



Conscious Life presents

Ayahuasca Healing for Veterans

Guest: Dr Simon Ruffell

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[00:00:13] Alexander Beiner

I'm here with Dr Simon Ruffell. Simon is a psychiatrist, and he also holds a PhD in Amazonian ayahuasca and mental health outcomes. Simon is one of the founders of Onaya Science, a not-for-profit founded to research Amazonian healing modalities such as ayahuasca. He's also the Chief Medical Officer of Heroic Heart UK, which is a charity supporting veterans with psychedelic plant medicine. So Simon, welcome.

Dr Simon Ruffell

Hello.

Alexander Beiner

Good to see you. So there's a lot I want to ask you about because you're doing very interesting work. You're working with veterans in traditional ayahuasca ceremonies, but also your work is unique because you're a psychiatrist, but you also are very immersed in Shipibo, or Amazonian, shamanism as well. And I know you've talked before about that intersection between psychiatry and shamanism. It'd be great to maybe start there and just get a sense of your journey with that. Coming from the Western medical model, what's it been like to immerse yourself in a different worldview?

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, challenging, in a word. Yes, my background is as a psychiatrist. So I worked in the NHS for many years. Then after getting a little bit disillusioned with some of the ways that we were treating our mental health conditions, particularly the drug treatments, I ended up in the Amazon rainforest

with a curandero, with somebody who leads ayahuasca ceremonies, and was pretty blown away by the positive therapeutic effects that I was seeing as a result of these ayahuasca ceremonies.

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In terms of the intersection between psychiatry and shamanism, that's an interesting one. So I started off doing research into ayahuasca, approaching it from a very medical point of view, like a reductionist scientific point of view. But after a fair few years of working in the jungle, I just came to the conclusion that there was a real striking difference between the way in which the curanderos were explaining the treatment of their participants when compared to the Western scientific paradigm.

There seemed to be this phenomenon happening when curanderos would say, "Oh, yes. In the treatment of our participants, we engage with spirits, and the spirits heal people in ceremonies." All the Western scientists would say, "Oh, yes. We need to ethically respect the curanderos, and ethically respect the indigenous peoples. But we actually know that that must be a metaphor. That must be theology."

Then there was another phenomenon, which was that the Western scientific studies were always... They seem to be being placed in a position where they had the power to validate these indigenous practices. Indigenous people have been using ayahuasca for hundreds, if not thousands of years. And suddenly, scientific studies came out saying, "We have now shown that ayahuasca decreases depression."

And of course, indigenous people are saying, "Well, we've been saying that for hundreds, if not thousands of years." So my angle is to try and work with indigenous peoples to try as best as we can to design studies and to look at things that they want to look at, and to take those concepts seriously. So concepts such as spirits, concepts such as removing energetic blockages, rather than just assuming that it's just metaphor or theology. That's a little bit of a summary of the way that we're approaching it, and what my angle is now.

Alexander Beiner

What's the response from other psychiatrists to taking the indigenous worldview seriously? Have you had pushback? Do you know if people are interested in it? What's it like?

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, it's a little bit of a mixed bag. I think if you approach it from an ethical standpoint, which is if we want to be engaging with indigenous communities and conducting truly ethical, inter-ethnic research, then you can't really argue with that because you need to be working in collaboration rather than placing yourself in a senior position.

But of course, as soon as you start mentioning things to do with energetic blockages or spirits, you get some raised eyebrows. For example, I gave a TEDx talk last week and was politely told to change some of the content that I was putting into the talk based on this. I'm not making any claims to know the truth about the existence of these entities. Rather, shouldn't we be at least

open to the possibility that other people might have another way of looking at the world and therefore conducting research differently?

[00:05:20] Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it's an interesting one because the Western rationalism since the Enlightenment, we are pretty much the only society in history that hasn't seen the world as populated by different entities, spirits, and intelligences. So that's another flip side of it, which I always find quite interesting. There's pros and cons as well, because obviously being too immersed in that has its downsides, too.

