

Deciding to Take Sacred Medicines

The decision to participate in a ceremony must always be made individually, not by a family member or friend. This decision should reflect a clear understanding of the possible risks and benefits in relation to your medical history, mental health, and overall emotional condition.

Sometimes, Sacred Medicines are regarded as a solution for illnesses or personal problems. However, they are only a means that, when used correctly, catalyze therapeutic processes and personal growth.

Each person is different, and much of our internal process of thoughts and emotions remains an unknown territory to us. It is within that unknown space that Sacred Medicines can serve a purpose—allowing individuals to gain greater awareness of their emotions, thoughts, behaviors, body, and relationships.

Through the process of integrating the various aspects discovered with the help of Sacred Medicines and the subsequent increase in self-awareness, an overall improvement in the quality of life often occurs.

Sacred Medicine ceremonies are usually conducted in groups ranging from five to twenty-five participants; occasionally, there may be as many as one hundred participants in a single session, or even more. Generally, these sessions take place at night, although there are occasionally daytime ceremonies.

Sacred Medicine ceremonies typically last between three and seven hours. Some centers or groups offer overnight stays after the session, but this is not always the case.

Sessions are always led by a facilitator, who may be a healer, traditional doctor, shaman or “neo-shaman,” therapist, padrinho or Mestre (in some churches), or another individual with extensive experience in Sacred Medicines who has learned to facilitate such sessions.



At the beginning of the session, time is often set aside for participants to share their intentions and explain why they decided to take part. Once intentions are shared, the Sacred Medicine is distributed, and each participant drinks their cup.

The experience with Sacred Medicine may unfold in different phases. Sometimes, exploring the inner world can be accompanied by emotional pain or other forms of suffering. It may also involve a release of accumulated stress.

Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear participants crying or expressing this release during Sacred Medicine sessions, especially those oriented toward healing, throughout the night.

Due to the purgative effects of Sacred Medicines, vomiting occurs frequently. This is done into a bucket inside the room or in a designated area outside.

In general, the music played by the facilitator guides the experience, although some facilitators choose to work in silence.

Benefits

From a scientific perspective, there is still much work to be done to demonstrate that Sacred Medicines have therapeutic potential for personal growth and therapy. However, the number of testimonials from people who have experienced these ceremonies often indicates a clear benefit for the individual and their immediate environment.

These benefits include what are called “revealing” or “revitalizing” experiences, which have a significant personal impact on many aspects, both physical and psychological. Many people also report an increase in their feelings of spirituality or mystical states in which they feel one with a greater reality rather than mere individuality, ultimately providing them with courage and strength to face daily life and enriching their worldview.



Even though someone may come out of an experience with Sacred Medicines without having learned something important about themselves, others, or the nature of reality, it is often said that a single dose of Sacred Medicines is more effective than 10 years of therapy. However, the reality is that a therapeutic process before and after the session is necessary to experience a sustained therapeutic benefit, related to changing dysfunctional behavioral patterns or resolving life problems caused by trauma or negative family dynamics.

This process includes deep integration and extensive follow-up. Only when the experience with Sacred Medicines is integrated within the context of a therapeutic program can it be affirmed that the sessions significantly enhance the effectiveness of the personal growth process.

There are reports of therapeutic outcomes with Sacred Medicines in people dealing with depression, burnout, grief, addictions, relationships damaged by guilt and emotional pain, childhood traumas, and acceptance of death in individuals with terminal illnesses, among others.

Risks and Exclusion Criteria

Physical Risks

From a medical standpoint, Sacred Medicines have few contraindications. However, if you have a cardiovascular condition, you should not take Sacred Medicines, as they may slightly increase blood pressure. There is no laboratory evidence showing alterations in liver function or other biochemical parameters after ingesting Sacred Medicine.

Nonetheless, research shows temporary changes in immune system function. These changes do not appear to have a direct impact on health.



It is crucial to consult a doctor if you regularly take any medication or need to take medications during a Sacred Medicine ceremony or retreat. Antidepressants, other psychotropics, and medications metabolized by certain cytochromes may be contraindicated with Sacred Medicines. In addition to psychotropics, any medication that can interact with MAO (such as monoamine oxidase inhibitors, MAOIs) may also be contraindicated. Sacred Medicine, when used in combination with drugs affecting the same metabolic pathways, can be dangerous. In such cases, consulting a specialist is essential. If you have a chronic illness, it may be inadvisable to stop taking medications for a prolonged period with the intention of taking Sacred Medicines. Here too, consultation with a specialist is fundamental. In any case, always carry your medications with you, even if you will only be away from home for a few hours. Sacred Medicine sessions often take place in locations far from urban centers, sometimes difficult to access. If you cannot return on time, not having your medications could pose a problem.

