



Conscious Life presents

Exploring Psychedelics

Guest: Alexander Beiner

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of this conference. Today, I'm speaking with Alexander Beiner, an author, journalist and facilitator whose work focuses on bringing new ways of seeing and being from the margins of culture into the mainstream.

He's the author of *The Bigger Picture: How Psychedelics Can Help Us Make Sense of the World*, and writes a popular [Substack](#) on philosophy, popular culture and psychology. He's an executive director of *Breaking Convention*, Europe's longest running conference on psychedelic medicine and culture, and he's the host of conscious life's upcoming Psychedelic Super Conference. Alexander Beiner, thank you so much for being with us today.

Alexander Beiner

Thanks for having me.

Meagen Gibson

So I want to start with the big question, which is, what inspired you to first explore psychedelics?

Alexander Beiner

Well, I think curiosity is probably the really short answer. So I had my first psychedelic experience when I was 19 or so and I was just fascinated by... Well, at first it was very meaningful and deeply connecting and I felt this sense of real familiarity as well as newness, which is something people often report. And then I wanted to know a couple of things.

One, what was going on? And two, why wasn't everyone talking about this amazing experience? Times have changed a bit now a lot more people are, which is great. So that was the... That initial energy was really out of curiosity and deep spiritual and psychological, let's say, healing and help that the experience has provided me.

[00:01:49] Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. It's so funny because I think we're around the same age, I'm not actually sure, but we talk about it, this new surge in psychedelics as if it's new sometimes. And as you know from everybody that you've talked to, I mean there was a huge surge of this in the 60s, the 70s and then in the early 80s it was squashed down.

And then of course there's been ancient plant medicine in use and modalities for hundreds and thousands of years. But as far as mainstream acceptable, everyone's talking about it. It's on the cover of magazines, on newsstands and things like that. Psychedelics are definitely more mainstream than they feel like they've ever been before.

Alexander Beiner

Absolutely, yeah. And there's been a shift even in the last maybe three or four years because first it started with these really positive clinical trial results coming out of places like Johns Hopkins and Imperial College here in London. And so it started out very sciencey, which was very positive.

And now I'd say it's shifted to people, Will Smith talking about his ayahuasca experiences and other celebrities. And so it's really hit the main, or let's say, is hitting the mainstream culture in a way that I don't think we've really seen since probably the 60s, and even in the 60s was quite a fringe thing. There was maybe an outsized influence of the psychedelic 60s on music and art, but we look back on it, and it's often easy to forget that most of the culture was like, "What are these hippies doing?" And it was a really small amount of people who are really interested in this. So I think it's an exciting time in the field.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And in the scope of trauma work and a trauma conference, I think we need to talk about whether psychedelics are trauma-safe. So what do you know, and how did you come upon this information outside of that first exploration when you were 19?

Alexander Beiner

Yeah. So this is an area for me that I'm really interested in. And the short answer is yes and no, I would say. I'll try and unpack that a little bit. So a little bit of my background. I'm trained as a counselor in a trauma informed approach, and I've also seen how important that approach is for working with people and very influenced by people like Peter Levine and Bessel van der Kolk and all of their work and these body first approaches to looking at trauma.

And then I'm also a journalist and a writer, so I have that... I like to pick things apart and to question things wherever I see them. And so I started noticing that trauma had become a real buzzword and a really popular concept in a lot of the spaces I was moving in, the personal growth worlds and the therapy worlds, et cetera. So I started becoming really curious about that and about psychedelics. Okay, psychedelics are super healing, or can be, let's say - that's important. They can be very transformative, really help us to look at parts of ourselves that we've been cut off from that need to be seen, need to be felt, but the process can be pretty intense.

[00:05:03]

Basically, there's a definition of trauma that one of therapists who trained me used to use, which was "too much, too fast, can't get away" is potentially the ingredients for a traumatic experience. Psychedelics are that, very often it's a very intense experience. There's lots going on. You can't stop the experience. So they can be traumatic, and many people... Well, some people will have traumatic experiences on psychedelics. It's all about how they're held, the approach, the training. You go into it with the support you have, et cetera. So that's all very important.

But aside from the fact that they could be traumatic, I think what's really interesting is the fact that, the way that we often transform as psychedelics, or sometimes do, is really by facing the things we don't want to face and really not being able to look away and then accepting it. And then that shifts something, and there's an opening up and there's a feeling of emotion. There might even be a reliving. There might be a re-experiencing of traumatic events that can happen for people as well. But that experience is very healing.

So, you know, I interviewed Peter Levine once and asked him about this, and he pointed out, which I thought was really interesting, that psychedelics are what he called flooding experiences. It's this huge amount of intensity in your nervous system that's going on. And so the question is, where's that balancing point between not flooding too much, but also looking at the ways in which a little bit too much can actually be healing in the right context?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. You said so much that I want to come back to, but the most recent thing that you said is about the flooding. And as somebody... You know Peter Levine and somatic therapy and I think so much of trauma healing and even trauma avoidance is about carefully maintaining capacity and kind of judging. Like holding everything just far enough away that we're not flooding ourselves, for many people. And that's why conventional types of talk therapy or even trauma focused therapy work, just what we're just kind of talking or even somatics or creative expressive arts, all of those things are built around extending your capacity to hold what's hard and to be with what's hard.

