

TOWARDS BETTER AYAHUASCA PRACTICES

A GUIDE FOR ORGANIZERS
AND PARTICIPANTS



ICEERS

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This document is a compilation of better practices for the use of ayahuasca in non-Amazonian contexts. It covers individual, collective and legal responsibilities.

Ayahuasca is a decoction of different plants with a long history of use in the Amazon, where very old records of its use by native peoples exist. In the last few decades the use of this preparation has been expanding beyond its original context, now reaching many countries outside of the Amazon. One of the consequences of this expansion has been the appearance of new forms of use, which in turn have brought new therapeutic potentials as well as new risks.

It is evident that native communities of the Amazon and other peoples with a long history of ayahuasca use do not need a guide like this. Ayahuasca is part of their cultural and spiritual systems, which include safe ways of working with the effects of the preparation, as well as methods for integrating them into the everyday life of the community. On the contrary, this document is aimed at people who organize or participate in ayahuasca sessions outside of Amazonian contexts.

The objective of this guide is to present a series of **minimum safety standards** to support ayahuasca sessions in non-Amazonian contexts, as well as to inform potential participants of ayahuasca sessions, so that they can better assess the safety and responsibility of the sessions in which they are going to participate, and thus make informed choices.

This document is in constant evolution and is open to contributions. Write to aya@iceers.org to suggest improvements or to be kept up to date of future versions.



FOR PARTICIPANTS

Individual Responsibility

TAKING AYAHUASCA IS NOT RECOMMENDED IF...

- ◇ You do not know what ayahuasca is, its effects and contraindications.
- ◇ You do it because other people are pressuring you to do it. One of the main contraindications with ayahuasca is the lack of desire to take it.
- ◇ You do not trust the person who is going to give you ayahuasca.
- ◇ You are taking antidepressants.
- ◇ You have a personal or family history of certain serious mental problems (see below in “safety and exclusion criteria”)
- ◇ You are pregnant or you think you might be.
- ◇ You are not a person in good physical health (Short version: if your health would prevent you from riding a roller coaster, you should probably not take ayahuasca Long version: It’s a little more complicated, see below).



Here you will find information about the potential risks and benefits of ayahuasca, as well as basic safety information for ayahuasca sessions, so that you can make more informed decisions¹.

About Ayahuasca

Ayahuasca is a decoction of different plants of Amazonian origin. For centuries, various peoples of the Amazon have used this drink as part of their traditional medicine, as well as in religious rituals. In recent years its use is expanding, globalizing and reaching people in other countries that approach it as a tool for personal, spiritual or therapeutic development. In many countries there has been ayahuasca presence for more than two decades. This presence has many forms, from indigenous shamans, Amazonian vegetalistas and Brazilian ayahuasca religions, to neo-shamanic and therapeutic circles. Although there is a lot of variety between them, what they all have in common is the fact that there is a person guiding the sessions. That is to say, there is always a person who is responsible for the session who serves the ayahuasca and who accompanies and assists the participants.

1 Visit this link iceers.org/ayasafe10 for further info.

Effects

In the short term, the effects of ayahuasca usually start between 15 and 60 minutes after ingestion, and last between 2 and 5 hours. Ayahuasca induces a modified state of consciousness where it is common to have visions and changes in the way of thinking and perceiving reality. Physically, the intake can cause vomiting and diarrhea, which is often interpreted as a form of emotional and energetic cleansing.

Levels of the experience

Biological Level

Ayahuasca, acting on the brain, produces biological effects that manifest as transient modifications, the release of certain hormones, modulation of the immune system, and an increase in blood pressure (without reaching pathological parameters.) Keep in mind that these physiological modifications do not affect everyone in the same way, for example people with previous conditions might be more affected. For this reason, although ayahuasca is physiologically very safe for healthy people, those with pathologies should be extra careful, especially if they take other medications. (see section of contraindications below).

