

Excerpted from
Peer Consultation Groups & Ethical Awareness Tools for
Psychedelic Practitioners
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Introduction

As professionals working with clients in profound states of consciousness, we need each other.

I've written this book out of my deep conviction that supporting one another via self-inquiry and relational reflection is essential to our work. Over three decades of thinking, writing, and teaching about ethics and Right Relationship, I've discovered that the best way to receive and give this support is by gathering in small groups in the manner described in the following pages.

For many years I've been considering the particular challenges of therapeutic work with extra-ordinary states of consciousness. I've reflected on *why* we need help, on *what* we require and desire, and on *how* this can be achieved in an accessible and affordable way.

This exploration has led me to the perspective and practices I share here. The solutions I suggest might also provide at least two personal benefits that can be difficult to find in Western culture, which are a sense of belonging and a more durable state of self-compassion.

Why do we—practitioners working with clients in profound states of consciousness—need each other? Many of us been doing therapy and healthcare in our silos for some time. When psychedelics fully arrive on the therapeutic scene, can't we just keep doing things the same way and add psychedelics to our therapeutic offerings? My deep belief, based on years of observation, participation, and enquiry, is that we cannot.

Practitioners are graduating from psychedelic training programs by the thousands, many of them new to working with psychedelics. Practitioners coming into this type of work need adequate experience, oversight, and support. How will they get it? Will practitioners be able to find, not to mention afford, this mentoring? My guess is that, for many, the answer is no.

However, there is an alternative. Peer consultation groups offer affordable oversight and mutual support. Members of such groups are witnesses to one another's professional practice. They are allies in maintaining ethical awareness through compassionate self-inquiry.

It is quite an undertaking for professionals to hold space for psychedelic sessions (as well as for breathwork, deep grief, trauma recovery, perinatal care, dying, or any major change. Expanded states create a palpable field that affects whoever is in the room. Both clients and practitioners working in these states experience greatly increased vulnerability, suggestibility, sensitivity, and emotionality.

It should not surprise us that extra practitioner challenges occur in this amplified therapeutic context. And yet, we are often caught off-guard when they do happen. Extra-ordinary states of consciousness involve much more interaction with unconscious biographical, perinatal, and archetypal or transpersonal material.¹ No matter how well we as professionals try to anticipate what will happen in these states, we are often quite surprised by the content and the impact of what arises from the unconscious of our clients.

What emerges from our own unconscious in these sessions can be just as startling and triggering. This is true even when we are in the Responsible Party role, the role of therapist or practitioner, focusing on protecting and empowering the client. We may be aware of impacts on us from the client's content, transference, or expressive emotionality. Sometimes, we experience something from our own psyche, even without our full awareness.

As ethical practitioners, we are duty-bound, after such triggers in a session, to do our personal work to explore what has come up for

us. This emergent material demands deep inquiry. Because we are working professionally as a Responsible Party, we do this not only for our own transformation, but also to become better at providing support to those for whom we are present in psychedelic or other profound sessions. We do our own deep work to improve our self-management and to expand our capacity to be present for clients in their profound states.

We need support to work through those entangled needs to provide better care for our clients and ourselves. So how do we find it? What if we could talk to other professionals who are working with profound states? What if we could share our experiences and our questions with people who have our same passion about this work? What if we could receive (and give) reliably compassionate support for self-inquiry and relational reflection that would help us maintain Right Relationship with a client or return to it?

It is quite common, as professionals working with people in extraordinary states of consciousness, to be in the midst of big changes ourselves. We may need some encouragement and assistance to get through those inevitable stuck places that bring up confusion, self-criticism, blame, or shame.

We need help with the inherent dual relationship and different ethical challenges of working with a client both in an ordinary state of consciousness (before and after the psychedelic session) and working with the same client during an extra-ordinary state of consciousness. We may even be longing for space where others can bear witness to the existential mysteries we are observing during these liminal sessions.

Because we are all in the midst of a consciousness-raising growth spurt as individuals and as a culture, we need to find new ways to help each other. Florie St. Aime points out in her book, *Unlearning as Liberatory and Anti-Oppressive Psychotherapeutic Practice* that, historically, a good deal of therapeutic intervention has been about helping clients adapt their motivations and behavior to cultural

expectations.² Psychedelics often bring up those adaptations for re-examination. Psychedelics often strengthen authenticity of personality and purpose.

In doing this deep work with clients, we practitioners may also be taking a fresh look at who we have been, who we are, and who we want to be. We could be getting new perspectives on what we want, what we fear, and what we might want to change. As has been repeated often in the field, “psychedelics amplify everything.” Personally, professionally, and culturally, we are feeling and experiencing many things differently and with more intensity. When life is different, when professional experiences are unusual, when we ourselves are more aware of how we, other people, and our surroundings are changing, we need to join with others to co-create a mini culture, a supportive space of compassion, protection, affirmation, trust, and belonging to help us through this passage.

Many of us long for relationships with peers who are as enthusiastic about this profound work as we are. We would love to find others who are willing to reciprocate in providing kindness and truthfulness. We, as well as our clients, benefit from such group support as we integrate the professional psychedelic experience into our lives. Our willingness to receive such support increases our capacity to serve others.

I strongly believe that participation in leaderless peer consultation groups is an ideal way to meet these needs. Further, in order for peer consultation to be really helpful with exploring the material that comes up in extra-ordinary states, such a peer group needs a structure that generates, builds, and holds trust. It must reliably support vulnerability and offer compassion.

Why do we need a group specifically structured to protect vulnerability? I believe the first duty of a Responsible Party in a psychedelic session is to protect the experiencer, and the second is to prioritize and serve that client’s best interests, especially if there is a conflict between the client’s and the practitioner’s interests or

beliefs. Stanislav Grof, M.D. wrote that to fulfill both of those implicit obligations, psychedelic practitioners must develop certain critical attributes and comfort with the territory of expanded states that allow whatever flexibility of belief or process will best serve the client in that moment.³

Beyond that, psychedelic practitioners need just as protective a context for their own personal work as the one they provide for their clients. Such a context would be one in which group members could and would risk vulnerability. It would invite deep sharing and self-inquiry. The structure of InnerEthics PCGs, together with commitment to that structure by the group's members (in lieu of having a professional facilitator or supervisor), expands a group's capacity to engender trust. Such a group invites and can adequately support the quality that is most necessary for inner change, which is vulnerability