

Reflections from the Field

Coaching and psychedelics: a beneficial partnership?

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Abstract

A burgeoning evidence base demonstrates the therapeutic potential of psychedelics. Grounded in a review of existing literature and drawing on assumptions from coaching psychology and positive psychology, this paper argues that psychedelic experiences, beyond their potential to treat disease and disorder, hold promising potential to foster growth, learning, and wellbeing for non-clinical populations, and that coaching can offer effective, safe, and ethical support. Through identifying positive psychological themes in research and highlighting shared motivations to seek coaching and psychedelics, this paper builds the case for psychedelics-assisted coaching, offers a framework for practice, and discusses ethical concerns and future research.

Keywords

psychedelics, coaching, wellbeing, integration, altered states

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Introduction

[T]he potential significance of psychedelics for psychiatry and psychology is comparable to the importance of the microscope for biology and medicine, or the telescope for astronomy.

Dr. Stanislav Grof (2019, p.41; see also Grof, 1975, p.32)

Due to their enormous potential for psychological growth and exploration, well illustrated by Grof's quote above, there has been a renaissance in researching the clinical applications of psychedelic compounds since the early 2000s. Substances such as LSD and psilocybin have since shown remarkable results in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, addiction and social anxiety (Reiff et al., 2020). While the impact of psychedelics on non-clinical populations has received less attention, their use has been linked to improvements in personal development, learning, creativity and well-being (Jungaberle et al., 2018).

Coaching is an umbrella term for practices that facilitate a range of similar outcomes (i.e., help people grow and develop). Traditionally focused on performance and behaviour change, coaching has evolved into a broad range of approaches, many of which carry the potential to complement psychedelic experiences, and vice versa.

Given the fast-rising popularity in the utilisation of both psychedelics and coaching, and considering the groundbreaking evidence from clinical settings, it makes sense to start a conversation into how coaching and psychedelics may work together. This paper, therefore, aims to expand the literature on psychedelics, beyond their clinical applications, to lay the foundation for research into the potential of coaching to help people prepare for, or integrate psychedelic experiences. It discusses the potential, scope and limitations of coaching in the context of psychedelic use, offers several possible application formats, explores ethical concerns, and suggests directions for future research.

Psychedelic experiences may be a powerful amplifier to the coaching process, yet they are not without risks, hence this paper explores if, when and how coaching may effectively and ethically assist clients on their psychedelics-assisted journeys of learning and self-discovery.

Sparked by the recent explosion in media attention (Aday et al., 2018), current expectations are that many coaching clients will not wait for academic evidence before contacting coaches for support in relation to their (intended) use of psychedelics. Therefore, the authors believe it is crucial to start this conversation now, as this will allow professional coaches to consider their position on the issue and either take on clients within an appropriate ethical and professional framework, or be able to refer them to appropriate alternative support systems in the interest of harm reduction.

An introduction to psychedelics

The term psychedelics translates from Greek as “mind-manifesting”. The well-known classical psychedelics include LSD, psilocybin (the psychoactive ingredient in “magic mushrooms”), DMT (the psychoactive ingredient in Ayahuasca), and Mescaline (the psychoactive ingredient in St. Pedro and Peyote) (von Heyden et al., 2018).

Substances like MDMA or ketamine are sometimes also referred to as psychedelics due to their phenomenologically comparable effects, but produce different neuropharmacological processes (Gregorio et al., 2020). Furthermore, a diverse range of other psychedelic compounds and derivatives of the classical psychedelics exist (see e.g., Shulgin & Shulgin, 1995). In the interests of brevity and clarity, this paper will limit its scope to classical psychedelics.

Psychedelics have been used for thousands of years for healing and self-development purposes (Hofmann et al., 1958). Some evidence points to a psychotropic fungus being used as part of the Eleusinian Mysteries, an annual ceremony of ancient Greek’s high society (Bizotto, 2018), while considerable documented evidence exists of long-term ceremonial use of Ayahuasca in South America (McKenna, 1998) and psilocybin in Meso-America (Badham, 1984). The resulting altered states of consciousness likely offered our ancestors different perspectives on their relationship with themselves and their environment (Simoes, 2002) - a goal shared by many coaching approaches.