Psychological Level

Effects include frequent emergence of memories and images from the past and other psychological materials, either conscious or unconscious, which are experienced with greater emotional intensity than normal. Many consider ayahuasca as a kind of mirror of one's interior, where one can see the internal conflicts, fears and difficult emotions, but also the beautiful and good parts of one's life.

Spiritual or transpersonal level

Spiritual or transpersonal level: The effects can sometimes include experiences of access or contact with realities that go beyond one's ordinary experience, and are ascribed to mythological, religious or spiritual dimensions, surpassing what one commonly feels or experiences.

Ontological

The combination of the afore-mentioned effects can lead the person to have changes in their conception of themselves and reality. In the medium and long term the effect that ayahuasca has on the life of each individual is unpredictable and varies from group to group and person to person, but it can be affirmed that it can sometimes prompt very deep changes in the life of individuals; this is something that people interested in taking ayahuasca should keep in mind.

Benefits

Some scholars believe that ayahuasca acts as an *adaptogen*, helping people find a more comfortable relationship with themselves and their surroundings. Although there is still a lack of broad scientific studies, there are many accounts of people who after an extended process with ayahuasca claim to have received clear benefits, both personal and in their immediate environment. Depending on the situation of each person, their previous history and the social context, the effects may vary, but there are reports of therapeutic results for people with a range of problems ranging from depression, *burn-out*, grief, compulsive use of drugs, guilt, emotional pain, childhood trauma and acceptance of death, to more common issues, such as life purpose, professional problems, relationship problems, etc. The spectrum is broad, however, what seems established is that, although ayahuasca can help, in general it is not enough *just to take ayahuasca*. In order to produce a therapeutic benefit that is sustained over time, a broader therapeutic endeavor is necessary before and after the ayahuasca.

Risks

During the session, the acute effects of ayahuasca may involve certain dangers, especially if the person is not being attended to well. For example, in higher doses, it can cause dizziness and, in rare cases, fainting. With proper care, these episodes can be prevented or resolved, but without proper attention they impose* added risks, such as falls, bruises, or choking on one's own vomit, etc. The key here is the **quality of the attention** and the **security measures taken by the organizers**.

There are also some additional situations that occur very infrequently. It is possible that after taking ayahuasca the effects last longer than the usual 4-6 hours. There also have been very rare cases where people have had psychotic breaks, which required medication or even continued treatment. In some of these cases there was a preexisting psychiatric condition, or a family history of psychological problems, but in other cases they were people with no known history of these problems.

In general, the keys to reduce the risks related to the use of ayahuasca are:

- ◇ **A rigorous pre-evaluation by the organizers, to assess the possibility of the appearance of the aforementioned pathologies**
- ◇ **Adequate previous psychological preparation of the participants**
- ◇ **A controlled context of the intake**
- ◇ **Adequate integration of the experience**

Additionally, there are a series of more subtle risks, which can appear after the session, perhaps long after the session, that have to do with dangerous interpretations of the material that has emerged during the session. For example, people may feel that ayahuasca “told them” to leave their job or their partner, that they have suffered abuse, or that they are or should be shamans. Sometimes these messages are not literal truths, but expressions of the unconscious dimension of the person. Before deciding what they really mean, it is convenient to act with prudence, not to jump to conclusions, and explore the interpretation along with people who have experience assisting with this type of process. Although there are not many specialized professionals in this field, ICEERS offers a free support service² that can serve as a starting point.

Ayahuasca is not a panacea or a magic cure. It is not infallible, nor a shortcut in the often difficult process of personal growth. It is more useful to understand it as a flashlight, which helps to illuminate parts of people’s lives that are unclear or unconscious.

2 at iceers.org/ayasafe11



Finally, there are a number of risks widely recognized by Amazonian cultures and traditions that may be difficult for people of other cultures to understand. According to these traditions, when taking ayahuasca participants are exposed to energies that can be positive or negative. How to deal with these situations in an effective way is considered to be a very important part of the training of the people guiding the session. Although these perspectives are infrequent in the global north, those interested in taking ayahuasca should know that they are common and important for people who utilize ayahuasca within their traditional cultural context.