And from what I understand, and please tell me this, because I approach this only as a journalist and not as an experiencer or a trained counselor. So please tell me if I go off the rails here, but my understanding of psychedelics is that the fight-or-flight part of your brain, your amygdala, that gets fired when you're trying to approach these traumatic experiences, to heal them under normal circumstances or the everyday, accessible circumstances, is the part that's firing and kind of causing problems for you somatically, and in your body, and all the panic responses and all the things that are coming up.

And my understanding is that when we're using psychedelics, that that part of your brain gets... It's like, "Go away, calm down. We're going to put you in the corner, relax for a bit. We're just going to explore the studio space and some stuff is going to come up, but you're safe and just take a rest, we've got this." Is that an accurate summary?

Alexander Beiner

Kind of, particularly with MDMA. So MDMA, which is likely to be the first psychedelic... I wouldn't even necessarily call MDMA a psychedelic, but it's close enough. It's actually an empathogen

because it helps us to be more empathetic, although chemically it's in the same family as mescaline or peyote. So that can have these psychedelic effects. So with MDMA, that very much seems to be the case, and that's why it's used for trauma therapy.

[00:08:59]

Originally in the 80s, before it was made illegal, it was used a lot for couples counseling, interestingly, as well. So what MDMA can help people to do is to relive or re-look at the traumatic experience without, you're absolutely right, without that shutdown of fight-or-flight of "It's all too much, I can't look at it." That does just effectively pause, which is incredible.

Now, it's interesting, because when you look at MDMA therapy sessions, people who've taken MDMA recreationally find it hard to believe that you could ever have a bad experience on it, or be in a real tough spot, because it's really euphoric and very connecting. There's a lot of empathy, a lot of expansion, a lot of creativity in the MDMA therapy sessions.

Very often people are, with the help of a therapist, going into places and unfelt emotions, and they are struggling to a degree, or they're at least going through a challenge. But it's almost like being held... Like someone's holding your hand or you're holding your own hand as you go through this. And so it's incredibly healing and powerful.

The other psychedelics, like psilocybin or LSD or iboga, they all work differently. I don't know with psilocybin and LSD exactly what's happening in the amygdala, but it's not quite the same. What is happening is that lots of different parts of the brain talk to each other that don't normally talk to each other. So there's a lot going on that everyone's still trying to figure out...

Meagen Gibson

Or don't talk to each other in the way that they do when under the influence. They're always talking to each other.

Alexander Beiner

Yes, exactly.

Meagen Gibson

We're going through the woods instead of taking the road, for instance.

Alexander Beiner

Exactly. They're just misbehaving a little bit, not coloring in through the regular lines, in that sense... My wife does research on this. She works as a psychologist in trauma, but also as a psychedelic researcher. So it's interesting when I listen to her talk about it, which substances are best for which thing, which indication or which struggle that we might have.

[00:11:04]

And there is use for psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, for trauma healing. There seems to be, however... The go to would be MDMA, but psilocybin, it'll still be intense, potentially. And you don't have that same holding experience that you might with the MDMA.

Meagen Gibson

And sometimes there's peripheral issues that we're trying to mend that are a result of trauma, but aren't trauma healing... What I'm trying to say is things like OCD or intrusive thoughts or something might... There are psychedelic applications and treatments for those things. They're focused on that thing, but the root of that thing came from traumatic experience and trauma history. So you wouldn't necessarily take MDMA to help with OCD or intrusive thoughts, but by helping the intrusive thoughts and the OCD, you're addressing and giving yourself room to deal with the underlying trauma.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah. Added to that, what's very interesting is that various psychedelics are used for PTSD in veterans, for example. So ayahuasca and then also iboga. And there's a new documentary by Lucy Walker, who directed and produced *How to Change Your Mind* on Netflix. And it's about iboga healing. It's called *Of Night and Light*, and part of it covers this center in, I believe it's Mexico, who are treating veterans who have PTSD.

And what's really interesting is that every single one of them has childhood trauma, which was then, and now they're struggling with PTSD. There's not one exception in that particular documentary, which I'm sure there are exceptions out there, but that's really interesting because I think that's well known in the trauma research, that you're more susceptible to PTSD if you have a trauma history.

And that certainly seems to be the case with that. And it's hearing their reports of their experiences. They might recontextualize and re-experience the traumatic event in war, for example, that they've been struggling with but then they will also very often go into their childhood and work out the tangles and the wounds and the healing and go through a healing process of that.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And you've made such a good point, which is that it's so confusing to people who don't have trauma or don't know they have trauma for that matter. Why particular people, especially if it's members of a giant family system, why does this one particular person have trauma and the rest of us are fine?

