

Ayahuasca and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Case Report

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Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that affects about 8% of the population in the United States¹. Conventional treatments for PTSD are a category of medications commonly referred to as antidepressants (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors) along with psychotherapy. Only two of these medications have received Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approval for PTSD treatment, Sertraline, and Paroxetine². Current evidence is emerging for the treatment of PTSD symptoms with psychedelic substances, one of which is 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), with it recently receiving a breakthrough therapy designation from the FDA². This report describes the case of a male United States military veteran who suffers from PTSD symptoms related to both military experiences and childhood trauma and had resolution of those symptoms after administration of Ayahuasca every 6 months under the guidance of a Shaman in Peru. This case serves to provide evidence for the use of Ayahuasca in the treatment of PTSD.

CASE REPORT

Mr. W is a 53-year-old male patient with a diagnosis of PTSD who entered the military at age 18 and had a 20-year career in the United States Army. In his long career, he had several combat tours and was diagnosed with PTSD upon return to civilian status. Symptoms that contributed to this diagnosis included hypervigilance, nightmares, flashbacks, and avoidance of public and social situations. He also had been the subject of childhood trauma that he did not recall until he his PTSD symptoms, from his military experience, began to occur. These symptoms were extremely bothersome to him and subsequently caused him to experience depressive symptoms and at times, suicidal thoughts. His management at the Veterans Administration consisted of numerous different medication trials, including Gabapentin, Xanax, Tegretol, Valium, Prozac, Prazosin, Buspar, Clonazepam, Nortriptyline, Doxepin, Zoloft, and Temazepam. He reported that he had many side effects on these medications, and all were mostly ineffective in treating his

PTSD symptoms. He noted that after trying several different medications, he began to have worsened suicidal thoughts and grew more frustrated with his care. He also had been through numerous therapies over the years and did find some of the techniques helpful. However, there was a limit to the amount of improvement in symptoms of PTSD that he had noticed. Even after therapy, he still found it challenging to socialize due to his overall uneasiness in public places, and he continued to have almost nightly nightmares that resulted in mood changes, often including irritability and depressive symptoms.

the late 2000s, he started to explore different religions and eventually identified as a Buddhist and in accordance with Buddhist culture, he went on a spiritual retreat. His retreat occurred in South America. He partook in a religious ceremony that involved the ingestion of Ayahuasca under the supervision of a Shaman. The entire process lasted 8 hours in what he described as a “religious experience.” He states that guided meditation was incorporated into the

psychedelic experience, which allowed him to "process" some of his past traumas. Following the first experience in 2013 he returned home and noticed that his PTSD symptoms had entirely resolved. He felt more comfortable in social situations with a decreased level of hypervigilance, and his nightmares had completely resolved. He continued to practice meditation and Buddhism during this time but had stopped taking any psychotropics by the mid-2000s and had also discontinued psychotherapy around the same time.

He reported the total resolution of PTSD symptoms for about 6-8 months following the administration of the Ayahuasca with recurrence of symptoms shortly after this period. He began to notice increased uneasiness associated with being in public places and return of the nightmares started but to a significantly lesser degree than in the past. Shortly after the return of these symptoms, he went back to Peru for another Ayahuasca experience under the guidance of a Shaman and underwent the same religious ritual and again had complete resolution of his PTSD symptoms.

He has continued to return to Peru for repeat sessions every 6 months and has continued to have resolution of his PTSD symptoms. He states that his life has drastically changed as a result. He is now more comfortable in public places, can keep a full-time job in IT, and has started to form more meaningful relationships that he was unable to do previously as a consequence of his PTSD symptoms. He also has not had any suicidal thoughts in several years and denies any depression or anxiety symptoms during that same period as well, at the time of the interview. He attributes his success and resolution of these symptoms directly to the Ayahuasca and stated he does not know if he would be

alive if it had not been for his discovery of Ayahuasca and the Shaman in Peru.

DISCUSSION

A literature review with search terms of Ayahuasca and PTSD reveals one study that hypothesizes that Ayahuasca could assist with PTSD symptoms given its Sigma-1 receptor and MAOI activity. Through this process, it is easier to "retrieve" the traumatic memories and process them³. There are emerging studies done with Ayahuasca and treatment-resistant depression⁴ and suicidality⁵, but no additional studies done on Ayahuasca and the treatment of PTSD symptoms. This case report can add to the literature on Ayahuasca and psychedelic substance use in the treatment of PTSD symptoms. Mr. W found it easier to process the traumas of his past under the Shaman guided therapy assisted with Ayahuasca, which lead to improvement in PTSD symptoms and significant improvement in quality of life after the resolution of these symptoms.

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Ceman, A; Klass, A. (2019, December). Ayahuasca and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Case Report. *The Journal of Psychedelic Psychiatry*, 1(1).

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