When not to take ayahuasca: Security and exclusion criteria

Physical contraindications

Ayahuasca is not recommended in the following cases: people with severe cardiovascular problems (as it slightly increases cardiovascular parameters); glaucoma; retinal detachment; severe hypertension; fractures; recent surgeries; acute infectious diseases; tuberculosis; epilepsy;;convulsions; cerebrovascular accidents. Also, those with serious liver, gallbladder, kidney or pancreas diseases, certain cases of gastroduodenal ulcer or gastritis, digestive hemorrhage. Those who have difficulty vomiting should also avoid ingesting ayahuasca.

Ayahuasca is not recommended for pregnant or lactating women.

Psychological contraindications

Ayahuasca is not indicated for people suffering from panic attacks, serious psychiatric disorders such as bipolar, schizophrenia, borderline personality, etc. If a person has a history of severe depression, suicide attempts or self-harm, it is essential that the work with ayahuasca is accompanied by adequate psychological supervision.

Pharmacological contraindications

The use of ayahuasca is contraindicated with drugs or substances inhibiting monoamine oxidase (MAOI), and any drug or medication with an effect on the serotonin system. Ayahuasca is also contraindicated with many antidepressants and psychotropic drugs.

Incompatible psychoactive substances

Substances such as cocaine, amphetamines or MDMA may interact negatively with ayahuasca, so their combination is not recommended, as the effects can result in hypertensive crises. Likewise, the combination of ayahuasca with bufotenin and/or 5-MeO-DMT (present in other substances of natural origin such as *Bufo alvarius*, vilca or yopo) is also contraindicated.

Ayahuasca is not and should not be used as a substitute for psychotherapy or medical care.

Finally, you should consult a specialist if you have any type of illness or use daily medication (including herbal medicine) and report this beforehand to the person guiding the ayahuasca experience.

If you are interested in taking Ayahuasca

The decision to participate in a session must always be made independently; the influence of others should never be a factor. The decision must be based on a clear knowledge of potential effects, risks, benefits and contraindications in relation to one's medical history, mental health and general mood. Ayahuasca is sometimes presented as a panacea. However, it is only a tool that may act as a catalyst for therapeutic processes when used appropriately, generating greater awareness. In the case of inappropriate use, it can worsen certain problems or generate new ones.

How to choose a center or guide

It is important to find out how the work/ceremony/session will be performed, both by researching online and by interviewing the responsible person in advance.

Some signs to look for:

- ◇ Detailed and objective information on ayahuasca is offered.
- ◇ Participants go through a preliminary interview and fill a health questionnaire.
- ◇ People meeting the center's exclusion criteria are not allowed to drink.
- ◇ The guide has many years of experience.
- ◇ You feel that the guide is trustworthy.
- ◇ The origin and components of the ayahuasca being served are clearly communicated. If an analogue of ayahuasca (*anahuasca*) is being used this is clearly stated.
- ◇ The guide works with small groups or with enough assistants to attend all participants.
- ◇ At the end of the session, the participants are allowed to stay at the location and rest/sleep until the next day.
- ◇ The organizers adhere to a code of ethics³.
- ◇ Integration and follow-up care are offered after the session.

Some things to avoid:

- ◇ Guides that present themselves as gurus or saviors.
- ◇ Guides that promise panaceas, miracle cures, quick solutions, or give guarantees about the results that will be obtained. No one that promises any results beforehand is being honest.

3 For example, that of the Platform for the defense of Ayahuasca, iceers.org/ayasafe13



- ◇ Operations where the pursuit of profit is an obvious priority.
- ◇ Guides that show insensitivity to or disinterest in your personal reasons for wanting to participate.
- ◇ Guides that engage in approaches with sexual connotations.

Before ayahuasca - preparation

Once a suitable guide has been chosen, participants can prepare for the session a couple of days beforehand by eating light, healthy meals and maintaining solid physical condition to facilitate a more fluid and perhaps safer ayahuasca experience.