So it would be interesting to hear a little bit more about ayahuasca in particular, because I'm not sure that everyone viewing... I'm sure people have heard of it, but aren't sure exactly what it is, and in particular, how it's used traditionally. I think that would be interesting. Before the advent of ayahuasca tourism, for example, where people from the West started going out to South America, how ayahuasca was actually used by, say, Shipibo people.

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, that's a really interesting one. So this is very simply put. Ayahuasca is a psychedelic Amazonian brew. It's usually made of at least two different plants, and one of them contains the potent psychedelic, dimethyltryptamine or DMT. It's drunk in a ceremonial setting most of the time.

In terms of its uses, this is also an interesting one. You referred to ayahuasca tourism, which is the influx of people coming over to the Amazon rainforest to drink ayahuasca, and then also the spread of ayahuasca throughout the rest of the globe. In terms of ayahuasca tourism and in terms of research papers, ayahuasca is thought of as being a really... A potentially really powerful healer. It can heal things like depression, anxiety. It can improve self-compassion, things like that.

But we're seeing as a result of ayahuasca tourism, the way that ayahuasca is traditionally used is being changed. Indigenous peoples definitely do use ayahuasca for that, absolutely. But that's really one half of the story. It was also used traditionally for things like warfare, for hunting, for divination, for things like this. But that doesn't really fit in the Western New Age perception of what ayahuasca should be. Which for most people, it should be about love and light.

And so what we're seeing now is that the actual traditions in the jungle are slowly but surely changing because the curanderos, the shamans, realize that... Probably quite rightly, most Westerners don't want to engage in things like witchcraft and warfare. So they're changing their expertise to treat the market. So the tradition is changing as a result of that ayahuasca tourism.

Alexander Beiner

That's really interesting to hear. I haven't heard anyone talk about that. I went to Iquitos in 2007, so I was in university. It was like a summer between years of university. And in 2007, ayahuasca tourism was still not at the level it is today. It was the beginning. I mean, it had been going on for a while, but it was a lot more nascent. It was a lot more fringe.

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And I found Iquitos, which is a city in the jungle in Peru... Very isolated city. Fascinating place. I found it very dark as a very New Age-y 21-year-old. It actually was very formative for me because it got me into shadow work, and it got me into exploring darkness.

And it really changed me because I became far less New Age-y because the encounter was so not what I expected. It makes me a little bit sad to hear there's an adaptation to that because I think it's actually quite healthy to have the reality of light and dark, kind of manifesting. But that is how culture changes as well.

So the other thing, obviously, I wanted to talk to you about is the work you're doing with veterans in the jungle and with ayahuasca. So maybe you could give an overview of what exactly that is.

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, sure. We are working with a charity called Heroic Hearts, who work with veterans with treatment-resistant PTSD. It's normally treatment-resistant. Those are people who have had PTSD, usually for a prolonged period, have tried other treatments, and they're really stuck. They're really, really stuck.

So Heroic Hearts send groups of veterans to the jungle, to the research center that we're based at. Then we assess the veterans on a number of different levels. We're looking at their brain waves using EEG. We're looking at their gut microbiome. We're looking at epigenetics, and obviously, symptoms to do with PTSD as well.

These studies are really... They're really just starting off. We do have some preliminary results which are really encouraging. So far in those studies, we've analyzed the data of 28 veterans that have gone through the process. Of those 28 that have gone through... Obviously, you have to have PTSD to get onto the retreats.

But at the moment the short-term follow-up, so immediately after the retreats, has shown that none of them actually qualify for a diagnosis of PTSD, according to the measures that we're using, which is super-encouraging. But at the same time, the real question comes with the long-term follow-up.

What happens at six months? What happens at 12 months? Just from our interactions with the veterans, some of them do seem to be saying they really feel like they could do with a top-up. They still feel a lot better than they did before when they drank ayahuasca. But it seems that the results are beginning to wane a little bit. But still, it's looking really impressive. It's looking encouraging.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it's fantastic to hear the way it's moving. It'll be interesting to hear about what actually takes place. I imagine a veteran really suffering from PTSD. They go to the center. What is the kind of experience they're having and what are they saying about it afterwards?