[1]

The first wave of psychedelic research and consumer consumption in Western cultures occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. This “golden-era” began with Albert Hofmann’s synthesis of LSD-25. His reports enabled further pilot tests to be undertaken, resulting in the first academic paper (Stoll, 1947). This was followed by Busch and Johnson’s report on LSD-25 as an aid in psychotherapy (Busch & Johnson, 1950).

Unfortunately, US legislation in the mid-1960s and the ensuing “War on Drugs” effectively ended all research efforts (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017), until 40 years later a research proposal by Griffiths et al. (2006) initiated a renaissance in researching psychedelics.

The psychopharmacology of psychedelics

Classical psychedelics exert their effects primarily by binding to and activating serotonin receptors in the brain, specifically the 5-HT_{2A} receptor (Vollenweider et al., 2007; Passie et al., 2008). This results in changes in the activity and connectivity of neural networks, leading to altered sensory perception, emotional processing and cognitive functioning.

The specific mechanisms by which psychedelics produce their effects are not fully understood. However, some studies suggest that they enhance neural plasticity, the brain's ability to adapt and change in response to experience (Grieco et al., 2022). Psychedelics may also reduce the activity of the default mode network (DMN), which is a set of brain regions that are active when engaged in self-referential thinking and introspection. According to the REBUS (RELaxed Beliefs Under pSychedelics) hypothesis, a temporal desynchronization of central cortical nodes of the DMN relaxes the precision of high-level beliefs within their predictive function to our ongoing experience (Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019). As a result, belief hierarchies are flattened and top-down inhibitions of higher-level beliefs dissolve, which results in the so-called anarchic brain.

Metaphorically speaking, a high-dose psychedelic experience “shakes the snow globe,” thereby creating a window of opportunity for the formation of new patterns as the “snow slowly resettles” (Pollan, 2019). These “Pivotal Mental States” (Brouwer & Carhart-Harris, 2020) are fertile ground for change and transformation.

The phenomenological effects of psychedelics

Psychedelics are reported to have very positive and pleasant effects ranging from enhanced cognition and emotional well-being to emotional-aesthetic experiences and states of deep joy and connectedness (Studerus et al. 2010).

In some cases, psychedelics can induce so-called “bad trips” – challenging, painful, paranoid or psychosis-like experiences, which are usually temporary (Fiorentini et al., 2021). In instances where such negative experiences have persisted, underlying pre-existing mental health conditions have been found. It has therefore been argued that psychedelics per se do not *cause* lasting psychological distress, but may trigger dormant conditions (Schlag et al., 2022). In combination with appropriate integration work, challenging experiences are often transformed into positive results (Gashi, Sandberg & Pederson, 2021). Hence, the term “bad trip” tends not to be used in therapeutic settings.

Psychedelics have been called non-specific amplifiers of current experience, and evidence suggests that the contents of a psychedelic experience remain highly dependent on contextual factors such as set and setting (Zinberg 1984; Carhart-Harris, 2018), referring to the mindset of the user on the day of the experience and the environment within which the experience takes place, respectively.

Use domains of psychedelics

Three domains may be broadly categorised:

- **Recreational use** to produce or enhance entertainment or enjoyment.
- **Clinical use** in research or clinical settings to treat mental health conditions.

- **Working with “healthy normals”** (Gandy, 2019) - use by people without a diagnosed mental health condition, or other significant disease, disorder or distress, in an effort to produce personal growth, learning or development.

While the first two domains have received most attention to date, there is increasing interest in the third. This approach is often referred to as “the betterment of well people”, a term coined by Bob Jesse from the Johns Hopkins Centre for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research (Pollan, 2018).

The potential of psychedelics for the betterment of well people

The Global Drug Survey (Winstock et al., 2021) reports the most common reason for consuming psychedelics to be for the enhancement of well-being. It is therefore surprising that “little attention has been given to the potential of psychedelics to improve healthy peoples' lives” (Elsey, 2017), especially as findings listed by Jungaberle et al. (2018), point to astonishing effects such as sustained increases in self-ratings of well-being, life-satisfaction and personal meaning up to 14 months later (Griffiths et al., 2008), elevated levels of mindfulness (Soler et al., 2016; Sampedro et al., 2017), and changes in key life values (Bogenschutz & Johnson, 2016).

Psychedelic experiences have been found to reduce depression scores (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018, Gukasyan et al., 2022) in preliminary evidence and reduce anxiety (Vargas et al., 2020), but also to increase the probability to experience mystical-type experiences dependent on various circumstances such as set, setting and preparation to the experience (Gandy, 2022). In addition, they alter personality traits that are known as quite stable over the lifetime such as openness (MacLean et al., 201) and connection with nature (Forstmann, & Sagioglou, 2017).