It is usually advised that the last meal should take place about 6 hours before ingesting ayahuasca. Keep your body hydrated and arrive well rested to the session.

Avoid the consumption of alcohol, stimulants, opiates and other drugs in the weeks before ayahuasca.

It is also very important to reduce expectations about the session (unrealistic expectations are frequent) while establishing a definite intention (what you would like to get out of the session).

During ayahuasca - basic recommendations

First timers should start with a low dose, so that they gradually become familiar with the effects of ayahuasca.

Ayahuasca is a powerful plant; use it with respect. Even if you think it is not doing anything, trying to stand up is often enough to realize the potency of the effects.

Participants should not leave the space of the session without notifying the guide.

Do not hesitate to ask the guide for help when you feel you need it. That is what guides are there for, it's part of their job and training to be there to assist you.

Some tips for working through difficult moments; breathe slowly and deeply from the diaphragm (vagus breathing), concentrate on the music, let go, and trust in the process, the ayahuasca and the guide(s).

At the end of the session it is advisable to remain in the space for a few hours and to rest properly before driving or reentering the outside world.

Integration and Follow-up

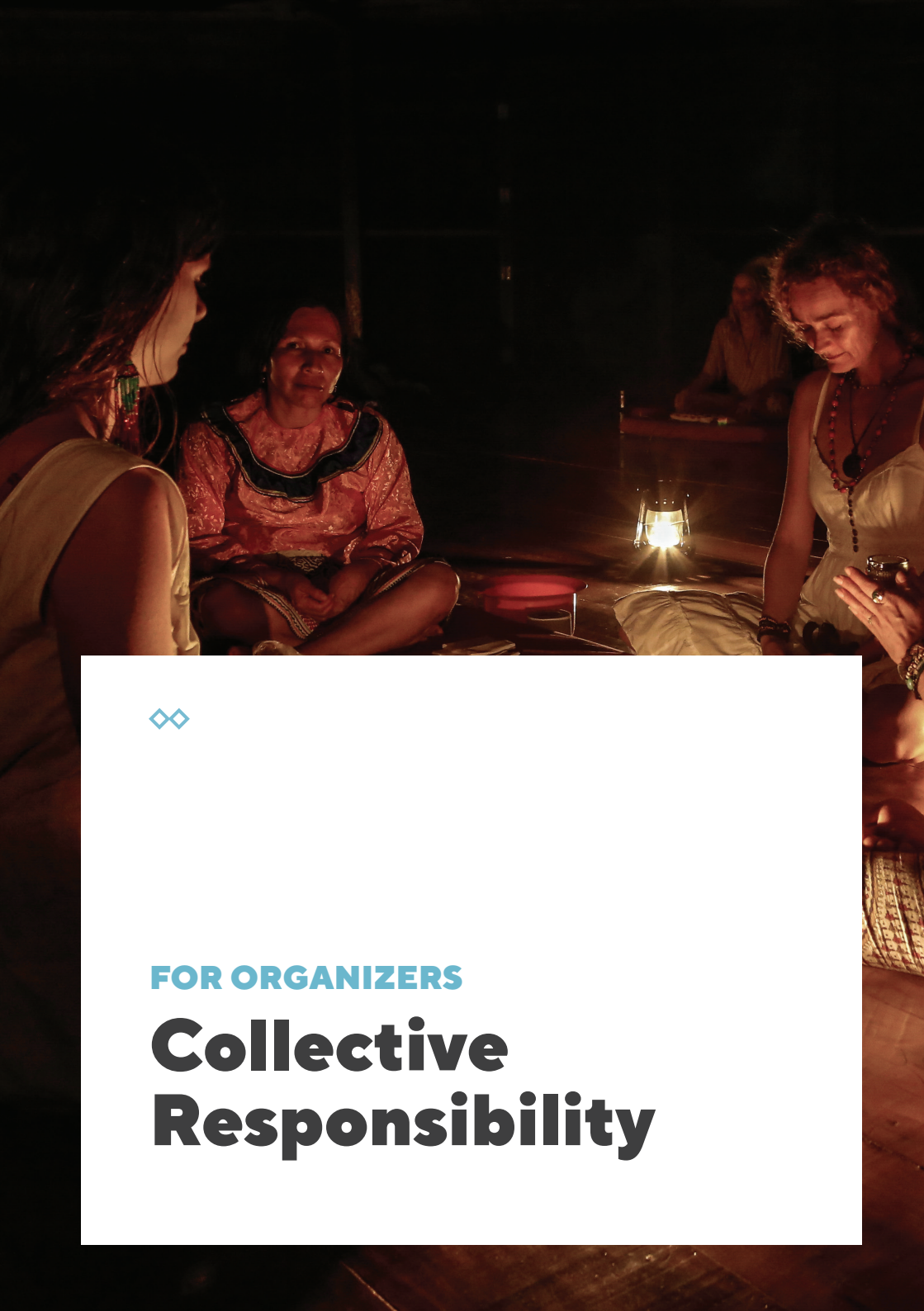
Often, after a session of ayahuasca, the person goes home with new perspectives on their life and a desire to change things, adjust behaviors, inject new energy into certain relationships, etc. Without proper follow-up and integration, these revelations and insights can disappear in a short time. Some activities can help minimize this, for example writing down what emerged during your experience in order to internalize and anchor the contents. It can also help to talk about it with a person who has experience in this arena.