[00:11:23] Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, I mean, most of them say it's the most challenging experience of their entire life, for sure. I think one thing that's actually super-interesting that I've noticed... And again, this is just from being on the retreats with the veterans, is that, of course, the military trauma comes up. And there's a lot of sexual trauma as well. It's not just combat trauma. But of course, that trauma comes up, and it's a huge part of the ceremonies.

But actually, for most of the veterans, that's not the original trauma. There seems to be a trauma that's happened before that, usually in childhood. In my observation, it's quite often something to do with their father. There seems to be this recurring theme. And arguably, that's the initial trauma that might have led them to go into the military in the first place, and then they got more trauma on top of that.

But yeah, there's a lot of reliving these processes. There's a lot of seeing things with a new objective lens, and there's a lot of forgiveness as well. Forgiveness to the people themselves, to the veterans themselves, to other people within their families, to people they've been at war with. Yeah, it's incredibly powerful and incredibly moving.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it sounds like it. I mean, this is something I'm hearing over and over again about combat trauma and other traumas. Rachel Yehuda spoke to this, too, that consistently when people suffer from combat PTSD, there is a previous childhood trauma there underlying. Which, as far as I understand, makes people perhaps more susceptible to a potentially traumatic event becoming PTSD.

And there's something magical about psychedelics in general, but ayahuasca is an incredible teacher in that way as well, to take us right to the root of what's going on. And that always I find really powerful.

So I'd like to talk a little bit about that integration process because you mentioned people are having these very challenging but very meaningful, powerful experiences, and then they go from the jungle and they go back home. And so what are some of the things you think about for integration? What are the things that they're finding useful?

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah. I mean, with the military veterans in particular, it's really important for them to have integration from somebody with military experience. It doesn't have to be that all of their integration is from people with military experience. But at least some of it, because it allows you... For obvious reasons, you can resonate with... Only some people can resonate with those kinds of experiences.

One thing that I'm particularly interested in at the moment, actually, and it's interesting that you bring this up, is the integration that we offer. Because when you're drinking ayahuasca, even if it's in a retreat center, and even if it's a traditional framework... Which you could argue you can never get a traditional ayahuasca retreat because retreats are a Western concept. Something that was made for Westerners, pretty much.

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But when you're in one of these retreats, you get faced with all of these new concepts and things that we were talking about. Spirits. Entities. On the retreats, they're quite often spoken about as if that's what everybody believes. You find that people begin to start thinking in this way. Then when they leave the retreat they go back to New York or wherever it is. If you start talking like that, you're going to get a lot of raised eyebrows.

The integration, I think, really needs to cover these two bases. It needs to cover the spiritual side of things, and it needs to cover the psychological side of things. I think there are some things within the retreat setting... Some things with ayahuasca, that you can only really understand, or at least it's much easier to think of it in terms of the traditional framework and the paradigm that the ayahuasca retreat happens in.

That's something that we're... At the moment, we're designing preparation, integration courses that combine these things. But yeah, it's something that's been on my mind in terms of the integration is how do you avoid that ontological shock. That challenge, that confusion when you go from one way of thinking into another way of thinking.

But yeah, at the moment, most of the veterans seem to be doing well. But again, an issue that I've noticed is that you have these amazing experiences on an ayahuasca retreat, and then you go back to whatever... Your quite isolated life in a small flat in the middle of nowhere, and then the demons begin to come back again, and then the challenges come back again. So that's something that's harder to deal with.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, there's a few things there. I mean, one thing that just comes as a memory that comes up for me is... I saw a woman talk in London years and years ago about her journey with ayahuasca. She had this condition, acromegaly, which is a tumor on the pituitary gland. And so it pushes growth hormone out and is fatal. And she tried everything and was given a few months to live. Went out to the Amazon and did a retreat.

I think it was at the Temple of the Way of Light. And her tumor stopped growing, and it was quite interesting because her doctor was like, "Yup, it seems to have stopped growing." However, what the message from the ayahuasca journey was, was "If you go back to your stressful life and everything that you were doing before this, it's probably going to come back."