Tyramine is a naturally occurring monoamine found in certain foods. Particularly, fermented products such as aged cheeses, soy sauce, wine or beer, and certain types of meat, nuts, etc., are rich in tyramine. You can find lists of tyramine-rich foods online. Avoid combining foods high in tyramine with Sacred Medicines, as this can cause a hypertensive crisis with symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, sweating, increased heart rate, dilated pupils, and, very rarely, cerebral hemorrhage and death. In any case, the MAO inhibitors in Sacred Medicine leave the body very quickly, so it is unlikely that you would experience toxicity if you consume tyramine-rich foods before or after a session. Although it is unlikely that you would consume these foods under the influence of Sacred Medicine, it is still discouraged.

Although uncommon, there are cases of people fainting during the experience. It is important to be aware that if a person is on a hard floor or near hard objects, they could get injured if they fall.



Psychological Risks

If you have a history of psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, psychosis, personality disorders, or bipolar disorder, among others, taking Sacred Medicines carries a high risk, especially if your condition is active.

The use of medications for these conditions is not always fully effective, but that does not mean that “alternative” treatments are. If you have a mental health condition and still wish to have an experience with Sacred Medicines, it is necessary to discuss your situation with the session facilitator.

Some facilitators may refuse to admit you to their sessions if you disclose a history of mental disorders, while others may not. The important thing is not whether they allow you to participate or not, but to ensure that your participation is not solely for their profit and to have the assurance that, whatever happens, they will take care of you.

Some people with a history of mental disorders have had positive outcomes after taking Sacred Medicines. However, there are other cases in which symptoms have reappeared. Therefore, it is essential to consider these risks.

Choose carefully with whom you take Sacred Medicines, and be honest and transparent about your medical history. The facilitator’s honesty regarding your well-being is also essential. If you do not perceive the facilitator as sincere—and this also applies to people without a history of mental disorders—it is safest not to take Sacred Medicines with that person.

The worst that can happen after taking Sacred Medicines is experiencing prolonged effects when they should have already subsided. Sometimes effects intensify at the end of a session due to relaxation or after vomiting, but if they persist long after the session has ended, you should notify the responsible person.

There are certain techniques that help people return to a normal state, but in some cases, these techniques are not effective. In such situations, medication or even prolonged treatment may be necessary.



Although these cases are rare, they do exist and are documented in the scientific literature.

This may be due to pre-existing psychiatric conditions, but there are also cases of apparently psychologically healthy individuals who have undergone these experiences.

These cases are extremely uncommon, and symptoms may include paranoia, ideas of reference (“everyone is talking about me”), delusions (incoherent or absurd thoughts, even within that state of consciousness), or severe confusion.

These symptoms are very different from the episodes of fear or confusion that can occur under the effects of Sacred Medicines, which are transient and often a natural part of the experience.

Preparation

Therapeutic work with Sacred Medicines begins with proper preparation, which reduces risks and maximizes potential benefits. There are three levels at which one can prepare for this type of experience: psychological, social, and physical. Obviously, each person must find their own way to prepare. Here are some tips that may be helpful.

Psychological Preparation

Begin to cultivate self-awareness if you plan to take Sacred Medicine for therapeutic or personal growth purposes. To adjust certain behaviors, improve meaningful relationships, or release emotional blockages, consider your past, present, and future perspectives. Also reflect on how you relate to your surroundings. You can ponder questions related to where you are in life, what recurring problems or behavioral patterns you have been unable to resolve or adjust, how these affect your interpersonal dynamics or relationships, and how your behavior influences your environment—and vice versa.

The more you have reflected on these topics before your Sacred Medicine session, the more the Sacred Medicine can act as a catalyst in this process. Ideally, a therapist can provide a neutral mirror to facilitate this method, or even just the help of a close friend or family member.



Reflecting on all these elements can help you gain a deeper understanding of these aspects, allowing your experience with Sacred Medicine to be as productive as possible. Try not to have specific expectations for the session.

Asking for specific outcomes, such as “show me the solution to my compulsive behavior problems,” can condition you and interfere with your experience. Once you become aware of where you are in life and what blocks your natural growth and well-being, enter the process without expectations, simply letting yourself be guided wherever the experience takes you. It is about trusting that whatever happens during the session will support your personal growth and health.

Since the experience with Sacred Medicine can be very intense and may deconstruct the ego (the mental construct of self), confront you with death, awaken your fears, and provoke an overwhelming sense of losing control over the experience, you must be ready to flow with it and hold onto trust—in yourself, in the session facilitator, and in the role of the plant. The more prepared you are entering a session, the easier it will be to let yourself be guided by the experience. Sometimes there can be a true struggle between fear and trust, in which case focusing on your breathing can be helpful.