And there's so many factors that play into who's going to develop trauma and who doesn't, and childhood experiences obviously being one of them, and then adult experiences. So if you're the only person that was in the military or armed services and you grew up in a household full of people with moderately similar experiences, it makes sense that your amount of overwhelm and your amount of processing would be different than those who didn't have military experiences and face incredibly difficult situations.

[00:14:16] Alexander Beiner

Absolutely. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

So I realize we've kind of brushed over... We've done a really good job of talking about specific psychedelics, and we've kind of inferred that different psychedelics have different wheelhouses of purpose, if you will. That was a convoluted way to say that. But maybe if you could go over the main types and maybe what people are used to calling them, if they've heard of them before, what kind of the research name is, and a brief overview on kind of where they come from, where they originated from.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, sure. So there's two broad... There's two main types of psychedelic that generally people talk about, and then there's also iboga and a few more. But I'll start with the two main types. So there's tryptamines, and tryptamines are... The classic psychedelics are tryptamines. So that means LSD, which people might be familiar with, psilocybin, which is the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, and then DMT, dimethyltryptamine and tryptamines are really ubiquitous in nature.

They're everywhere. So we all, for example, you and I have DMT in our blood right now as we're talking. No one knows quite why, but if you ingest that separately, it's a very powerful, very short lived psychedelic experience. So DMT is also one of the active ingredients in ayahuasca, which people might have heard of, which is a plant medicine, a brew, a combination of multiple plants used in South America, which makes the DMT orally active, which it normally isn't. So that's used in, and has been used for, no one knows exactly how long, but could be potentially tens of thousands of years, could be as little as a few hundred years, but it's a very long time, certainly used in South America primarily.

And then there's also 5-MeO-DMT, which comes from a frog. It's in a substance called bufotenine. So that's another type of DMT, which is a very beautiful, unifying, transcendent experience that people often report, a very non-dual experience when people take that. So psilocybin is really widespread across the world. There's psilocybin mushrooms in the UK and Ireland where I am right now, that they grow in the autumn. There's a species called liberty caps, which grow where there are sheep.

So they've been around for a very long time here. There is actually no... Because the druids and other indigenous groups in this part of the world didn't write stuff down. There's no proof that they were used. But many people would argue that it would be very surprising if they weren't used because we as human beings try everything when you eat stuff and it's pretty hard to keep it under wraps once you've eaten a psychedelic mushroom.

The Mazatec in Mexico also use psilocybin mushrooms ceremonially and are... In the West, the rediscovery of that is really thanks to them because there was a woman called María Sabina who was a mushroom shaman, and she had an encounter with, of all people, a JP Morgan exec called,

whose name has just escaped me, even though I talk about psychedelic history all the time. R. Gordon Wasson, there we go.

[00:17:46]

So Wasson and his wife met Sabina. There was a Life magazine article about her and that was in the late 50s. And then that became... People were like, "Oh, Wow." It was kind of coinciding with the discovery of LSD, which was actually discovered in the 40s by Albert Hofmann, who was a Swiss chemist. And he discovered it kind of on a... He was actually looking for a drug to induce labor and he had it in a cupboard for a while. LSD-25, which is derived from an ergot fungus which grows on rye.

So it's also a fungus, it's where it comes from. And he went back to it, the story goes, he went back to it on a hunch one day and was kind of handling it and playing with it and then went home and started having a very strong LSD trip because LSD is very potent, and it goes in through your skin as well. So that's called bicycle day, April 19. Each year. It's kind of in the psychedelic world, celebrated because he rode home on his bicycle and managed to stay on it, which is impressive.

So LSD then was, you could call... My friend Leor Roseman, who's a psychedelic researcher, he calls LSD in the West one of our indigenous psychedelics. So LSD is really what people might be familiar with from the 60s, et cetera.

And then there's also ketamine. Ketamine is a dissociative psychedelic. This is also used in a lot of hospitals. It's used to treat depression now as well. It's a little bit different. And then there's iboga, which comes from West Africa, from Gabon, or from the Bwiti people. Actually, Bwiti is more like a religion, and that's a root. And very... I've never done it myself, very, very powerful.

What's incredible about iboga is it actually resets your opioid receptors physically. So if you're addicted to heroin and you go through an iboga process, you are, the next day, no longer addicted to heroin physically, as well as, very often, psychologically not addicted anymore. There's nothing quite like it, chemically, in the world. It's really fascinating. And there is a sort of pharmaceutical product, ibogaine, which comes from iboga. So iboga is one that I probably know least about, but it's really worth mentioning because it's out there. And then... We're almost there.

There's a lot of psychedelics, but we're almost there. The next group is phenethylamines, and that's like MDMA, peyote, mescaline. And those actually were also around in the 50s and 60s, the beat poets... A lot of people's access in the west, the beginnings was through mescaline, people like Aldous Huxley took mescaline.