Griffiths et al. (2008) reported that:

“At the 14-month follow-up, 58% and 67%, respectively, of volunteers rated the psilocybin-occasioned experience as being among the five most personally meaningful and among the five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives; 64% indicated the experience increased well-being or life satisfaction; 58% met criteria for having had a “complete” mystical experience.” (Griffiths et al., 2008, p. 621)

A meta-analysis of 77 controlled clinical and epidemiological studies (Jungaberle et al., 2018) identified benefits across a range of positive psychological themes (see also Appendix A) including:

- increased well-being and life satisfaction,
- cognitive flexibility, creativity, and problem solving,
- heightened emotional processing and prosocial behaviours,
- increased social cognition and empathy,
- life-values and orientations,
- psychospiritual experiences and mindfulness-related capabilities.

Applying a positive psychology lens to psychedelics

Positive psychology emerged as a branch of science in an effort to fill a significant gap in the literature. Seligman (2001) argued that research in psychology was largely focused on treating disease and fixing what is broken, and that the field of psychology was incomplete without studying well-being, strengths, optimal human functioning, and generally what's *right* with people. Here the authors state that the same argument applies to the current state of psychedelic research.

Recently there has been some effort to produce relevant empirical evidence in the field of psychedelic science (e.g. Di Virgilio et al., 2023), and the Roland R. Griffiths Professorship Fund

(2022) has been set up to support “a world class, rigorous, empirical program of research with psychedelic substances to advance understanding of well-being and spirituality in the service of promoting human flourishing for generations to come”. However, evidence remains scarce and the authors' literature review yielded not a single paper related to coaching.

Coaching as the applied arm of positive psychological psychedelic research?

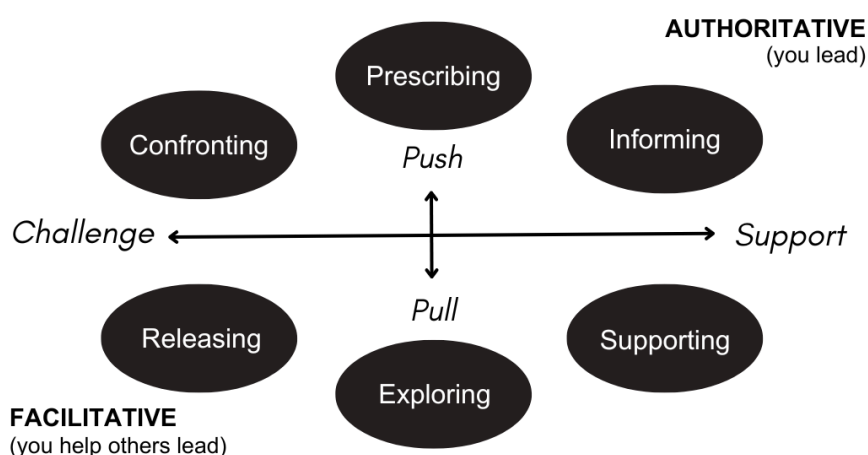
In the context of positive psychology, coaching has been referred to as “the applied arm of positive psychology” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p.5, see also Kauffman & Scoular, 2004), and the two fields have been described as “natural partners” (Zimbardo & Boniwell, 2004). As a result, it is the authors' view that coaching should be considered when considering best practice in applying the emerging research into the potential of psychedelics for the betterment of well people.

The scope of coaching

Coaching is an umbrella term for practices that help people develop and grow. Traditionally focused on performance and behaviour change, it has evolved from predominantly instructional approaches in sports into a practice that offers a relationship in which the coach acts as non-directive thinking partner to help clients navigate their life or career. While this generally happens in a structured way and towards a well-defined outcome or goal (Green & Grant, 2003), coach and client may contract to create space for an open exploratory journey (de Haan & Sills, 2012), while some approaches are not solution-focused or outcome-driven (e.g., Gestalt Coaching (Leary-Joyce, 2014) or Existential Coaching (Jacob, 2019)).

To illustrate the range of what coaching may entail, the Heron model has been adopted into coaching (de Haan & Nilsson, 2017; see Figure 1) and offers a map of intervention styles coaches may utilise.