Concentrating on slow, deep breaths from the bottom of your lungs and releasing tension from your body with each long exhale can be effective techniques to relax and let go. During preparation before the experience, it may be helpful to occasionally sit and practice breathing, building confidence for your encounter with the plant.

In any case, it is common to go through different phases during the experience, some of which may be very challenging. Others can be deeply enjoyable, full of meaning and life satisfaction. While you should prepare for possible difficult moments, remain open to experiencing beautiful moments with Sacred Medicines—states of profound significance that can be revealing and, at times, accompanied by ineffable beauty.



Social Preparation

If part of your intention in experiencing Sacred Medicine is to adjust your relationships with family, partners, or friends, open a dialogue with these people during your preparation whenever possible. Explain your sincere intentions to resolve the issues you have with them. If you are in therapy, you could ask whether they would like to be involved in your therapeutic process, if you consider this appropriate.

If you feel confident enough, explain that you will participate in a therapeutic session using an ethnobotanical tool (Sacred Medicine), share your intentions, and receive their feedback.

Establishing a relationship of trust and support is beneficial for all parties.

Physical Preparation

In traditional cultures, especially in Peru, there is abundant knowledge about complex diets used in shamanic practice. For days, weeks, or even months, people eat baked green bananas with white rice, without salt, sugar, or oil. For each day of the diet, a specific plant decoction is administered. Sexual abstinence is maintained, and participants live in complete isolation in a cabin in the forest. The diet often begins with the ingestion of an emetic plant such as tobacco or yawarpanga (*Aristolochia Didyma*). The intention is to cleanse and sensitize the body and psyche to the effects of the plants so that they produce greater benefits. Originally, these diets were a form of healing and part of the training of healers.

You decide how far you want to go with diets, fasting, isolation from your everyday environment, sports practice, or meditation before taking Sacred Medicines in a Western context. Some people maintain their usual diet, others reduce salt and sugar intake for a few days or weeks, and others fast in the days leading up to the session, etc. In general terms, consuming light and healthy meals and maintaining good physical condition can facilitate the experience with Sacred Medicines and possibly make it safer.



These types of diets can also serve as a way to connect with your body and the blockages you feel, helping you gain clarity and prepare for the session.

It is recommended to consume plenty of fruits and vegetables in the days leading up to the session. On the day of the session, have a light breakfast and a meal rich in carbohydrates. Make sure your last meal is between 4 and 6 hours before the session.

If you are taking medications that are contraindicated with Sacred Medicines, such as antidepressants, it is recommended to stop using them two weeks before the session. This should always be done under medical supervision, as it is a very delicate process. Interrupting psychiatric medication can cause serious problems. Keep in mind that there will always be time to take Sacred Medicines once you are free from your medication.

Herbal preparations containing St. John's Wort and Ginkgo Biloba are contraindicated with Sacred Medicines. Avoid alcohol, stimulants, opiates, and other drugs during the days or weeks leading up to the session. Keep your body hydrated and well-rested before the ceremony.

SESSION

Depending on the person, the effects of Sacred Medicine begin between 10 minutes and one hour after ingestion. These effects last between two and four hours. There are many types of Sacred Medicine blends, as shamans use a variety of plants to modulate their effects. Some of the plants used include Tobacco, Brugmansia, Brunfelsia, and Bobinsana.

Each plant contributes its own influence to the overall experience. The duration and intensity of Sacred Medicine sessions vary considerably depending on the content of the blend. While some centers and groups use powerful and concentrated mixtures of Sacred Medicine, others use gentler blends and offer several doses. Many facilitators do not administer high doses to people taking Sacred Medicine for the first time. This allows participants to become familiar with the effects in a manageable way before consuming a higher dose and experiencing a more intense session.



The experience with Sacred Medicines produces changes in the way we perceive reality. The texture of reality often shifts at the beginning of the session. This can be observed with both eyes open and closed. Reality may become brighter, more colorful, and appear to be made up of patterns of luminous energetic vibrations. A buzzing sound in the ears is normal and marks the onset of psychological effects. Keeping your eyes closed makes the experience much more intense than when your eyes are open. If the experience feels too intense, you can open your eyes to lessen the intensity.

Throughout the experience, visions may appear in the form of abstract patterns or recognizable, vivid images. Emotions are felt more deeply, and it may be possible to access forgotten memories. Some people experience what could be described as paranormal phenomena such as telepathy or precognition. Regardless of whether these effects are truly paranormal or not, they are subjectively common elements of the experience.