So she actually changed her entire lifestyle from that. I always remember that very vividly. That story. The other thing I wanted to pick up on in terms of preparation and integration. I'm big on preparation as well. I think preparation is... I think Bill Richards said "Good preparation is superior to good integration." I'm paraphrasing, but I think they're both very important.

But preparing... So if people don't know the word "ontological shock", ontology is what is your view on what reality is and what is real. The nature of reality. And so very often, big ayahuasca experiences or others will radically change our view on it. And I think what's missing a lot of the time in preparation... Certainly in the clinical trials, but I think even in retreats. It's something I'd like

to do better, is getting people... Giving them a chance to inquire into what I think reality is, beforehand.

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Because that's not really something we do very much day to day. It's not something we do at work. It's always ontology is sort of implicit somewhere. But it's very important to have a sense of... Do I believe in free will or predestination? Do I believe everything is one? Or do I believe... I'm a materialist and I think the only thing that's really real is matter. Do I believe consciousness is primary or do I believe they're both intertwined?

I think these are really important questions for people because like you say, there's this shock when they come back. And the other thing I found I wanted to pick up on is this, something you mentioned, which is around peer support.

Because you mentioned it's really useful to have integration for veterans with people who have that experience. It'd be interesting to hear your thoughts around that, because peer support seems to be a very important aspect of integration. Not just for veterans, but maybe for everyone.

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, absolutely. For veterans, it's super, super-important for the reasons we spoke about before, but also that sense of camaraderie. You're going through something together. What we see with the retreats that we investigate in the research is that a lot of the time people remain in contact with the people that they are on, on the retreats. That's because they get it.

You can have these open conversations about the stuff that came up without people thinking that you were just in the jungle taking drugs. That is something that... Which arguably to a certain degree you were, but it definitely lessens the experience. This is something that I've noticed in integration as well.

And we really stress this, just being really careful with who you share things with. So if you say to somebody, "I went back to the time that I was at war, and instead of having to shoot this guy that I had to shoot, an angel came down and wrapped me with love and showed me that it was all okay and that it wasn't my fault."

Then if you go and you say that to somebody back home, and they might say, "Well, that sounds ridiculous. That sounds like you must have been really high." Then it would remove the magic from it, remove the majesty from it, and then you may well be considering, "Well, did it actually mean that?"

In many ways, it doesn't even matter what that means as long as you get the healing from that situation. I think when you're with a community who have that kind of experience, it's really, really important.

Even outside of the veteran community, just having other people who know what it's like to go through those experiences. You don't have to have the same beliefs, but just an open ear for

somebody who will take you seriously and listen to what you're saying without feeling judged, I think is essential.

[00:20:45] Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I would definitely... My experience of co-facilitating psilocybin retreats, the group bonding is something that we very explicitly say. You know, this is a very powerful part of the process, is that also you have the chance to deeply connect with others, and then you have that shared experience with them.

So I noticed people stay in touch. People stay connected. They check in with each other. And I think that's a really beautiful part of the process as well. And I know that also brings to mind the question of how to integrate, right? This is an ongoing question for all of us in a way.

I always see it as there's passive integration and active integration in the sense that there's somethings where it's like... You might have a particular message of, okay, I need to change this aspect of my life or my behavior, or I need to sort out my diet, or I need to really have that conversation with my mom or my dad and really clear this up. I would consider those active things that we do.

And then there's passive integration, which is, I think, an unconscious process that can take months or even years. I've had experiences where a year and a half later, I'm just sitting on a couch and a light bulb goes off and I go, "Ah, that's what that meant." And in a way, that's out of our control to some degree.

But I'm curious about what kind of practices you found are useful for people to integrate any psychedelic experience or in particular, ayahuasca.

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah. I mean, for me personally, journaling has been a huge thing. I'm watching, specifically, dreams. Keeping a dream diary has been an absolute game-changer. I mean, dreams and psychedelics are arguably both windows to the unconscious. I find that so much information comes through dreams and just really helps me process stuff in terms of that.

