

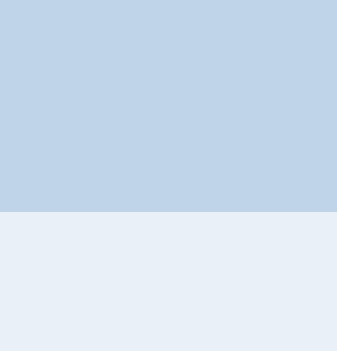


Fact Sheet

The Therapeutic Potential of Ayahuasca

The first studies relating to the therapeutic benefits of ayahuasca began in the 1980s. Since that time, research has shown several potential psycho-therapeutic benefits related to pharmacological effects and to the subjective experience.

What is ayahuasca?



About

- » **Ayahuasca is a decoction of the Amazonian vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*.** The word "ayahuasca" is a Quechua term commonly translated as "the vine of the dead" or "the rope of the dead." Different Amazonian peoples have dozens of different names for the brew and its variations, which are embedded in complex lineages of traditional practices and knowledge.
- » **The brew is made by combining the vine with other Amazonian medicine plants, most commonly *Psychotria viridis* (*haacruna*) or *Diplopterys cabrerana* (*chaliponga* or *chagropanga*).** These admixtured plants are responsible for the dimethyltryptamine (DMT) found in the brew, which is made orally available by the monoamine oxidase-inhibiting (MAOI) action of the beta-Carboline alkaloids.
- » **Amazonian people use ayahuasca as a medicine,** a channel of communication with the natural world, for divination and for strengthening social relations, and more. It is inherent to and inseparable from many Indigenous and traditional cosmologies and central to their cultural identity and political self-determination. In the last few decades, ayahuasca has traveled beyond its historical territories as people from all continents have become interested in its therapeutic and psychospiritual benefits.

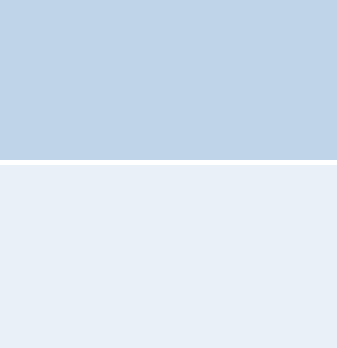
How can ayahuasca be therapeutic or increase wellbeing?



Healing Effects

- » **Ayahuasca can boost personal development,** psychological and emotional wellbeing, social harmony and cohesion, and spiritual or religious experiences.
- » **Promotes "decentering,"**⁴ or the ability to observe thoughts and emotions as transitory events of the mind without being trapped by them.
- » **Promotes Mindfulness and Cognitive Flexibility,**⁵ allowing people to contemplate events, situations and relationships from detached perspectives.
- » **Ayahuasca has shown anti-depressant effects** in patients with major depression, effects that were sustained for 21 days after the administration of a single dose.⁶
- » **Various forms of purging,** such as vomiting, are sought-after effects that promote physical, emotional and energetic cleansing.^{1,2}
- » **Confronting difficult emotional or psychological content** can be transformative and healing.³
- » **Positive outcomes in grief therapy,** persisting at a one-year follow-up including some mechanisms of action previously undescribed in the literature.⁷
- » **Potential neuroprotective⁸ and neurogenerative^{9,10} properties** that might prove useful for the treatment of dementia and a variety of neurodegenerative diseases.

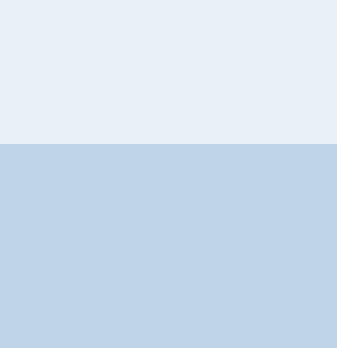
What is "purging" and why is it important?



Purging

- » **Purging, nausea and vomiting** are not considered adverse reactions by session participants, but rather beneficial and desirable effects.¹
- » It is considered an essential part of the **therapeutic process.** For many indigenous people, purging is the most important desired effect: it helps them stay physically, emotionally and energetically clean.²
- » It helps the body get rid of parasites, and also **helps process emotional states** or rid the mind from neurotic thoughts.