And so then those are the main groups. And then there are a lot of research chemicals created by Alexander Shulgin, who synthesized things like MDMA, that he basically played around with. And he wrote a whole book, two books, *PiHKAL*, and *TiHKAL*, 'Tryptamines I have Known and Loved', and 'Phenethylamines...' And so there's a whole bunch of different variations on all of those things. So that's a big, exhaustive list of the many types of psychedelics.

[00:20:53] Meagen Gibson

I like that we're talking about it because we talk about psychedelics, but what does that really mean? And I think for a lot of people, especially if this is the first conversation they've ever heard anybody have about it, there's a large expanse under this huge umbrella of what we're talking about. And it's not like, "Oh, you take psychedelics and you cure your trauma." It's so much more involved in that. There's so many more varieties, there's so many different applications and settings.

So I wanted to give a brief overview of the scope of it. And then there's also what we're calling scientifically researched and medically applied psychedelics. And then there's what people call recreational. But that feels unfair to me because it's just as anciently medicinal. And what we're calling recreation is somebody else's cultural ritual and tradition. So I don't really like the - here's medicinal and then here's recreational. That feels too black and white to me. What does the psychedelic community call it? How do they differentiate?

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, they do use those terms, but when I say they, I'm talking about people from my culture, which is in the West, so to speak. And I think actually, I haven't actually thought about this before, but it actually probably comes from the sort of protestant work ethic that is in a lot of these countries, which is that there's work and there's play, and those are different things. You do your work and then maybe one day a week you get to rest and play. So that's a very culturally specific thing.

And so I think in other cultures there's certainly sacramental, and sacred, and very dedicated use, but there's also varieties of places where the recreational blends with the sacred together. And I think that happens... I think that's the way a lot of people discover psychedelics is that they begin recreationally, maybe at a music festival or with some friends, and they realize that, "Oh, wow, this is a really profound experience which is actually changing me and helping me."

And so then that opens the door to often a kind of more of a reverence with the experience where people start approaching it differently and start treating it as something sacred rather than something... The opposite of sacred in our culture is profane. So it's something to take seriously rather than play with.

But I also think it's important to realize that psychedelics are also very playful, and that's partly how they heal in my view. So they are silly, playful, jokey, profound. They can be all those things. And there's something really wonderful about the experience.

Meagen Gibson

It's interesting that you said that because as you were speaking, I was actually writing all of these similar words because that was what I wanted to ask you about next. So much of what trauma, and how trauma affected my life and why I started healing, was an inaccessibility to joy and play and freedom, the feeling of it. Because if your sense of safety is being just constantly activated or your desire to re-establish safety and security and all of those things are your primary directive.

[00:24:12]

There is no space for play or exploration or even to feel joy. Because how can you be joyful when you're trying to establish safety? So that's one of the things that I talk about so much when we're talking about trauma healing and why you want to heal trauma is because happiness and joy and exploration and playfulness. That's it. That's the whole shebang. So let's get us back to where we can be in that space.

And when you were talking about the different types of psychedelics, all I kept hearing was, people who had been playing, they were like, "Oh, I was exploring this" or "I walked through the woods and I ate that." Or I had this in my cabinet and I was like, "What's that doing?" And it was people exploring and playing and discovering. And for us to, in the 20th, 21st century, to split that in our minds of the productivity and the science versus the exploration. They were never really divorced to begin with, were they?

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, absolutely. It's such an important point. And it's also one of the qualities that we can cultivate in ourselves. To have a healthy, expansive psychedelic experience is to actively be curious and be in that childlike space. And so they really do lend themselves to that. And very often as well, people experience awe, which is a word that we don't use that much, but we say awesome. But the original meaning of that is that your mind is blown by the beauty of something or the size of something. Like seeing a mountain. That's how people used to say that mountain is awesome. It inspires awe. So awe, wonder.

People often see things, especially nature in a completely new way. And that's beautiful. And there is a sense of childlike wonder coupled with sometimes just really sophisticated psychological teaching. There really can be such amazing tools. You get wonder and awe when you need it. And you'll get the serious, let's do some shadow work when you need it. And so a big part of it is this openness and receptivity. And one of the reasons it's called a trip is that in a psychedelic experience, you can go from absolute wonder and beauty to, okay, let's get serious now in a moment.

And so you have to kind of roll with that in a way. And so afterwards, very often, if you've had a beneficial experience, even if it's been challenging, you're exhausted. Exhausted, emotionally exhausted, because you've been on an emotional roller coaster that goes way deeper and twistier than the regular kind of state we're moving through.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And that brings me to another question around expectation and intention and how much... What is so curious to me about all of this is obviously, well hopefully, nobody's accidentally doing any psychedelics. Everything is done with consent. So that's not the intention I'm talking about, but just the context of: I am intending to do this for a purpose. I have a trauma healing agenda, but then also really setting our expectations around what might come forward and the ride that we might be on.