If working with ayahuasca is leading you to consider major life changes or start working on serious personal issues, it is best to do so with the support of a therapist or a person trained to help you during this phase. Often the revelations of ayahuasca cannot be taken literally and require a process of decoding, which is much more fruitful with a properly trained person.



Legal Status

In Spain, while in principle the mere fact of attending ayahuasca sessions does not involve any legal risk for participants, it can entail legal risks for the organizers. One of the plants that comprises ayahuasca contains DMT (N, N-dimethyltryptamine) a controlled substance both internationally and nationally. However, as the INCB (the United Nations agency in charge of monitoring compliance with international drug treaties) along with certain local cases have already established, neither ayahuasca nor any other preparation made with plants that contain DMT is subject to international control. Nevertheless, each individual country may make ayahuasca illegal within its jurisdiction, as has occurred in France.



FOR ORGANIZERS

Collective Responsibility



The following guidelines are based on a basic premise of ayahuasca circles: Whenever one offers a psychoactive substance to a third party, with or without exchange of money, one assumes a certain responsibility for their welfare.

Before offering ayahuasca to third parties

The person or team in charge of the session should have cultivated an adequate theoretical and practical base that includes:

- ◇ Being clear about the purpose of the action and ethical reflection on what methods will be used to best achieve this objective.
- ◇ Extensive personal experience with the processes ayahuasca generates in people.
- ◇ Knowledge of the legal implications related to ayahuasca.
- ◇ Knowledge of the pharmacology of ayahuasca in general⁴ as well as about the ayahuasca which will be served.
- ◇ Knowledge of the risks and contraindications of ayahuasca⁵.
- ◇ Knowledge of first aid techniques.
- ◇ Knowledge of non-ordinary states of consciousness and different therapeutic approaches.
- ◇ Proper preparations in case of adverse effects and emergency situations.
- ◇ A team of collaborators who have been trained to give support during the session.
- ◇ Knowledge and respect of the boundaries associated with the therapist-patient relationship.
- ◇ Protocols in place for prevention and reaction to dynamics associated with sexual violence.

4 See iceers.org/ayasafe14

5 See iceers.org/ayasafe10



Selection and preparation of participants

User Guide: Well in advance of the session send all participants a document with information about ayahuasca so that they are duly informed and can prepare adequately. The user guide should include information on:

- ◆ The properties of ayahuasca, its composition, its effects and potential risks.
- ◆ The implications of taking ayahuasca.
- ◆ The restrictions before and after the session.
- ◆ The responsibilities of the staff and the participants.
- ◆ The procedure and the functioning of the session.
- ◆ An overview of the process in its entirety.