I think also community is such a huge thing, and speaking to other people who get it and have been through those experiences always it just really, really helps. Of course, in indigenous communities... In general, at least in my experience, indigenous peoples like the Shipibo don't talk about preparation and integration that much.

But that's because they live in this community. They live in a community where they're just doing that the whole time. Where it's normalized, you can just talk about it. There are elders there, you can speak to them. If you're beginning to go a little bit weird, people will bring you back in and help you out with that. I think really the main thing is just having that supportive network.

Then also another thing that I recommend to a lot of people when they're drinking ayahuasca more regularly... And I certainly have this myself as well, to have some trusted people who can just give you some feedback on where you're at every so often.

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And just say, "Yeah, I've really noticed in the last six months, you've matured a lot since you've told me about these things that came up in your ceremony." Or equally, to be a bit ego-checked and say, "I'm not sure about this. What's going on here?" So I think just having that safety net of people around you that you really trust and don't feel judged by.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, that feels very, very important. And it reminds me of something you said earlier about integration and not being careful who you share your experiences with. That's something I've also observed for myself and something I tell other people, which is...

I always like to leave one thing behind for myself as well. So one aspect of my experience that I will never share with anyone in each experience. Also as a writer who writes sometimes about psychedelic experiences, it's quite poignant for me when I'm thinking like, I want to tell a story and I want to explore this.

But there's something... I mean, for me, it is, of course, sacred. And for many people, these experiences are sacred. And there's something about the sacred, which means not sharing it, like the unspoken. Sometimes the sacred is hidden and unspoken. And I find that can be quite a powerful practice.

So I'm curious, what's next for the work with veterans? What's next at the center? Would you have another group coming in from Heroic Hearts? What's on the horizon?

Dr Simon Ruffell

We're continuing the work with Heroic Hearts. It's actually a five-year study, so it's ongoing. This is just the pilot that we've done with these first 28 veterans. We're continuing with that, continuing to look at ayahuasca in combination with different plants. For example, master plant dietas.

But interestingly, we're now beginning to look at the same studies, the same format. Not specifically for PTSD, but for TBI. So for traumatic brain injury. That's with military veterans, but then also extreme sports athletes. We're starting to look at UFC fighters, some surfers, people who have had repeated brain injury, and then seeing the impact that ayahuasca can have on those people as well. So, yeah, the research is continuing there.

Alexander Beiner

That's very interesting. Yeah, there's a documentary called *Of Night and Light* by Lucy Walker about iboga therapy for veterans. They talk about traumatic brain injury in that, and iboga does seem to have the ability to heal traumatic brain injury, which is quite... So I'm fascinated to see whether ayahuasca will as well.

My suspicion is it will, but you never know. It's science. And I am not a scientist. That's why I like to write. I come up with ideas and then, yeah... But no, that's great. And so what's the process for someone? How does it work? Do all the veterans arrive at the same time? Just take us through a little bit of the journey of what will happen? And how long is it? How long do they stay there?

[00:26:34] Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah. So if anyone who's interested, you have to apply through this organization, Heroic Hearts. And there's Heroic Hearts UK and Heroic Hearts US. And we work with both of them, primarily US at the moment. And so you apply and you get screened by both Heroic Hearts and then also by our organization. So our organization is called Onaya. We're a not-for-profit research organization.

And then after the screening process, you have to do a lot of preparation with Heroic Hearts, and also some with Onaya as well, over about a period of a month in total. Then you come to the jungle and there are different length retreats. The shortest one is 10 days and the longest one is three weeks at the moment. Normally it's drinking ayahuasca three times per week. That's the setup.

But then you also have specific plants that are given to you on prescription depending on the diagnosis that you receive from the shaman. Then after that, people normally stay around in Iquitos in Peru for a couple of days before heading back to wherever they're from, and then they start that integration process. And the prep and the integration is all online. And then we're there doing our research starting about a month before, and then we carry on following people up until about twelve months later.