[00:27:35] Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it's a really good question because it's such a delicate balance. I run retreats in the Netherlands with my colleague Natasja Pelgrom, where truffles are legal there, which is because of a legal loophole. Psilocybin mushrooms, if you stop a mushroom growing up, it'll grow a little nutty truffle. And those are legal in the Netherlands.

So we were on retreats, not for clinical, but for personal exploration and people who were coming. And one of the things I often try and get across in the preparation in particular, is this real delicate dance between going in with an intention and not going in with an expectation, because an intention is a sort of direction I'm facing in, like a north star that I'm moving towards, whereas an expectation is almost certainly going to be wrong with psychedelics.

And very often what happens is that the experience is unfolding in a particular way. And when someone has a strong expectation, they block the experience because it's not what they were expecting, so they're not going into it, and then that can cause tension, and then they need to relax a little bit and drop into the experience. And then I've also started actually changing it from even the word intention to more of like, "What's the stance you're taking? Who are you going to be in response to the experience?" And that's because there's a really important difference between doing and being that really shows up with psychedelics.

And I probably, I would say most healing or personal exploration in the sense that if we knew exactly what we needed, we could just stay at home and not go to a retreat or go and do the work. But we don't. And so in a sense, what we do have control over is how are we going to respond to the world?

And I draw on this really lovely definition of love by John Vervaeke, who's a cognitive science professor and a friend of mine. And he said this a few months ago, and immediately it really captured my imagination where he was talking about. I actually play for the participants, I play that song, What is Love? Baby, Don't Hurt Me.

I queue it up as a very sacred song, and then it's a bit of a joke. But the reason is because if we ask, what is love? It's really interesting. We're like, "It's umm... I don't quite know what is love?" And John Vervaeke's answer to that is that love isn't an emotion, because you can be in love, but be furious with someone, you can be really sad, you can be ecstatically happy, but you're still in love that whole time.

And so he calls love an existential stance. It's a response that you have to the world. And I really think that is a lovely way to describe it. And I think it applies so much to how we go into a psychedelic experience, because if we go in with, okay, how am I going to show up? Like I would in a relationship? You're going to meet a whole new group of people. Okay, check in with myself. I want to be authentically me ideally, if it was me. And I would also want to stay open and curious and receptive and get to know people and be polite, all of these things.

And with the psychedelic experience, it's similar in the sense that we're going in... It can really help to go in with that state of curiosity. I call it curiosity hacking, because if in doubt, become curious. And that's not just with psychedelics. That's in general, I think that's actually thanks to the work of Stephen Porges and polyvagal theory. That's what inspired that particular idea.

[00:31:03]

And then also there is something you mentioned before, which I think is very important, which is... This relates to trauma quite a bit, because the kind of psychedelic healing that is popular right now clinically is what's confusingly called psychedelic therapy.

And that is high doses. And the idea is to elicit a really deep mystical experience that totally changes our perspective on life and our problems. And then there's therapy around that as well. So that's one. In Europe, there's another form which is also popular, which is psycholytic therapy. Which is lower doses, but the talking therapy happens throughout. And that's often what MDMA therapy is like. In psychedelic therapy, therapists just kind of sit and hold space while the person is quiet in their own space.

So in the psychedelic therapy model, the instruction is usually: Go 'in and through', which means whatever shows up, lean into it. Bill Richards, who's one of the original researchers and is still doing research in this field. I've heard him talk and he knows if a patient's like, "I'm feeling paranoid right now", he'd be like, "Amazing. Go into the paranoia. Feel it". Now that can be really good if you're not traumatized. Because you've got the resources, you've got the energy, you're like, "Yeah, boom, bring it."

I'm lucky enough not to have significant trauma. And so for me, when I'm having a psychedelic experience, that's 90% of the time what I'm doing. I'm like, "Bring it. How much more intense can it get?" Because that attitude just keeps it flowing. It's not the right response for someone who's traumatized. This is actually research my wife is doing at the moment based on one of the imperial college trials that she worked on.

But the idea of going 'in and through', I actually don't actually teach that to people in general because I think a better thing is to know when to lean in and when to lean back. Sometimes you need to really dive into something that's showing up emotionally, or a memory, or an image, or whatever it is, and you go, "Oh, okay, there's something in here for me, it's all tangled. I don't quite know what it is. I'm going to dive in."

Sometimes you need to take care of yourself and lean back, and also you don't want to have a kind of cognitive overload of too much information because then generally what happens is that people dissociate even if they're not traumatized. So I've seen people in, not ceremonies I was running, but I've seen people in ceremonies very clearly in a dissociative state because it was their first time and they were fine after, but it was their first time, it was too much, too fast, can't get away.

And so they dissociated because it's the safest thing to do. Now that's just a shame because often people won't remember that section of the experience and they're not really doing any deep inner growth in that place.

So even for people who are fairly well resourced, I still think 'in and through' is not the best advice, in general. It's 'in and through' and sometimes 'not in and through'. It's a little bit more complex. And what I try to teach people is the discernment to know do I have the resources to go into this or right now? Do I need to open my eyes, take a breather, have a sip of water, gather myself and then go back in. And that's up to each individual. And as guides, we can't really determine that for them.

