. There's a sense of it's all one. It's all interconnected. It's all part of the same ecosystem or the same universe, and it's all interdependent.

The kind of thing that Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh calls inter-being, that without the cloud and the rain, there wouldn't be the tree to create the paper on which the poem he's writing is written. That sense of interconnectedness with an enormous sense of peace that comes from that.

Well, it happened to me as a 17-year-old kid, and I got curious. Wow, who knows about this? And the people who knew most about that, these were people involved in religious traditions, particularly those who had cultivated deep meditative practices. So I became a student of that, even though I was very non-theistic and very mechanically oriented as a person, and led to becoming a psychologist, but also led to becoming a psychologist with a lot of interest in meditation practice.

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I think sometimes glimpsing these states and seeing how fascinating the mind is and how different the world seems in these different states of consciousness can actually be useful preparation for meditation practice, because then when we run into similar states in meditation practice, we have some familiarity with them. We recognize them a little bit. We get, "Oh, yeah, this is the sense of... This is what it feels like to feel like an organism walking down the path rather than feeling like Ron, worried about Ron."

We're better able to drop into some of these experiences because we may have tasted them with a psychedelic experience. So the synergies go in a lot of different directions here.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. It's fascinating. It's almost to me, as if somebody could pop you into a really muscular body temporarily, for a few minutes and then ask you to work out for the rest of your life. And you'd be like, "I remember what it felt like to be strong". And you'd be like, Okay, it's not that hard to go work out now because I know I'm capable of being strong, and I know what the point is of trying to be strong.

Dr Ronald Siegel

It's like that. I think when one of the uses of psychedelic medicines, particularly in the context of spiritual traditions, is to taste psychological freedom a little bit more, to taste what it's like to really open to painful and pleasurable experience, to learn to let go, all of these kinds of skills, then hopefully in the rest of our waking life, we can actually integrate into how we live.

Because the main point, at least from my perspective, isn't to have a fascinating experience, although nothing wrong with fascinating experiences, but it's how can this help us to be a little saner in our lives, a little more peaceful, a little less judgmental of ourselves and others, a little bit more at home with existential reality and the fact that we all age, get sick, and die. How can this help us live life more fully?

I want to put in the caveat, even though I was fortunate, I read this book, had this positive experience, everybody isn't. These medicines can be very, very challenging for people. More challenging if you have more of an unresolved trauma history, or you have perhaps firmer habits of dealing with your mind and dealing with emotions.

But anybody can be really thrown for a loop with these medicines. The importance of set and setting and having a really safe environment, being well-prepared is very high. I would say the importance of legal structures is important because the underground structures have a lot more risks.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. It goes without saying that during what I would call the second psychedelic renaissance, because what we call the first one was really just the West's Caucasian version of it. People have been using psychedelics for thousands of years. Then in the '60s, we had this revolution, and it was deemed illegal, and everybody was afraid of it. And now we're having this

next wave. I think you've already spoken to it, but I just want to make sure. What do you see as the promise and perils of this next wave of development of psychedelic-assisted therapy?

[00:25:46] Dr Ronald Siegel

Well, the wonderful promise is there's real research going on. There are sophisticated groups of people, sophisticated scientists, doing well-controlled studies to try to get a sense of what are the effects of these medicines on people, both neurobiologically as well as clinically. That's super important.

The other piece I think that's really important about the current wave of renaissance, if you will, is that it's not just hippies. This is not just connected to a particular cultural orientation and a cultural rebellion and the like. There are people in a lot of different walks of life exploring this and supporting the exploration of this.

The perils, however, are, especially since Michael Pollan's excellent book, *Change Your Mind*, that really brought this to journalists' attention, and from there to wider and wider groups' attention, people start to think of it, psychedelics, as a miracle answer to everything that ails us as human beings.

There's all sorts of things that go wrong from that. One of them is if somebody's struggling badly with trauma or depression or some such, and they have a psychedelic experience and it doesn't fix it, it leads people to feeling like a hopeless case. I have an archetypal image of what worries me a lot.

Forgive the stereotype, but there's a guy, they're usually guys, who's 28 years old, who has a degree in the Humanities and has been living in his parents' basement because he's been having trouble getting traction with work in the world. He hasn't had the greatest relationship history with lovers.

He discovers his medicines and has profound transpersonal experiences. As a bright, educated person, he realizes, "Oh, Wow, this is what all the world's religious teachings have been about. This is what Jesus was communicating. This is what the Buddha discovered. I get it. I've got to teach others".

And hangs out a shingle, basically as a shaman, and begins to introduce others to these medicines without any training or understanding of trauma and how people differ one to the other, and with a lot of self-esteem needs, a lot of needs to now be a successful shaman, not to mention all sorts of loneliness and things. And suddenly, he's in six-hour long, extremely intimate sessions with people, perhaps people of a gender that he's sexually interested in, who are awash with love and interbeing and realizing the arbitrariness of social conventions. And it's like, what could possibly go wrong?

Meagen Gibson

Quite a bit, actually.