Create a profile for each participant based on established safety criteria, which includes:

1. A General Health Questionnaire⁶.
2. An individual interview with each of the participants:
 - ◆ For first timers: Assess their personal history, current status, and motivation for using ayahuasca.
 - ◆ For returning participants: Consult their general state and significant changes since the last session.
3. Present the informed consent document and clearly explain its function⁷.

⁶ See example in iceers.org/ayasafe15

⁷ See example on iceers.org/ayasafe16

Based on the information collected from the forms and interview, decide whether it is appropriate or not to accept each participant. The following should also be considered:

- ◇ Only accept people who understand the personal process that their participation implies.
- ◇ Only accept those people whose health questionnaires do not present contraindications.
- ◇ In some cases additional therapeutic work may be necessary before the session. If so, the person should be referred to an appropriate professional.
- ◇ Only accept people whose personal process will not require more assistance (temporary or resource-wise) than the format of the session allows. (People with certain personality disorders, severe depression or other ailments with which ayahuasca is not specifically contraindicated may still require more resources than can be guaranteed)
- ◇ If you cannot accept a participant, explain the reasons why the person was excluded from the session and try to offer alternative possibilities for them.
- ◇ Do not accept a person if there is any doubt about their suitability to participate in the session.

Other suggestions for the previous phase:

- ◇ **Intentionality:** The provider should encourage the participant to prepare adequately for the session and offer sufficient guidelines⁸.
- ◇ **Connection:** It is recommended that a personal bond based on support and trust is established between the person offering the session and the participant.

8 See iceers.org/ayasafe10

Before the Session

The person or team in charge of the session should be sure to:

1. Know the ingredients and potency of the ayahuasca. A preparation that has not been analyzed or tested in advance by the guides should never be administered to others.
2. Have enough assistants/collaborators to attend to all the people who participate. For safety reasons, groups should not be managed by a solo guide.
3. Choose a safe environment, isolated from external interference but accessible, welcoming and sufficiently spacious. Ensure the availability of potable water, toilets, adequate lodging and necessary amenities.
4. Ensure the safety and physical wellbeing of participants, preparing the environment to suit their needs (for example, removing dangerous objects, making the place cozy/ comfortable, providing mattresses, blankets, tissues, buckets, etc.)
5. Have a protocol of action in place in case of emergency that is known by all members of the team.



During the Session

The person or team in charge of the session should make sure to:

1. Adjust the dose of the preparation according to the age, sex, experience, health status and needs of the participants. It is better to serve too little than give an excessive dose.
2. Guarantee the **physical safety** of participants. This includes adapting the environment to ensure the physical integrity of the participants (make enough space for each participant, prevent people from wandering around in an unsafe way, from driving vehicles, etc.)
3. Guarantee the **emotional security** of the participants. This includes providing all necessary emotional support, ensuring there are no harmful disturbances and interactions with other people (staff and participants) and ensuring the welfare of the participants.
4. Refrain from any sexual contact or seductive behavior with participants before, during or after the session. Have protocols in place to prevent and act on these situations. Ensure the emotional safety of the participants and clearly define the relationships between guides and participants in an ethical and professional manner.
5. Never, under any circumstances, leave participants alone or without supervision.
6. Protect the integrity, privacy and security of the people in the group as well as the interactions they have.
7. No participant should leave the space of the session before it has concluded.
8. Before closing the session, check each participant individually to ensure that they are in an adequate state.



9. Know how to delegate or request help in case of emergency or difficulty in handling a situation.
10. The safety of the participants must come first. Never deny help to any participant, even at the risk of incurring your own legal problems.