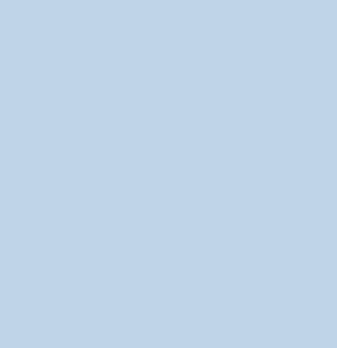
Does ayahuasca improve mental health?



Mental Health

- » **The therapeutic properties** of ayahuasca are likely due to a combination of its psychoactive and pharmacological actions. Ayahuasca activates brain areas related to the memory of personal events (the so-called episodic memory) and the awareness of emotions and internal sensations.¹²
- » **Ayahuasca can boost "decentering,"**⁴ or the ability to observe thoughts and emotions as transitory events of the mind without being trapped by them, increasing mindfulness and cognitive flexibility.⁵
- » Most people who take ayahuasca are perfectly **adapted and integrated** in their social, working, and family environments and engage with ayahuasca for personal and spiritual growth.¹³

What does the research say about depression?



Evidence

- » A recent study reported **anti-depressant effects of ayahuasca in patients with major depression,** effects that were sustained for 21 days after a single dose.⁶
- » **The therapeutic effects were correlated with brain changes** measured with neuroimaging techniques, thus providing an objective demonstration of therapeutic change.¹⁴
- » Clinical research has also shown a **decrease in suicidal ideation**¹⁴
- » **Assessment of cortisol levels after ayahuasca treatment** show cortisol levels similar to normal subjects, which can be a biological marker for the reduction of depression and suicidal ideation.¹⁵

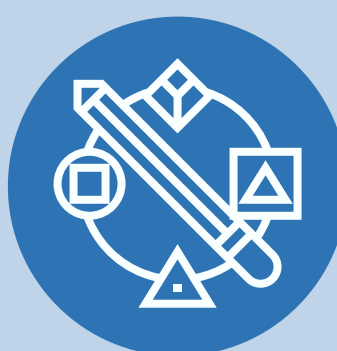
What else might it be helpful for?

- » Ayahuasca is associated with **positive outcomes amongst people grieving** the loss of a loved one, with one recent study documenting persistent effects at one-year follow-up.⁷
- » Ayahuasca is associated with **positive results in patients with eating disorders,** according to exploratory studies.¹⁶
- » Ayahuasca could be used to **treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),** according to several authors.¹⁷
- » Ayahuasca could be useful in the **treatment of borderline personality disorder**¹⁸ and range of "diseases of civilization."¹⁹

Can ayahuasca help with brain health?

- » Ayahuasca has been shown to **improve the symptomatology of some severe physical conditions,** such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS),²⁰ although much more evidence is needed.
- » Harmine, harmaline, and tetrahydroharmine (the three main constituents of *Banisteriopsis caapi*) were **found to stimulate (in vitro) adult neurogenesis,** while harmine showed proliferation of human neural progenitors.²⁰
- » **DMT promotes neurogenesis and neuroprotection** both in cell cultures²² and animals.²³

Can a difficult psychological experience be positive?



Difficult Experiences

- » **Most intense difficult psychological experiences** tend to be positive and therapeutic in the long-term³ and **do not lead to long-term negative consequences,** except in rare cases.
- » **Difficult experiences can help the participant confront shadow content,** painful memories, personality or character flaws, outdated cultural, social or religious ideas, and repressed trauma.
- » **In many Amazonian traditions, difficult experiences are understood to be tests** provided by the plants themselves, who challenge initiates to ensure they are progressing on their learning path.
- » While these can be transformative, it is **essential to work with responsible and qualified facilitators** and providers.

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Resources

- » For access to the referred research citations, and for more detailed information on the topics highlighted in this Fact Sheet, please visit the latest edition of the [Ayahuasca Technical Report](#)
- » For further information about ayahuasca, its history of use, and legal status in various countries, please visit: <https://www.iceers.org/ayahuasca/>

References & Resources



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