

THE IT'S OKAY PSYCHEDELIC HARM REDUCTION SERIES

Volume 1

# Psychedelic Crisis 101

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A Guide to Supporting Others in  
a Psychedelic Emergency

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*DISCLAIMER: The information in this booklet is not meant to encourage or discourage the use of psychedelics. The basis of this writing is that regardless of legal status, individuals may choose to ingest an illegal substance. The intention of the writer is to reduce potential risks that can come from the ingestion of a psychedelic substance. The ideas and opinions provided in this booklet are that of the author alone and do not represent those of other organizations and people cited.*

*“The capacity to be there for another person, to remain unperturbed no matter what form the process takes, to trust the intrinsic wisdom of the healing forces of the organism, and to support- without judgement and even without intellectual understanding- whatever is happening is the key to effective holotropic work.”*

*–The Stormy Search for the Self, Grof*

Quick Definitions:

Trip Sitter = Psychedelic Caregiver

Voyager = Individual under the influence of a psychedelic

### **Introduction**

The following information is meant to be an educational resource for anyone interested in the philosophy and skills necessary for providing support to someone experiencing a psychedelic crisis. This document is meant to share an understanding of what is happening for an individual under the influence of a psychedelic and to share information on protocol for working with these experiences. The information is compiled from a collection of manuals and books on the subject, as well as personal experiences and observations from years of working as a psychedelic crisis care provider. In this document, we will discuss what a psychedelic crisis is, and the philosophies and methods for supporting someone in it. The reason this manual focuses on describing philosophies, ideas, concepts, and caregiver qualities, is because every person and emerging process is unique. For a sitter to be effective, there are key concepts that must be understood which guide the sitter’s engagement with the process.

## **IMPORTANT: MEDICAL CONSIDERATION**

**The ideas and practices discussed here are only applicable in situations where the individual undergoing a crisis is not in any physiological danger (injury, seizures, vomiting, pale skin, dehydration, etc.), nor a danger to self or others (violence). Get medical attention immediately if there is any doubt of an individual's physical safety.**

### **What is a Psychedelic Crisis?**

Classified as non-specific amplifiers, psychedelics can produce a variety of mind-altering experiences such as sensory enhancements, euphoria, deep feelings of connection to friends/family/community/nature, new insights into one's life and relationships, intense feelings of fear and confusion, and many more possible effects. Given the wide range of experiences that these substances can produce, some explorers unexpectedly find themselves in situations they were not prepared to handle, such as reliving traumatic memories, experiencing dramatic changes in one's identity, extreme states of fear, oversensitivity to external stimuli, an array of archetypal religious experiences, etc. In researching ways to understand these experiences, we will examine the observations made by Stanislav Grof M.D., one of the leading researchers of non-ordinary states of consciousness and LSD psychotherapy. Before LSD was made illegal, he conducted over 4000 LSD sessions in order to explore the therapeutic healing potential of this substance in the context of a clinical setting. It seems that many of his observations from these studies are directly observed in unsupervised settings as well, such as music festivals. The main differences are that the clinical setting provides a safe space for going through these difficult experiences and the intentions/expectations of psychologic healing are explicit under these circumstances. Grof's observations show that under the influence of LSD, a process can be catalyzed which

brings material from one's unconscious to the surface. Once this process begins, it is important to allow it to come to resolution. If the process is prematurely interrupted, it may create lasting distortions of reality even after the effects of the drug wear off. In short, psychedelics can produce a variety of experiences, pleasurable or challenging, and to define it as a crisis is dependent on the context in which the challenging aspects arise. Allowing whatever process arises to come to its own resolution is the foundation for creating a supportive and safe experience.

## The Zendo Project's "4 Principles of Psychedelic Harm Reduction"

In this section, I will explain in my own words the meanings behind the 4 Principles of Psychedelic Harm Reduction, crafted by the Zendo Project. It is important to state here that this is my personal interpretation and not that of the Zendo Project specifically. I recommend reading the Zendo Project Manual for the direct definitions described by the organization, as the information there is equally valuable.

As I see it, these principles are meant to orient the individual giving support towards a **perspective** and **method** of interacting. The perspective is that of trusting the process as a healing experience and the method is to move through it by creating safety and allowing. The principles are:

**Create a Safe Space**

**Sitting, Not Guiding**

**Talking Through, Not Down**

**Difficult Is Not the Same as Bad**

**Create a Safe Space**

**-Perspective:** a safe space is reflected in physical and emotional/psychological safety. Giving the voyager a space to fully feel and express whatever is coming up is of high importance in encouraging a healing experience. The voyager should feel safe to have the experience they are having, creating acceptance and reducing resistance to the process.

**-Method:** Physically speaking, it is comfortable and low stimulation; ideally with lots of space for the possibility of movement.

Emotionally and psychologically speaking, the space should be able to support loud expressions and sensitive content. To be a "safe" sitter, the role is to exist as an anchor of grounded, accepting, allowing, and non-judgmental reality. **Always get consent before any touch.**

### **Sitting, Not Guiding**

**-Perspective:** The voyager has their own answers. The agenda of the sitter can hinder the process that is naturally unfolding for the voyager. One is not in control of the experience. Attempts to control it can create distrust and confusion. A sitter that judges the experience as one that needs to change to their own desired experience is ineffective and potentially harmful to the voyager. More often than not, the sitter is unaware of the content of the voyager's journey, which would make it inappropriate to impose one's will onto the process.