[00:29:01] Dr Ronald Siegel

A lot of that goes wrong. And the same way that bad psychotherapy, psychotherapy which is driven in some way by the unresolved needs of the psychotherapist, can be very, very harmful to clients or patients. Psychedelic-assisted work where people are super opened up with somebody who hasn't done a lot of work on themselves to really know their desires, know their wishes, know know themselves and have perspective, a lot can go wrong, and people can get hurt. I particularly worry about that.

Of course, there's all sorts of arguments of, if you capture this in the medical system, you're going to reduce access, it's going to be white, rich people again, benefiting and not others. Those are all valid arguments. I'm not sure exactly what the path forward is. But one of the perils that I worry about is the one I just mentioned.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, exactly. There's no easy, cut and dry answer to it either. The psychedelic-assisted therapy, as you said, let's put out a framework for that and what that actually means as well since you've participated in it because it is a very clinical and in an experience that can be and is almost guaranteed to be so intimate and raw and vulnerable. There can be so much transference in that room of intensity if you don't have professional trained adults who have done all that work that you've just mentioned, facilitating the experience.

If you could outline for us, what does psychedelic-assisted therapy look like?

Dr Ronald Siegel

That's a super important question. The model which is used most in research studies at the moment is a model that derives from Stanislav Grof who was a psychiatrist who led some 10,000 LSD trips in the '50s and '60s, the first wave of this in Western medicine. It's a modification of what he would do. There's only two therapists involved, often male and female. Gender is not necessarily binary, I know that's complicated for people, but the assumption is it's less likely to be threatening and less likely to go off the rails, frankly, with two genders present, that the person would find safety with one or the other.

A number of preparation sessions, at least a few, that are designed to instruct or actually practice this attitude of open acceptance toward whatever rises and coming back to the present and moving toward what's difficult, as well as gain a sense of trust with the therapist.

Then there's a medicine session, whether we're talking about ketamine or MDMA, or psilocybin. Those are probably the three that are being used most, either in research or in practice at the moment. There's a medicine session that could last a couple, few, six, eight hours long of intensity.

Usually, the person is blindfolded. They're usually lying down on a comfortable couch or bed. Often, music is employed. The idea behind the music is to help move the experience along because when people have difficulty, it's usually because they become stuck with something, like there's some image that they're really afraid of or some fear or some bodily sensation that's frightening them.

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And since music, these playlists tend to be constantly changing, it tends to move it along so the person doesn't get too stuck in anything. And the person may come out of the eye shades and talk a little bit and go back in. There may be some alternation that way, but it's basically that.

And then there's a series of integration sessions, often with both therapists happening afterwards. Now, that's a very intensive model, obviously extremely expensive because these are typically trained therapists who need to be reimbursed for their time.

There's a lot of modifications. There's group model modifications. There's modifications in terms of, are both therapists present for everything and the like. But that's the basic outline. The basic therapeutic attitude is one of trusting the natural healing intelligence of the mind.

There's this idea that our minds, naturally, if sufficiently freed, will heal themselves. What does healing look like? It looks like integrating the things that have been pushed out of awareness. In other words, allowing things painful or embarrassing or prohibited experiences to be back in awareness and being able to hold them and be with them. And you could see how powerful that would be with post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, where the memory is too hot to touch and too unbearable if it could come back into awareness. So that's one of the processes that typically is occurring.

The other one that typically occurs is this changing of sense of self, of connecting more to others and seeing the arbitrary and constructed nature of self, and usually seeing the, if you will, the silliness of self-esteem preoccupations, getting perspective on that.

That's the full standard package of what psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy looks like these days.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you, because I think we skipped over that part. What does it look like? I think it's important for people to understand that setting as well.

I know your most recent book, *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary: Finding Happiness Right Where You Are*, we've talked about people's necessity and self-identity and desire to be unique. Why did you write this book and how does it address that?

Dr Ronald Siegel

The book's very related to the themes that we're discussing. It started as a self-treatment project. There I was already in my 60s, having spent decades doing meditation practice, mostly in Buddhist traditions, not religiously so, but these are traditions that see as their goal letting go of self-preoccupation, dissolving of ego concerns, as well as having been a psychologist for years, treating people, having been in my own therapy years ago.

You'd think I would have developed something like a secure, stable, coherent sense of self, but nothing of the sort had happened. My feelings about myself would go up and down regularly throughout the day. I'd have a good production session or meeting or teaching episode, and I think,

"Oh, all these years of training and practice have really borne fruit. Look at how skillful Ron has become". And then I'd have one that goes poorly or somebody wouldn't invite me to something. I think, "I knew this wasn't my calling. I should have become the engineer. This isn't working".

[00:36:05]

Noticing those fluctuations and thinking, "Is this just me? Or is there something more universal to this?" And then really doing some investigating and realizing that it's quite universal that we all struggle with this. It derives from our mammalian concern for our rank in the primate group. How do we compare to others? We're not necessarily beating our chest or showing who's physically stronger, but we certainly look at others and how they're doing in the world and make a lot of comparisons.