[00:34:29]

So the best thing to do is to prepare as best as possible. And then the more experiences you have, the better you get at that. It's like any skill, you get better at going, "Yeah, I can handle that right now", or "No, I'm going to change setting". I'm going to get up and go somewhere else.

Meagen Gibson

Again, you said a lot I want to come back to. First, I didn't know dissociating was even impossible when you were in a psychedelic experience. So I've just learned something. And also, of course it is, now that you've said it, but for some reason I was just like, "No, that's not on the menu." And then also just the idea around, especially if you've had a traumatic experience that you're trying to heal from and that's part of your journey, it doesn't have to be the focus, but part of it, or at least it's even running in the background as you kind of do this kind of an exploration.

The agency and the power and the autonomy that is part of trauma healing, getting back that agency, getting back that feeling of, not control, but of autonomy and sovereignty and those types of things, being able to, instead of be directed to go 'in and through', but to be able to lean in, or to be able to check in and say like, "Yeah, I have a space for that today". Because anybody with a trauma history knows that some days we have a ton of capacity and some days we have very little.

And so it might just depend on what day you're having an experience, what you've got in you and what you don't. And would it be safe to say that a good psychedelic experience would also be one where you get to rest and have a soft landing throughout the experience? It doesn't necessarily all have to be intense and hard?

Alexander Beiner

Absolutely. And in fact, because everyone is so unique and different, I've seen this happen multiple times where someone's coping... Let's say someone's personality, structure and response to the world is to always be attacking the world and go, go go, and solve every problem. And very often I have seen what they get is it's time to rest. And they're like, "Well, where are the fireworks?" And the thing is generally it's like psilocybin that I work with mainly can be very literal.

So the experience you're getting is the message, the medium is the message. So you're like, "Oh, I'm feeling totally exhausted and I'm yawning every 5 seconds. I just feel like sinking into my mat." Then maybe it's time to sink into your mat and that's what you need. And maybe what you need is 4 or 5 hours of just pure stillness and rest and that'll take you somewhere else.

So that's a really good point. And often it's both. It's a combination of, for an hour you're really in this particular thing, and then for an hour it's bliss, and then for an hour it's rest, and then for an hour you might be bored for 20 minutes at the beginning while you're waiting for it to come.

There's so many different aspects of the experience that can show up and also the setting will really change it. So where you are, the expectations of the group, you're with your own expectations, the music will change the experience. If you're listening to drumming music, that's going to influence what you're seeing at different times. It's not necessarily going to influence the

content so much as the form of what you're seeing. It could do both, but it's all this really beautiful, very artistic, I would say, mixing of all these different things together.

[00:38:02] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I mean, heck, on any given day, the amount of light, the material I'm sitting on, the clothes I'm wearing affect my experience and the people I'm in the room with. I'm on the sensitive end of the spectrum. So what are your concerns in this emerging field, at least as far as the larger world is concerned and the research and application of psychedelics?

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I have many concerns. I have a lot of hope and a lot of concerns and so do many of us who've been in the field for a while. I think my main concern is that I would like psychedelics to come into the mainstream culture in a very diverse and multidisciplinary way. Meaning it's not just, oh, these are for healing depression or anxiety, I absolutely want that as well. But if it becomes only a medicalized approach, then we lose a lot.

Partly because in many parts of the world, our medical systems are really caught up in profit motives, which means that one problem is that only, like with psychotherapy, only people with enough money are going to be able to access it. And there's a whole bunch of people who won't be able to access it, but could if they had good education, good community support, and were growing their own mushrooms, which is actually incredibly easy to do if you're not going to get arrested for doing it. There's ways to have a healthy, thriving ecosystem. Oregon, for example, has legalized the use of psilocybin for adults for both therapy and personal growth.

And so they have a model that... I don't know exactly where it's at now because it's still forming, but they were very much looking at a two tier model where you have clinical, and that's different professionals who are working with that, which I think is the right thing, because you need a professional to work with someone with a very intense childhood trauma history or just very treatment resistant depression, whatever it might be. And for the group of people who I'm trained to work with, for example, which is officially called healthy neurotics, which is all of us. Which I think is such a funny term.

Meagen Gibson

I don't know why I feel attacked. But sure...

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, so I'm a healthy neurotic, apparently, and so are most of us. Yeah, so that's just all of us. So people who might, we might all struggle with anxiety or depression at some point in life, or just be looking for something new in life. And so people who are looking for that go to a retreat center and already are now. Because in our retreats, for example, we have a screening process, and anyone who's clinically too complex for us to work with, we aren't able to see, which is also tragic because there's nowhere to really point them towards, because right now it's just clinical trials, and hopefully that'll change.