Guiding someone in an experience requires 2 main components, which are usually absent in a crisis that arises:

- 1) Extensive training with other psychedelic therapists, guides, and/or shamans.
- 2) Pre-journey rapport, intention, and consent to be guided.

It is inappropriate and harmful to act as a guide under circumstances where those 2 factors are not present.

**-Method:** Allow the process. Trust the process. Don't rush the process. Learn to be with the suffering of others without needing to change them. The caregiver should continually ask oneself what one's own motivations and intentions are in each moment/interaction. Very often, one does not need to "do" anything aside from be attentive, grounded, and quiet. Is it a math problem, or a sunset?

### **Talking Through, Not Down**

**-Perspective:** "The only way out is in." The experience will come down on its own. The sitter's role is not to bring someone down or make them feel "better," but to support them through. Being calm and grounded can have a calming influence on the voyager; however it is not important that the voyager remain calm. They will most likely express a variety of things, from calm to highly ecstatic. Refrain from attempts and goals of getting the voyager to "come

down.” Also, avoid minimizing the voyager’s experience; this may well be the most profound moment of this person’s life.

**-Method:** Remain grounded and be with what is happening. If the energy picks up, allow it, be with it, and stay grounded. We are not trying to “get them talking;” we are not trying to get to any particular place; we are just being with what is; as an anchor; moving through it. It can be helpful to encourage deep, slow breaths but do not force it upon someone experiencing a cathartic release. If conversation is helpful, validate and explore what is happening for the voyager with curiosity and openness. Avoid “chit-chat,” small talk, and minimizing the voyager’s reality. Under the influence of a psychedelic, each moment takes on profound meaning. It is important to acknowledge that.

*“A sitter doesn't distract or "bring down" anyone undergoing a psychedelic experience, nor do they act as therapists or psychologists regardless of credentials or experience.”*

*– Green Dot Ranger Manual pg. 16*

### **Difficult Is Not the Same as Bad**

**-Perspective:** Yes, it is challenging, overwhelming, and potentially changing one’s entire construct of reality and who they are. It is also important to see this as a healing experience and opportunity for inner growth. Usually our most difficult experiences in life lead to our most growth-oriented. See this as a process of sudden transformation and expansion. Holding this perspective is of high importance in supporting someone through it. This idea allows the sitter to trust the experience, no matter how scary or big it may seem.

**-Method:** Recognize the value in this experience, even if one does not understand it yet.



## **Key Elements and Qualities of a Psychedelic Caregiver**

Be Authentic

Be Present

Be Grounded, Calm, and Centered

Trust the Process

Encourage and Support the Expression

**Authenticity** – A key ingredient in acting as an effective psychedelic caregiver is authenticity. Authenticity can be defined as “relating in a natural, sincere, spontaneous, open, and genuine manner” rather than contrived, mechanical, or phony (Direct Social Work Practice, pg. 117). When someone is under the influence of a psychedelic, they may be highly sensitized to the expressions, emotions, reactions, and ego defenses in those around them. It is beneficial to assume that someone under the influence of a psychedelic can “see right through you” in the sense that you can’t pretend or put on a front over what you may actually be feeling or thinking. This is why it is important to practice transparency, honesty, and authenticity during one’s engagement with others in these sensitive states. This is also why so much of this manual is an attempt to create a set of perceptions about a psychedelic crisis, which when understood, can allow someone to authentically trust the process. Dishonesty and hidden intentions can quickly create distrust and paranoia.

**Presence** – This is the moment. This moment is important. Here and Now. This means not focusing on the past or future. This means being with what is happening from moment to moment. What is happening right now? Okay, and how about now? One moment, the voyager might be lying on their back with their eyes closed, and the sitter remains by their side. The next moment, the voyager may shoot up in a burst of energy, and the sitter moves up with them. Presence and connection go hand in hand. That which one is present with is also what they are connecting to. The goal of the sitter is to connect to the voyager from a grounded place. To connect, we are present. An appropriate metaphor can be one of improvisational partner dancing. The sitter is continually reading the moves that the process is taking and engaging with it from a grounded and allowing place. Because each moment changes, it is impossible to create a list of all the ways this shows up. The foundation and structure of this dance is being present from a grounded and allowing place. From that place, each dance is unique.

**Grounded and Centered** – How am I feeling right now? Is my heart beating a little faster? Am I having an emotional reaction to the experience? It is of utmost importance to maintain ground when supporting a voyager who has no ground. To be grounded and centered means to maintain a sense of calmness and relaxedness of body and mind. To be thinking clearly, and moving with ease. To feel firmly rooted, comfortable, and safe in one's body. It also means to uphold a sense of confidence in oneself and in one's engagement with the interaction. The goal here is to be a solid, assuring anchor for the voyager.