Figure 1: De Haan & Nilsson's (2017) “Heron Model of counselling and coaching (after Heron, 1975)



Given such a broad scope of interventions, the lines between coaching and other practices such as therapy, counselling or mentoring can be blurry (Popovic & Jinks, 2013) and it has become difficult to tell certain kinds of coaching and therapy apart (e.g., solution focused, person-centred, Gestalt, or existential approaches).

A starting point for drawing distinctions between coaching and counselling/psychotherapy^[2], is offered by Popovic and Jinks (2013) across three levels:

- **Time orientation:** coaches tend to work with the present and desired future of a client, while a counsellor tends to focus on their client's past and present.
- **The state of the client:** coaches tend to work with clients who are resourceful and generally well able to cope with day-to-day challenges, while a counsellor or therapist tends to work with people who feel unable to cope and are in dire need of help.
- **The type of intervention:** counsellors and therapists tend to work at greater psychological depth than coaches.

Coaching can hence cover a broad range of practices, many of which with the potential to offer valuable support for clients seeking personal or professional development via the help of psychedelics.

Coaching and psychedelics: Shared objectives?

In addition to coaching's potential as an applied arm of psychedelic science for the betterment of well people, another way to draw meaningful links between coaching and psychedelics is to explore why people seek psychedelic experiences and identify any overlap with why people seek the services of a coach.

Why do people seek psychedelic experiences?

Individuals may seek psychedelic experiences for a variety of reasons, influenced by perceived benefits, individual trip reports, and increasingly because they have been influenced by the emerging research.

In a series of personal accounts by attendees of psychedelic retreat centre Synthesis, reasons for attending a retreat included: "taking the next step in a personal growth trajectory"; "the desire to live more in love than in anger"; and "getting to the root of my self-limiting beliefs and looking at how my feelings around not being good enough can change" (Synthesis, 2023).

In a web-based questionnaire, 626 participants reported a range of perceived benefits which included help with disorders, addiction and migraines, but also access to the unconscious mind and long-term improvements in well-being (Carhart-Harris & Nutt, 2010).

Psychedelics have the potential to aid (scientific) creativity and insight (Gandy et al., 2022), have been proposed to act as "ideagens" by Roberts (2019, p. 24), and one study participant credited his experience for overcoming specific creative blocks (Reitman, 2008).

The authors' review of relevant studies in the field (see Appendix A, including the aforementioned meta-analysis by Jungaberle et al., 2018), identified a range of benefits across a broad spectrum of human flourishing, as defined by Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2018), and various areas related to wellbeing:

- Healthy human functioning
- Psychological wellbeing
- Life satisfaction
- Personal development
- Autonomy

- Positive emotions
- Engagement

- Relationships/Relatedness
- Meaning & Purpose
- Achievement (through learning, problem solving, decision making, and creative insight)

- Openness
- Connection with nature
- Gratitude
- Optimism
- Mindfulness
- Empathy
- Forgiveness

In the face of the impressive and fast-growing research base, combined with many media publications hailing psychedelics as a miracle drug (Yaden et al., 2022), it is likely that a growing number of non-clinical populations will want to tap into the potential of psychedelics for personal development, insights, overcoming creative blocks, or general wellbeing.

Why do people seek coaching?

The academic literature on people's motivation to enter coaching relationships is surprisingly scarce, with most accounts based on surveys or non-peer reviewed publications. The broad range of coaching approaches and definitions adds additional research obstacles. A thematic analysis of 119 popular coaching definitions, frameworks, and descriptions of the role of the coach from coaching textbooks (see Appendix B), produced the following clusters of themes:

- Self-awareness and personal growth
- Collaborative support relationships
- Performance and goal-setting
- Action and responsibility
- Transcendence and growth
- Wellbeing
- Overcoming challenges
- Dialogue and communication

Correlation between coaching and psychedelics clustering

As per the above analyses, positive psychological outcomes reported by psychedelic research and perceived benefits of seekers of psychedelic experiences seem to have some clear convergences with the scope and desired outcomes of coaching. This does not imply that a partnership is necessarily beneficial, but is enough to encourage a research effort into psychedelics-assisted coaching and coaching-assisted psychedelic journeys.

The authors are aware that their analysis is incomplete and executed at surface level without rigorous scientific standards. Nevertheless, the findings of such a preliminary analysis point to a considerable overlap between why people seek psychedelic experiences and why people come to coaching. This overlap suggests that these two practices could benefit each other.