[00:40:46]

And then there's also spiritual and sacramental use which is very important. And so that is a fundamental human right. And the use of psychedelics for spiritual insight is very old. It might be the oldest form of a spiritual practice that we know about. Certainly shamanism is the most widespread and kind of oldest form. And so that needs to be protected. And then so does, in my view, recreational use. I think we let people, someone is very free to go and buy an entire bottle of whiskey and drink the whole thing in one sitting and probably not survive that experience.

Whereas you're not allowed to grow and consume a mushroom, which is for me a huge contradiction. So if we're going to let people skydive, horse-ride and drink alcohol and just trust that they're not going to drive, for example, just be like, "Please don't".

Meagen Gibson

Or there are consequences.

Alexander Beiner

Or there are consequences. We can very much put in consequences for misuse of psychedelics as well. In Society, there's a precedent for it. It's not that difficult to do. And already in Colorado that's happening now, Colorado decriminalized personal use of plant medicines. And I met one of the people this summer who was spearheading that campaign and what he was doing next. I was like, "What are you doing now that you guys did it?"

He was like, "Now we're doing a school program, which is a bit like D.A.R.E, except it's more about responsible use and understanding." "Hey, these are what these substances do. Here's what you need to think about if you were going to do them." They're obviously not promoting the use, but they're letting people have information, which I think is a much more sensible policy.

So that's what I'd like to see this kind of really healthy ecosystem going through, because otherwise the concerns are corporate capture, capture by for-profit entities that are going to corner the market and prevent access. And then also that the deeper levels of the psychedelic experience get lost in commercialization. That's also a concern I have.

It's not black and white because we've seen it with yoga and mindfulness, but for every cheesy version of yoga on Instagram, there's a retreat somewhere doing really deep yoga work. So you can find both. And likewise you can go to a Vipassana for ten days, or you could do a very simple meditation app. And it's not even to say that the apps are a bad thing.

So there'll always be... The difference between these things is that psychedelics are illegal. So that's the difference. Mindfulness and yoga are not illegal and never were. So there was not that tension of when they become legal in some form, who's going to get control over them? And that is a real concern. That hopefully is being mitigated.

It's actually moving in a better direction than I thought it would be about three years ago when there was a big investment into psychedelic pharma companies and it looked like "Uh-oh, these venture capitalist funds and pharma companies are going to try and corner the market." But

because psychedelics are, A) very difficult to patent and B) don't do what you want them to do, I think so far so good.

[00:44:01] Meagen Gibson

Right. It's less controllable than, say, more other pharmaceutical manufacturing processes, if you will.

Alexander Beiner

Definitely.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I guess we've come to the point now where if we've convinced somebody that this is a road that they want to go down, how on earth do we even begin? I've been researching psychedelics for about a year, and I still feel like I'm not even remotely close to knowing how to even begin to approach the process if I was interested in doing it.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it is tricky now. Right now there's places where you can go to legal retreats. Obviously if someone's in the US, they could look into going to Oregon or now Colorado. It's a little bit tricky in Colorado because you're not allowed to charge for anything. So I don't know how they're doing that there. It's just usually kind of more compassionate groups, and I'm not aware of any donation based, I think. There's ways around it, I think. So that's going on.

And then also researching... People don't just have to do it within a retreat or with a clinician. Most people I know who are in the field now, that wasn't a thing. So we all started with our own personal use in some way. And so that has been something that people have access to for a long time. The thing with that is that you just really need to do your research and know what you're doing, et cetera.

It's not something I necessarily promote because I don't know who's watching or listening. And so generally my advice would be to find a retreat center, a good retreat center. There's a directory on a website called Third Wave, actually, of retreat centers that have reviews so people can check that out. And then hopefully, as times change, there'll be more and more access for people in different ways.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And obviously you want to promote any personally responsible exploration and that we haven't even touched on microdosing and things like that if you want to really quick... Because the huge turn off for me was always, who's got the time? I can't relinquish control for 12 hours. Not happening. Talk about functional neuroticism, right? I was like, "Who has the time? I don't have that kind of..." What is microdosing? Are you familiar with it? And how does it differentiate from what we've been talking about so far?

[00:46:39] Alexander Beiner

So microdosing is the use of really small amounts of a psychedelic, like psilocybin or LSD people often microdose with, in order to sort of... People use it for a whole bunch of different reasons. Enhance creativity. Some people use it for chronic pain. There's a chronic pain protocol, et cetera. And there's a way of approaching it. People can check out the work of James Fadiman, who is the original microdosing... Or there's a place called the Microdosing Institute, which if you google that, they're based in the Netherlands and they have a lot of resources.

I personally am not into microdosing. Part of that's personality, because I think if you're going to do it, get the full, rich experience that really takes you deep into yourself, because that's where the real transformation happens. So microdosing is, in my view, not particularly transformative, although I would imagine there's people who disagree with me out there, and everyone has a unique experience.

Meagen Gibson

I'll forward those emails to you

Alexander Beiner

Yes, I'm sure there's quite a few. The other thing is that... There's one study by Imperial College that did a really clever, self blinding study. So they wrote that they got people to volunteer who do microdose. And then the people blinded themselves by putting through, putting the microdose in envelopes. And some were placebo. And they mix them all together, and then they send the researchers the numbers of the envelopes.