**Trust the Process** – In this aspect of an effective psychedelic caregiver, we must understand the concept of the *Inner Healer*. This is the idea that the psyche has its own intrinsic healing intelligence the same way that the physical body heals cuts, broken bones, etc. When conditions allow, healing occurs. A powerful psychedelic experience can bring unconscious material to the surface, such as past traumas, unhealthy patterns of behaviors, harmful personality traits, and more. Once this kind of process emerges, it is important to allow the process to find its own resolution and to avoid premature termination of the process, via drugs that suppress the effects such as antipsychotics and sedatives. Bringing someone out of a process before it comes to completion can have psychologically damaging effects, resulting in unprocessed material showing up in the voyager's life well after the effects of the psychedelic are gone. For this reason, a psychedelic caregiver trusts the process and supports the voyager to go through even the most challenging of moments, knowing that there are profound insights and gifts hidden in our darkest inner caves. The only time it is appropriate to prematurely terminate the experience is if there is a physiological emergency (assessed by a trained medical professional) or the voyager is a danger to self or other.

**Encourage and Support the Expression** – “Yes.” Whatever shows up, say “Yes.” If the voyager starts to yell, “Yes.” If the voyager curls up quietly into their blanket, “Yes.” If the voyager wants to sing or dance or writhe around the floor or exclaim a series of profane ideas, “Yes.” The voyager should feel safe to express whatever arises throughout the journey. To create that safety, we say, “Yes, keep doing what you are doing. You are allowed to do that, you are allowed to feel that, you are allowed to say that.” Allowing the expression supports the process. The only times there should be a “No” is when the physical safety and boundaries of the voyager, sitter, and/or others present are threatened.

## **Deep Listening**

For the purposes of this section, we will categorize two levels of a psychedelic crisis: *immersive* and *externally engaged*. Depending on how strong the emerging process appears, the voyager may or may not be able to connect to conversation. At first, explore whether words are being received by asking simple questions such as: What's your name? Do you know what/how much you took and when? Recognize if the voyager is wanting/needing conversation. It is normal and okay to be silent as well. Many times, the voyager will prompt the conversation. If the voyager is externally engaged, they may begin to describe personal content related to their life and explore deep questions regarding existence and spirituality. In this type of situation, the role of the sitter is to listen deeply and non-judgmentally to the content being explored. Connect with the voyager by letting them know you are listening. Reflect what you are hearing and let the voyager drive the process. Validate and accept emotions that arise, even negative self-thoughts ("you're allowed to hate yourself here" can ironically be a very healing experience). Express curiosity and ask clarifying questions to support the uncovering of understanding. Lastly, it is important to mention once more that the sitter should not think they need to "get them talking." If conversation happens, engage appropriately. If the experience becomes internal, allow it.

### **Helpful Phrases**

"Remember, you took a psychedelic and you will come down in a few hours." (reality check, it won't last forever)

"It is safe to go into it, we are right here with you." (reassurance and encouragement to allow)

"I know it's really intense right now." (validation)

**The Importance of Self Care,**  
**The Caregiver's Physical Basic Needs,**  
**Self-Monitoring, and Support for the Caregiver**

Being present and grounded can only occur when the caregiver's basic needs are met. This means being hydrated, fed, and rested, as well as using the restroom when the need arises. It also includes comfort, such as feeling warm and relaxed in one's body. When any of these physical needs are not met, the caregiver may become impatient, agitated, ungrounded, or distracted by the unmet need, pulling one away from the calm compassionate attention towards the voyager. It is extremely important to continually check in with oneself during a trip sit and to have a way to get these needs met. In ideal settings, there will be more than one caregiver present so if one needs to take a break, use a restroom, etc., then there is back-up to do so. In other well-crafted support systems, there is a designated role meant specifically for supporting the caregivers, so while the caregiver can give their full attention to the voyager, someone else can focus on checking in with the caregiver. This work can be intense and can demand a high level of focus on someone else's journey for hours at a time; and paradoxically it requires one to focus on their self. In other words, the only way you can help someone else, is to help yourself.

*"The care givers must attentively monitor their own emotional responses and fatigue, recognizing their personal limitations and asking for help if needed."*

*—The Manual of Psychedelic Support, Pg 38*

*"I can do nothing for you but work on myself...you can do nothing for me but work on yourself!"*

*—Be Here Now, Ram Dass*

## **Conclusion**

In understanding the healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness induced by a psychedelic substance, we are able to shift our perspective towards one that supports the healing process. The information in this booklet is a consolidation of research and observations made in and out of clinical settings from professionals and personal experience. It is meant to create a foundation of understandings and practices to reduce the harm that can occur from psychedelics. As psychedelics continue to gain popularity and attention by the masses, it is important to address the risks and encourage safety in the already widespread usage of these powerful tools of self-exploration.

## **Bibliography/Suggested Reading**

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*The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide: Safe, Therapeutic, and Sacred Journeys.* James Fadiman Ph.D.

*The Zendo Project Training Manual – [zendoproject.org](http://zendoproject.org)*

*The Manual of Psychedelic Support*

*Green Dot Ranger Manual 2010*

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