Other suggestions to maximize benefits during the session:

- ◇ **Physical position:** Encourage the participants to remain in a sitting position instead of lying down during the session. This ensures that in case of fainting, there is no danger of suffocation from vomiting. If they cannot sustain a sitting position, it is recommended that they lie on one side rather than the back.
- ◇ **In case of problems:** In the event that a participant experiences difficulties, proceed with simple non-pharmacological techniques to provide support (focused breathing, active listening, presence, etc.). Maintain support until the participant indicates that they are in a stable state and no longer requires support, and you are certain that that is the case.



After the Session

The person or team in charge of the session should:

1. Give the participants **enough time to rest** and recover before leaving the premises and make sure they have the space to do so. It is recommended that participants return to their beds or remain in the ceremonial space until the next day.
2. Ensure that in the hours after the session there is someone available to provide support to anyone who may need it.
3. Provide an **integration space**, where participants individually or collectively can use different materials (paper, paints, colored pencils to draw, etc.) to begin the process of integrating the experience.
4. Offer participants the possibility to share their experience, doubts or concerns with the rest of the group, or privately with someone from the responsible team.
5. Be aware of intervening during sharing. It helps to have an attitude of active listening. Guides are encouraged to stay within the limits of their knowledge and not bring judgments or psychological interpretations without proper training.
6. Perform a final check on the physical and psychological state of all participants before they leave.
7. Offer the possibility of additional support beyond the session. Provide your contact information, telephone or email address, and offer to maintain communication.
8. If one does not have availability to offer the level of support required for the integration process, offer participants the option of using other qualified professionals.



Other suggestions for integration / follow-up:

- ◆ **Generate Knowledge:** Data can be collected with validated questionnaires to measure the impact of the experience on the life of the participants in the longer term and to monitor the integration process. A questionnaire can be sent once a week and two months later.
- ◆ **Self-care:** It is important to be aware of the role of an assistant and not get carried away if participants want to give one individual the credit for their deep experiences or spiritual guidance. It is essential to give support while knowing that it is the participant who actually leads the process, and is responsible for their own evolution, discoveries and connections. For the correct development of the team in charge of the sessions, an evaluation of the work itself should be carried out through regular supervision with a more experienced individual.



FOR ALL

Legal Responsibility

International legal status

The psychoactive alkaloid in ayahuasca, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), is a controlled substance listed as Schedule I on the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances in 1971. As such, DMT is considered a substance whose use, manufacture and sale are prohibited internationally, except for very limited medical and scientific uses. However, the ayahuasca decoction itself is not under international control, which has been confirmed by the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

Spain: Undefined legal status

Despite the widespread belief to the contrary, the legal status of ayahuasca in Spain is not well defined. Ayahuasca is not specifically prohibited, nor is it authorized or regulated for any purpose, be it religious, therapeutic or shamanic.

The Government Delegation for the National Plan on Drugs included ayahuasca in its report on Emerging Drugs published in 2011, describing it as a ‘substance of abuse of plant origin’. Although this label does not imply criminalization, it demonstrates that ayahuasca has become a part of the Customs Department’s detection system.



What does it mean for my work?

In Spain, personal use of any controlled substance is not a criminal offense in itself, but selling controlled substances to others is. This means that, in the event of the ceremonial use of ayahuasca, the participants would not be committing any crime. However, those who import, receive, advertise, distribute and/or offer ayahuasca to third parties may incur criminal liability if ayahuasca is considered a controlled substance because of its DMT content.

Epicenter of legal incidents worldwide

Spain is the country with the largest concentration of legal incidents related to ayahuasca in recent years. Many of these incidents have led to arrests, and more than twenty have gone to trial. Most of these trials (more than 90%) have ended in acquittals or have been archived. This does not mean that the process did not involve costs for the defendants, both personal and economical. It is precisely because of the ambiguity of the legal status of ayahuasca in Spain that these interventions can end up in lengthy judicial proceedings.



ANNEXES

Resources & Bibliography

OTHER RESOURCES

- ◆ Chacruna's Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse: iceers.org/ayasafe18
- ◆ Aware project: awareproject.org
- ◆ ICEERS Foundation: www.iceers.org
- ◆ Ayahuasca Technical Report: iceers.org/ayasafe14

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