Fears or challenging emotions may also arise, sometimes accompanied by physical blockages such as pain or tension in the body.

During these demanding moments, breathe slowly, embrace the music, and trust in the process induced by the Ayahuasca and in your facilitator. It is common for beginners not to experience visions in their first session. In some cases, it seems that visions with Sacred Medicine require a kind of visual and cognitive learning before they can be received.

Sacred Medicines also alter one's usual patterns of thought. When visions are not experienced, one might believe that nothing is happening psychologically, whereas an external observer would likely disagree.

Never leave a session thinking that nothing is happening. You may simply not be having visions, but your mental process is still being profoundly affected.



If you have decided to take Sacred Medicines, do not leave your session under any circumstances until those responsible authorize you to do so. It is better to spend some time feeling bored than to end up in an accident for having left abruptly. Leaving before the session ends carries the risk that the psychological effects may intensify after you have left the space and are alone. Sacred Medicines are powerful plants; treat them with respect, even if you believe you are not feeling anything. For some people, the effects take time to manifest. Be cautious—there is always enough time to return home.

Many consider Sacred Medicines to be a mirror of their inner world, through which both inner conflicts and inner beauty may emerge. When this happens, the experience can be indescribably exquisite.

At times, you may experience feelings of paranoia during the session. The experience with Sacred Medicine is not linear; rather, it moves through different phases—some more pleasant and others more challenging.

Like any journey undertaken in life, there are moments of laughter, moments of sadness, moments of euphoria, moments of revelation and truth, and moments of boredom or disappointment.

Clinically, symptoms similar to those of mental illness may appear—mainly suspicion, paranoia, and self-referential thoughts (“everyone is looking at me” or “this or that is happening because I’m causing it somehow”).

These effects are normal during the time the experience lasts and are temporary. Their appearance is proof that these are experiences we all go through at some point in our lives, for one reason or another. Even if they are uncomfortable, you must face them. Learning to deal with whatever arises is always the best attitude to have in a Sacred Medicine session. And most importantly: do not hesitate to ask your facilitator for help whenever you feel you need it. That is what they are there for.



It is possible to enter perinatal states, as described by psychiatrist Stanislav Grof. This term refers to experiences related to the process of birth itself. During a Sacred Medicine journey, one may relive the birth process, much like a biological delivery.

According to Grof, birth is the first traumatic event that every human being faces. He divides this experience into four phases, known as the Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPMs). Each matrix corresponds to a different stage of labor and delivery.

Perinatal experiences can be deeply challenging and may include physical sensations such as lack of air, the pressure of contractions, pain, as well as psychological experiences of death and rebirth, existential emptiness, and psycho-spiritual renewal.

These profound experiences form the foundation of many initiation and rite-of-passage traditions in ancestral cultures, representing symbolic journeys of death and rebirth into expanded states of consciousness.

Integration and Follow-up

Without an integration process, the insights and revelations received under the influence of Sacred Medicines may fade faster than expected. To integrate your experience, we recommend sharing your process with the facilitator, the group, or a trusted therapist. Drawing or engaging in other forms of artistic expression about what you discovered during your session can also greatly support your integration journey.

Integration allows you to bring your revelations into everyday life in a grounded and meaningful way. Physical activities can help you reconnect with reality and stay centered—these may include spending time in nature, swimming, hiking, or practicing yoga.

It is highly beneficial to continue your process with the guidance of a therapist or a qualified person who can support you during this stage, especially if you took Sacred Medicines for therapeutic purposes. This ongoing support will help you maximize the benefits of your experience and anchor its wisdom into your daily life.



In the days following a session, emotions connected to the experience may continue to surface. There are even cases where people experience altered states of consciousness in the days after their Sacred Medicine ceremony. This can feel unsettling when it happens. In such cases, it's best to remain in a safe space (for example, at home) with someone you trust, in case you need support. That person can, for instance, play soft music to help you relax.

If you have any concerns, it's always advisable to reach out to your therapist or the person who facilitated your Sacred Medicine session.

In general, after a ceremony, one returns home with new perspectives on life, feeling inspired to adjust certain behaviors and bring new dynamics into relationships. These renewed energies are strongest during the week following the session, but they don't last forever. It is during this period that you must take what you've learned and begin to apply it. If you don't, change is unlikely to occur, and the lessons received during the session may fade into memory.

If you're open to it, a few sessions with a therapist familiar with the dynamics of Sacred Medicines can greatly enhance the positive impact of your experience in daily life.

Before making major life decisions, make sure you have taken time to reflect deeply. Do not sell your business, leave your partner, or abandon your everyday life to move to the jungle after just one week with Sacred Medicines.