The researchers know what they have, but they don't know. It's really smart. And they found that there was no difference between microdosing and placebo in their study. So more studies are needed, but that's just something to think about. Always gets people really up in arms who are into microdosing, which I get.

Meagen Gibson

Placebo effect is real.

Alexander Beiner

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

It's a real thing that actually does have an impact. It works, it's effective.

Alexander Beiner

And then the final thing is just that there's a lot of different ideas about what the micro is. How micro is the microdose. What does that mean? And so different people have different ideas. Some

people used to say, "No, it should be sub-perceptual", which I thought was "Because it only works if you don't know it's working". It doesn't make sense to me.

[00:48:54]

But then most people I've spoken to would be like, "No, there is a light perception of the experience" So I know people swear by it. I know people get a lot out of it. So I think there is absolutely value to it. It's just not my... As a philosophically minded person, I'm much more interested in, let's go deep and see what's really happening.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm going to completely throw you a curveball that you may or may not have an answer to. So feel free to be like, "I don't know. Let me check and I'll get back to you." But what do you know about any experiential differences in metabolism or experience between men and women? Because there's been so little research until very recently about the ways that pharmaceutical drugs are metabolized by female and male bodies, and they are different in a lot of ways. So I didn't know if there's any research that has gone into that that you're aware of.

Alexander Beiner

That's a really interesting question. As far as I know, I don't think there's a standalone study that's looked at that. Now, there might be, in some of the studies. They might have taken that into account, but I've read a lot of psychedelic research papers and I've never really seen that. That doesn't mean it's not out there. So what I can say is that the dosing with psychedelics doesn't work the way you might expect it to work.

I've seen a big six-foot-five, burly guy take a small amount and that for him is a huge dose, and then a much smaller woman take a much bigger amount, and that's her good dose. Our biochemistry is even within gender, or within sex, really different from person to person.

There's really interesting stuff going on with psychedelics about the strength of the experience you have also being really determined by how you're doing, what you've eaten, how much preparation you've done, what headspace you're in, within a range it seems. Sure, if you give a huge amount to anyone, they're going to have a big experience. But there is a real variation in that spectrum.

So personally, when we talk about people, about dosing with our participants on retreat, I haven't really seen a significant difference between people's dosings. We wouldn't think a woman's going to have less or more and a man's going to have less and more. It's entirely based on what they've expressed as they're looking for and our judgment about their readiness and comfort with the level of intensity. And so there's a lot of thought that goes into it, but body is one of the... Actually we never talk about it because I think we know you just can't judge based on that.

[00:51:52] Meagen Gibson

Fascinating. I'm glad I asked because I didn't know. I was like, "Does it matter?" It's interesting that size doesn't seem to become a factor and really that people's kind of present state is more of the factor, which makes sense when you think about it.

I want to remind everybody that Alex is my co-host and really actually the main host for our upcoming Psychedelic Super Conference, which is very exciting. We're going to explore all of this. Alex is going to be doing a bunch of the interviews, all the people that he's built in his network and run into in his journalistic endeavors of psychedelics, and experiential, and hosting and all of those things. So he is the better host in this one.

Alexander Beiner

I'm not sure about that, but I am looking forward to it...

Meagen Gibson

If you want experience because I have none... But this has all been extremely exciting to me and I'm very interested in it. So that's super exciting. So I wanted to make sure and update everybody on that and also say that the world of psychedelics is changing rapidly. And so whenever you find this interview, just do your own research, do your own due diligence because I'm sure you would say the same thing, that the field is changing moment to moment, right?

Alexander Beiner

Absolutely. And if we're talking about science, we should always be looking at provisional things. Right now we think this, but we don't know yet. So absolutely it is changing. More and more studies are happening all the time. There's lots of interesting... I mean right now there's studies also on chronic pain and anorexia and anxiety, depression, gambling addiction is about to start. So there's so much more that we're going to discover in the field. And there might be a microdosing study that comes out tomorrow that says, no, this stuff is amazing. So yeah, we just don't know.

Meagen Gibson

You'll have to call me and be like, "All right, let's hop back on for a five minute post interview recap."

Alexander Beiner

Wear the same clothes.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, we'll do it. Alexander, how can people find out more about you and your work?

Alexander Beiner

So easiest way is on my website, AlexanderBeiner.com, and then my book *The Bigger Picture* is available in Amazon, Barnes & Noble, elsewhere where books are. And then I also write on

[Substack](#), which you can find on my website. So I write pretty regularly on, not just psychedelics, in fact, mainly on kind of looking at culture and what's going on in the world right now from lots of different lenses.

[00:54:26.] Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thank you so much for being with me, and I look forward to working with you on The Psychedelics Conference

Alexander Beiner

Likewise, thanks. And yeah, very much looking forward to that.