Of all the antidotes to this, and the book is really a collection of antidotes, what we can do to be more at peace and less preoccupied with social comparison and self-esteem issues. But a super powerful antidote is seeing how this all works and seeing how, "Oh, my God, the whole story about me is a story about me". It's not solid. And really starting to appreciate some of the love, the awe, the appreciation, the gratitude that comes from being somewhat less focused on ourselves and more letting in the amazing mystery that is life.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I love that

Dr Ronald Siegel

Mindfulness practices, obviously, figure prominently in that. While I didn't write about it in the book, because of legal issues and everything, well-guided psychedelic experiences could figure in this project as well.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I could see it as being a supplement and guide to the integration part, or the preparation part for an experience like that, right?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Absolutely.

Meagen Gibson

What questions in the field of psychedelic-assisted therapy do you find most intriguing, most important? What are people not asking right now?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Well, people are asking it, but we don't know the answers. The biggest question is going to be, for whom does this work well under what circumstances? We know things definitely not to do, that

could be really problematic. But we don't know exactly who's going to benefit under what circumstances.

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The furthest along studies of this are MDMA for PTSD, and we've got some pretty robust findings showing that people's PTSD symptoms really do resolve quite a bit with this medicine, in the context of therapy. But we don't know how much integration they need and what's enough.

I sometimes think we're opening a Pandora's box because people need a lifetime of integration, but we don't have the resources to give everybody a lifetime of psychotherapy, so we need other systems to help people do that. How are we going to do that? How are we going to make this available safely and more widely, given that I'm suggesting you need a very well-trained person to really do this well? And that's expensive, basically, because it takes a lot of time and energy to develop skills. Now, people do it outside of formal training, et cetera. That's a big question.

I have other questions like, "Okay, what's the most effective way to help things to stick?" Because personally, I've had many experiences that in the moment have felt transformative and quite illuminating with these various medicines that are being used today. And yet, two days later, reading through my email, I see remarkably familiar reactions to each email, worries, frustrations, self-esteem issues, and thinking, "All right, so how do we..."

As I was talking to a good friend of mine, Rick Hanson, who's dedicated a lot of his work to, how do we make states into traits? How do we help to have these wonderful experiences stick more, so that we don't just fall back into our usual patterns of thinking? There's lots of ways to do it. Historically, I think people have gone to churches for this. They serve a lot of functions, but be with like-minded people for reminders.

Certainly, having a meditation practice can be very helpful. There are certainly many things that help, but I think this is really worth exploring because the contrast between just how profound and freeing some of the insights that happen in a psychedelic experience are, the contrast between that and how easy it is to get back into our normal defended habits, it's a little startling.

And the same thing happens with meditation. You can go on a silent retreat. If you do a silent retreat for a week or more and you've really become tremendously opened up, and then a day of email and, gosh, it's almost now a memory, what happened? This applies to how to grow from non-ordinary states quite broadly.

Meagen Gibson

If the two of us can figure that out, we will be rich. It's the most important work, isn't it?

Dr Ronald Siegel

At least we'll be helpful.

[00:41:48] Meagen Gibson

Exactly. That first and foremost, helpful first.

Dr Ronald Siegel

The answer may be completely free.

Meagen Gibson

Totally. How do we get states into traits, or states into stages of development? How do we not revert? Anybody who's even gotten a massage, or spent a day in a spa, or been on vacation, or taking a long, peaceful walk in the woods and then come home to see their kids making a mess. We snap back pretty quickly, don't we?

Dr Ronald Siegel

I know it begins with compassion about that, acceptance about that, realizing that, it's true, everything changes, including these states of illumination, come and go. Isn't that interesting? That's part of it.

We also, I think, want to be exploring what's most helpful there. There's tons of smaller questions, if you will, I'll just throw out a few. For example, with ketamine-assisted psychotherapy, because ketamine in certain doses can be used as a psychedelic-like drug, it's very easy for people to remember and move toward painful events of their past. But they're not... Because it's so easy, they don't exactly experience all the pain associated with it.

And yet in psychotherapy or in meditation practices, usually it seems that what's healing is really opening to how hard that was as a child when this happened, for example. Going back there and being with it and feeling it in our bodies. Then the question is, is it equally curative if the medicine makes it easy to do, so that there's less suffering involved in exploring the trauma? I think that's a fascinating and open question. It may not be necessary to be in agony to get better.

That would be interesting to know about. All the questions about what's a spiritual bypass? What's doing the work of healing ourselves? I think these are very interesting that the psychedelic medicines helped open up for us.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. The next 5 to 10 years plus will be fascinating and very exciting on that front. I hope we learn things that help us be kinder to all of us, right?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah, absolutely.

Meagen Gibson

Ron, how can people find out more about you and your work?

[00:44:23] Dr Ronald Siegel

I have a website, which is www.DrRonSiegel.com, which I assume you'll give a link to. You can see books and podcasts and a lot of mindfulness recordings, meditations that you can download for free.

I'm not so good at it because I don't really have a communications assistant, but I try to post some of the more interesting or unusual programs that I'm participating in so that you might check them out. Please, if you go there, join the mailing list because that's actually the best way, because when I'm about to do something, like be part of this, I'll send out an email when it comes live.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Dr Ron Siegel, thank you again so much for being with us.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Thank you so much for inviting me, and thank you for such a thoughtful interview.