In practice: how might coaching and psychedelics work together?

A framework^[3] for “coaching practice in the context of psychedelic experiences” (see Appendix C) was developed by the Interest Group Coaching & Psychedelics (IGCP, formerly the Professional Section Coaching & Psychedelics at the MIND Foundation). This group consisted of about a dozen

active core members who met regularly in an effort to provide a discussion space for interested coaches. It consulted a group of several hundred coaches to develop its framework (which informs the following section).

Psychedelic coaching formats

Coaches may support clients to prepare for and/or integrate psychedelic experiences. This is likely to be the most beneficial and safe partnership.

Many coaches also work with clients who are consuming microdoses of psychedelic substances (which operate under the threshold of noticeable perceptual distortions). Some coaches also “sit with” their clients *during* their psychedelic experience. The role of the coach-as-sitter is to keep the client safe, but without applying any coaching or intervention until the effect of the substance has worn out. The latter two practices are more controversial, but increasingly practised by coaches. Research and academic debate on the ethics and safety of working in these ways is therefore crucial.

Preparation

Coaching sessions may take place ahead of a psychedelic experience to help clients prepare for the journey and think about how they want to approach the experience.

Practitioners may share information about the effect of psychedelic substances, offer safeguarding and safety advice, recommend educational resources and discuss possible challenges and relevant coping and support mechanisms. Coaches may provide advice on how to choose a safe retreat centre, and guide the client’s preparation efforts. Facilitative coaches will create a space for their clients to learn, in line with Whitmore’s (1992) definition of coaching.

During preparation, risk of harm can be minimised by offering potential check-ups by a medical professional to avoid any issues caused by pre-existing conditions (see Gründer & Jungaberle, 2021).

A clear agreement on how coach and client will work together (contracting) will create a trusting relationship between the coach and client (Pilecki et al., 2021).

Regardless of the facilitation style, during the preparation stage it is important to:

- Explore why the client is seeking the psychedelic experience and help them formulate clear intentions.
- Support a process of learning around psychedelics and psychedelic development journeys.
- Create space for the client to reflect on what may happen before, during and after the psychedelic experience.
- Discuss how the client will ensure that “set and setting” are conducive to having a productive experience.

Integration

Integration may start as soon as the substance has completely left the client’s system (usually 4-24 hours post ingestion) and should be considered not as a single event of a brief phase, but as part of a longer-term process, noting that many aspects of the psychedelic experience may continue to unfold gradually after the experience (Bathje et al, 2022)). In Pilecki et al.’s (2021) psychedelics-assisted therapy protocol, clients are encouraged to:

- Process their insights and emotions through creative expression (drawing, journaling or physical exercise).

- Reflect on questions and implementing habits in daily life, using questions and suggestions such as those set out by Bourzat and Hunter (2019).

If notes are taken during the client's experience (by the client or a sitter), these notes may be discussed in the coaching space.

Integration work may take days, weeks or years, depending on the experience that the client has had, and the extent to which they desire ongoing support.

Due to the potency of psychedelic experiences, clients may benefit from, or indeed urgently require, the support of a trained mental health professional. Integration coaches should therefore be prepared to refer as appropriate (see discussion below).

Microdosing

Microdosing, in the context of psychedelics, is the practice of ingesting small percentages of a full dose, typically around 5-10% (Fadiman, 2011), which is below the psychoactive threshold of the substance. The aim is not to experience significant alterations in perception, cognition or emotion but rather to experience enhanced positivity, energy, creativity, focus and sociability (Fadiman, 2011).

Microdosing has generated positive reports in the media and personal development literature (e.g., Siebert, 2020). For example, one study notes "a perception of microdosing as a general panacea that is able to improve virtually all aspects of an individual's life" (Polito & Stevenson, 2019, p. 19). As a result, there is increasing demand for coaching that involves microdosing.

To date there is little evidence that the approach has any effect beyond placebo (Kuypers et al., 2019; Ona & Bouso, 2020). However, to argue that the effects of microdosing are largely mediated by expectations, is "premature and possibly wrong" (Polito & Likhaitzky, 2022, p.1).

There are ethical concerns here, as coaching a client who microdoses technically means that they are under the influence of a drug, which is generally regarded as unethical. However, as research has not yet found any harmful effects of psychedelic compounds at microdoses (Passie, 2019), the risk of coaching in combination with microdosing is therefore likely to be low. Ongoing research and debate around microdosing is encouraged.