Alexander Beiner

And so there's, of course, then as well, this intersection between you and the others in Onaya as the medical professionals effectively, and then the shamans. I'm curious about the shamans... What are some of the models that the shamans are using to make sense of, say, someone healing their PTSD? And are they looking at it through a trauma lens? Are they looking at it through a completely different lens?

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, that's super-interesting. I'll give you a couple of examples because I find it fascinating. So when I was explaining our work surrounding epigenetics and to the shamans that we work with... Epigenetics is the study of how genes can change their expression in response to the environment.

For example, air quality or diet can change the expression of genes, but then also stress and trauma seem to be able to change the expression of genes as well. There's some early stage research that suggests that these changes can be passed down through different generations. For example, the children of Holocaust survivors are more susceptible to stress.

When I was explaining all of this to the shamans that we work with, they just said, "Oh, yeah, of course. That's cleaning ancestral lines. We do that in ceremonies all the time. In fact, most of the work that we do is cleaning ancestral lines. It's a big part of it."

So that's an interesting intersection between the two worlds. There are sometimes, for example, when shamans say "spirits" or "entities", it can be difficult to translate that into a Western scientific paradigm. But this explanation actually potentially seems to fit on quite nicely.

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Could it be that the negative energies that the shamans describe actually manifest on a genetic level, with ayahuasca implementing epigenetic change that can interrupt that transfer of familial trauma? Who knows? Who knows? But that's one potential way that they look at it.

Another funny anecdote, quite a nice anecdote. So Don Rono, who's the curandero that we work with the most... When I was describing what EEG was to him and why we thought it was important to look at the brain waves of participants. Rono just looked at me and said, "Well, Simon, in ceremonies, I have caps on people's heads that measure the electrical activity of their brain in the spirit world. And mine are much better than yours."

And I was like, "Okay, Rono, fine. You win this one." So yeah, there are different ways of looking at it. Perhaps some overlaps, perhaps some not.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I love that. That's fascinating. Really intriguing where those overlaps are. And then what's different, for example, spirits, which is sometimes more difficult to make sense of. I suppose in Jungian or Parts work. IFS, Internal Family Systems, is very popular in combination with psychedelics. And that's an idea that we have all these different parts of ourselves, and these parts can be cut off and appear as something alien or other, like an entity.

I actually am not entirely convinced that's all that's going on, personally. But I think having had many experiences which don't fit into that category, and some that do, it's absolutely fascinating.

I'm curious to close off with. I wanted to ask you about, what's your hope for the future of this kind of work, of treating veterans. But perhaps beyond that? There's a huge change happening. We might be, as soon as August, seeing MDMA legalize as a medicine in the US. The momentum certainly seems to be behind psychedelic medicine becoming a treatment. What would you like to see? What would be your dream vision for the future?

Dr Simon Ruffell

Yeah, that's a great question. I think we're at a really interesting point now where we're planting the seeds of the way that we are going to see this psychedelic renaissance, for a better word, continue to develop over time.

I think it's really important now, even though obviously we don't have all the answers, and arguably none of the answers, in terms of the validity or the truth behind indigenous practices. But I'd like to see the seed planted that those ways of thinking are taken seriously.

Because at the moment, I think we run the risk of excluding indigenous peoples from the psychedelic conversation. Which is ridiculous, seeing as they've been working with psychedelics for much longer than we have. Working in collaboration, and true inter-ethnic collaboration is the way forward.

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But I think that for now, we need to be opening up those conversations, opening up those dialogs. Including indigenous healers, at every stage of these research processes, even in the clinical trials. Because they are very openly saying, "You don't really know what you're doing. You need to be involving us, and these are our sacred medicines."

Again, I'm not expecting it to be perfect, but I just want to see those conversations well and truly opened.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, absolutely. It's incredibly important. Great. That's a lovely vision for the future. And also the work you're doing right now is really exciting as well. So, Simon Ruffell, thank you so much.

Dr Simon Ruffell

It's a pleasure. Always good to chat to you, Ali.