

Combating psychological distress with psychedelics in cancer patients

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Madam, Cancer is the leading cause of death worldwide and being diagnosed with cancer can be the source of severe pain and emotional distress to patients. It is not uncommon to find symptoms of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, loss of will to live, and meaning of life. Mitchell et al, found that the symptoms of depression and anxiety are present among 30-40% of hospitalized cancer patients, and 70-90% of cancer patients experience significant pain.¹ These symptoms are found to have further debilitating effects on patients which include, non-compliance to medications, decreased quality of life and social functioning, suicidal thoughts, and poor progression and outcomes of the disease.

With the growing recognition and evidence, psychedelic-assisted therapy is used to alleviate the adverse behavioural symptoms of mood disorders seen among cancer patients. Psychedelics are a group of diverse compounds that act as a 5-HT_{2A} receptor agonist, thereby producing alterations in cognition, perspective and emotions. Psychedelics group includes Psilocybin, Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), Mescaline, and Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) to name a few, under its heading.²

Psilocybin has been shown to produce a robust response in reducing depression and anxiety among cancer patients even in moderate, single doses³ and its antidepressant response was even sustained post-therapy for several weeks. Moreover, patients reported a positive attitude towards life, spiritually, behaviourally, and cognitively. This was supported by another randomized control trial which showed sustained antidepressant and anxiolytic effects in 78% and 83% of patients, respectively, even after 6-month follow-up.² Similar results were reported by another research that kept LSD under study. Along with that, LSD is shown to alter the usual cognitive perspective and habits, shifting the normal frame with which the patient perceives the world and his illness.⁴ These effects help patients improve the emotional aspect of pain, accept their fate, and embrace death more easily than without therapy. Collectively these effects provide better control over their psychological issues which helps to improve physiological

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well-being.

However, several side effects were reported among patients on psychedelics therapy, but none were reported to be of serious concern. The most commonly reported was mild to moderate increases in systolic and diastolic pressures.² Others were mostly associated with high dose administration of psychedelics, for example, nausea, vomiting, physical and psychological discomfort, and transient episode of emotional distress. None of these effects was long-lasting and resolved on discontinuation.

There are several pharmaco-psychological treatments, e.g. benzodiazepines, that are being administered in palliative care of these cancer patients, but none are shown to be very effective in combating these psychological issues. Furthermore, side effects, including increased dependency and higher relapse rate are seen along with the delayed onset of therapy, more among conventional antidepressants than psychedelic therapy.⁵

Therefore, there is a growing concern regarding psychosocial distress and its overall effects on the well-being of cancer patients which has warranted the development of newer modalities in the treatment. In this hunt, many clinical trials have been conducted keeping psychedelics as a group of drugs under study. Their data have shown them to be effective, safer, and more tolerable among patients than conventional therapies in combating depression and anxiety among cancer patients.

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