Coach-as-Sitter

"Sitting" refers to being with someone during their psychedelic experience in an effort to provide a safe space and to support the person, without any interference or intervention, acting only to reduce harm, to meet their basic needs, and to ensure their physical comfort. During experiences for psychedelics-assisted therapy, clients tend to lie still, wearing eye shades and listening to music (Richards et al., 2017). However, they may want to do something different, such as exploring their environment, which makes it crucially important that someone responsible, experienced and knowledgeable is present.

After the effect of the substance has completely worn off, a coach who acts as a sitter may help the client capture the contents of their experience by prompting them to journal, draw or use other means. It is vital not to lead, project, or guide the client in this process.

It is important to note that coaching and sitting are separate activities. Since clients are in a state of plasticity while under the influence of a psychedelic, and hence considered vulnerable, any attempt at coaching them during an experience may therefore be regarded as unethical.

Key requirements for coaches

Given the potency of psychedelic compounds, supporting clients around such experiences requires higher degrees of responsibility, ethical awareness, and safety. The content that clients bring to the integration space may be confusing and difficult to relate to, and clients may open doors into their psyche which have been closed for some time. The speed and scope of exploration and insights gained during the experience may also be much faster than in a normal coaching relationship.

Every coach working with clients who use psychedelics should therefore:

- know their approach to the work, and be able to communicate clearly what they are and aren't willing and able to provide for their clients
- be mindful of the risks that use of psychedelics may entail
- have gone through a level of training that is appropriate to their clients' context and situation
- work within their competencies at all times and know when and how to refer a client
- attend regular supervision
- develop and apply solid ethical principles
- have an understanding of, and additional training in, relevant psychological and/or therapeutic frameworks
- be able to apply a variety of appropriate approaches, styles, skills and techniques that are within the bounds of their professional training

Coaches can play an important role as gateways into appropriate mental health support services and should therefore have a suitable referral network of mental health professionals at hand. Coaches should refer when:

- they approach or overstep their competencies and/or professional boundaries
- a client approaches them to heal a diagnosed mental health issue
- a mental health issue emerges during the coaching relationship.

It is vital that coaches develop an appropriate screening mechanism to select clients who are appropriate and safe to work with, and/or to encourage relevant clients to seek a risk assessment with a trained medical professional. As a rule of thumb, clients who seek coaching around a psychedelic experience should be resourceful and able to cope relatively well with any personal or professional challenges.

There is ongoing debate as to whether, and to what extent, it is important for coaches to have experienced psychedelic states. While some argue that coaches can only accompany their clients as far as they have travelled themselves, others assert that every person's experience is unique and that the coach's own experience is likely to lead to inaccurate assumptions and hinder phenomenological inquiry. A consensus seems to be that having had *some* experiences with altered states helps the coach to be familiar with the landscape, and tends to create a level of comfort for clients. *Extensive* experience opens up the possibility for the coach to work in a more directive or informative way. Clear contracting around client's expectations in this regard is key.

Practical considerations and ethical guidelines

Contracting

From the outset of the coaching relationship, it is important that the coach clearly communicates their style and approach, and that expectations, hopes and concerns for both parties are discussed, including what the coach is and isn't willing and able to provide as part of their service.

The Heron Model (Figure 1) may help coaches navigate their reflections and contracting conversations.

Duration

The length of coaching engagements varies widely. Outside of the psychedelic context, coaching relationships may last between a single session and several years (typically 3-6 months). Whether the psychedelic context changes the required length of an engagement is a question for future research.

Directive vs facilitative approaches

While professional coaching bodies define coaching as a facilitative practice that helps clients tap into their own resources (e.g., Association for Coaching, 2023; International Coaching Federation, 2023), many coaches offer direction and actively share knowledge, resources and experience. No consensus was possible within the IGCP as to how clients may best be supported when preparing for or integrating psychedelic experiences. Arguably, the more directive the approach, the more responsibility the coach takes for their clients' well-being. The weight of such responsibility should be considered very carefully by coaches working with clients seeking to work with psychedelics.

Safeguarding

To maximise safeguarding and ethical practice, coaches may work alongside therapists, or clients may choose to have a therapist "on call", so that, in case professional mental health support is required, it will be close by.

Learning from psychedelics-assisted therapy approaches

Due to the overlap of coaching and therapy with regards to core skills, a lot can be learned from psychedelics-assisted psychotherapy. For example, preparation and integration protocols used for psychedelic therapy (e.g., MAPS, 2022; Watts & Luoma, 2020; Gorman et al., 2021) may inform coaching practice and could be adapted to fit the coaching context. Established screening mechanisms may assist coaches in safeguarding.

Legal implications

Coaching conversations that support clients in preparing for a psychedelic experience must not involve any illegal behaviour or activity.

While a growing number of jurisdictions are decriminalising and even legalising some psychedelic compounds, the use, possession, sale and production of psychedelic substances are still illegal in most countries (see Wikipedia, 2023, for the legal status of psilocybin globally). However, regardless of the legal status of a psychedelic compound, conversations to help clients *integrate* an experience are not illegal (even if the experience itself was preceded by illegal behaviour).

Perspectives may differ on whether coaches 1) help people to integrate challenging experiences or prepare clients for something they have already decided autonomously they will be engaging in, in the interest of harm reduction, or 2) inadvertently collude with clients in engaging in inappropriate or risky behaviour, by merely making their services available.

Generally, as in all coaching, it is the responsibility of the client not to engage in illegal activities, but coaches must ensure they do not become complicit in supporting illegal actions.

The more guidance and direction a coach offers their clients, the more responsibility they carry with regards to the outcome of the coaching engagement. A coach who offers advice or directs their clients' behaviour may be liable for any adverse outcomes that clients may experience as a result.

Ethical considerations

Ethical practice constitutes cultivating a habit of reflective practice. Coaches considering working with or around psychedelic experiences should therefore consider key questions about their approach and the safeguarding of all relevant stakeholders.

The authors identified the following key ethical considerations linked to coaching involving psychedelics:

- Clients engaging in psychedelics may be at risk of harm, especially when they have pre-existing psychological or clinical challenges, or when working with practitioners who lack appropriate qualification and competence. Well-meaning coaches may produce counterintuitive results.
- Due to the current shortage of psychedelic therapists, many people may instead approach coaches for what Jacob (2011) describes as “therapy through the back door”^[4]. The authors have met many coaches who specifically offer to support people’s psychedelic healing journeys around trauma and addiction. This raises a number of important safeguarding concerns.
- How far coaches go when working with their clients remains a decision each practitioner must make on a case-by-case basis. However, the lack of regulation for coaches makes this an area of concern, especially given the potency of psychedelic substances to manifest extremely challenging and unpleasant experiences.
- A question remains as to whether coaches who work around psychedelics are promoting their use. This is an important point, as people do come to harm from the use of these substances and may not benefit from their use. The authors advocate that clients should *never* be encouraged to seek psychedelic experiences. That said, it is highly beneficial that coaches make their services available to those who chose to follow this particular path towards growth and development since coaching can contribute to harm reduction and can maximise the benefits of the experience. This can present a dilemma as advertising the service (in an effort to make it available) may inadvertently give the impression that the use of psychedelics is beneficial or encouraged.

All of the above require ongoing open debate and critical awareness.

Existing ethical frameworks

It is immensely challenging to formulate any specific guidelines accepted by the majority of coaches. This is due to the broad range of coaching approaches and the considerable grey area relating to therapeutic practices, mentoring, teaching, or consulting.

This was highlighted when coaches operating in the psychedelic field were asked by the IGCP to comment on a proposed practice framework (see Appendix C) and code of ethics (Jacob & Farquhar, 2021, see Appendix D) where opinions varied widely.

Two notable ethical frameworks for practitioners working with psychedelics exist (Guild of Guides Netherlands, 2021; Northstar Pledge, 2023), and while they do not specifically address coaching, they set out important guidelines for practitioners who work with psychedelics generally and are therefore important resources for coaches considering working in this field.

Coaches should also take note of coaching-specific frameworks such as the Global Code of Ethics for Coaches, Mentors and Supervisors (2021) and the ethical framework of the International

Coaching Federation (2020), which largely also apply to coaching in the context of psychedelic experiences.

Future research and directions

The authors would like to see research into the use of psychedelics beyond the treatment of disease and disorder. This research should focus on the potential of using psychedelics for learning, growth, insight and development, and the potential application of the resulting knowledge through the development of coaching methodologies.

Critical reviews such as Jungaberle et al. (2018) have highlighted the range of positive effects of psychedelics on clinical populations. The next step will be to test such hypotheses on non-clinical populations, with the aim to learn how such benefits may best be achieved.

Since coaches are already actively engaging clients around their psychedelic experiences, qualitative studies with participating coaches will offer insights into the experience, practices and attitudes of such practitioners. These would be an ideal starting point to learn about:

- possible coaching formats, methodologies, approaches and techniques
- ethical concerns
- best safeguarding practices
- boundaries to coaching in this context
- referral attitudes
- the effects of supervision on ethical and safe practice.

More needs to be done to illuminate the experience of *receiving* coaching in the context of psychedelic development journeys. This could involve the interpretative phenomenological analyses of interviews with clients who have received coaching to prepare for and/or integrate a psychedelic experience.

Further research should be done into how microdosing affects typical coaching goals, such as learning, creativity, well-being, personal and professional development. This should deliver insights into the potential of microdosing to enhance the coaching agenda (and vice versa).

Other key questions are:

- whether more regulation will make clients safer, or will stand in the way of people accessing support
- what constitutes ethical practice in the context of coaching and psychedelics.

The authors of this paper would like to see:

- more spaces in which coaches can exchange ideas, concerns, experiences and questions
- the emergence of an inclusive professional body offering support and guidance on how to support clients who seek psychedelic experiences
- the development of a widely accepted code of ethics for the coaching community
- the development of more open dialogue amongst practitioners, rather than exchanging ideas “underground”.

The podcast “Talking about Coaching and Psychedelics” (Jacob & Bamberg, 2021- present) has started such a dialogue. Many of the podcast participants offer training programmes for coaches who want to support clients with their psychedelic experiences and growth journeys. The message from the discussions so far is that, fundamentally, questioning, exploring and debating best practice plays an important role in keeping clients, coaches and stakeholders safe and free of harm.

Conclusion

Psychedelic experiences in combination with professional psychological support have been demonstrated to be safe and powerful treatment pathways for a range of clinical conditions.

While the research exploring the utilisation of psychedelics for the betterment of well people is still in its infancy, existing evidence suggests that it has considerable potential. Adopting a positive psychology and coaching psychology lens on psychedelic research, it is clear that there is much unexplored ground, and that an exploration of benefits beyond healing and treating disorder and disease is warranted.

Coaching has evolved from its beginnings as performance-enhancing interventions, to include a broad range of approaches, many of which can be conducive to support non-clinical populations seeking psychedelic experiences on their journeys towards discovery, learning and growth.

Having identified considerable overlap between the reasons people seek coaching and the benefits reported by participants of psychedelic experiences, there seems to be a grounded rationale to research both psychedelics-assisted coaching and coaching-assisted psychedelic journeys.

Since many practitioners today are already offering coaching services to support clients in preparing for and/or integrating psychedelic experiences, and in the face of various ethical considerations, it is important that a conversation about ethical guidelines and possible coaching methodologies happens overground, and is informed by relevant research. This paper is an attempt at starting this conversation. It reviewed relevant research to date and suggested directions for future research, explored the positive psychological potential of psychedelics, highlighted important ethical concerns, and outlined possible formats in which coaching and psychedelics may work together to help people grow and develop.

Endnotes

[1] ↩

The authors feel it is important to recognise indigenous populations globally for their stewardship of wisdom about the use of psychedelics and for keeping this wisdom alive to this day.

[2] ↩

In most European literature, the terms counselling and psychotherapy are used interchangeably.

[3] ↩

The framework was the result of a comprehensive integration of different perspectives on coaching drawn from the Association for Coaching (2023), the International Coaching Federation (2023), Downey (1999), Parsloe (1999), Green & Grant (2003), Whitmore (1992), de Haan (2008), Bolton (2013), Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck (2014), and Knight & van Nieuwerburgh (2012).

[4] ↩

Arguably, a coaching relationship may provide a valuable support system for clients with a clinical diagnosis, but only as long as the coaching is not aimed at treating the condition, and as long as the condition does not interfere with the client's ability to engage in the coaching process.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Positive Psychological themes reported in psychedelic research

Appendix B: Thematic analysis of coaching objectives

Appendix C: A framework for coaching in the context of psychedelics

Appendix D: Code of conduct and ethical guidelines for coaches in the context of psychedelics

Due to word count restrictions, all appendices have been made available at:

<https://bit.ly/coaching-and-psychedelics-appendices>