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## Hallucinogenic and Sedative Drug Treatment and its Impact on Mental Health Nursing

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HALLUCINOGENIC AND SEDATIVE DRUG TREATMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON  
MENTAL HEALTH NURSING

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Science  
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction  
at Western Kentucky University

By

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May 2021

\*\*\*\*\*

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## ABSTRACT

Mental health nursing is a complex and radically changing discipline that must continuously adapt to evidence based practices, including the use of alternative options for the treatment of mental illness. There has recently been increased research into the use of hallucinogenic and sedative drugs for the treatment of mental illness.

Hallucinogenic and sedative drugs were examined as potential treatment options for a variety of mental illnesses in the 1960s, although these trials were ceased by the government due to human safety concerns. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recently approved trials to study the use of hallucinogenic drugs to treat mental illness, and sedative drugs, such as ketamine are currently FDA approved to treat major depressive disorder. This presentation will provide an overview of the literature regarding the history of hallucinogenic and sedative drug trials, as well as current research on the use of these drugs to treat mental illness. The potential impact that these drugs could have on mental health treatment will be discussed, as well as the evolution of the mental health nursing role, especially as it pertains to these innovative treatment options.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother and sister, Sarah and Katherine Cherry, without whom  
I would never be the woman I am today.

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## HISTORY OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE, STIGMAS, AND PSYCHIATRIC NURSING

Throughout the history of society, mental illnesses have been stigmatized and, in the past, may not have been emphasized as important to address when providing healthcare to individuals. In recent years, more of an emphasis has been placed on the treatment of mental illness and its importance in overall wellness; however, seeking mental health treatment may still be considered taboo in various cultures across the world. Individuals may fear being outcast in society due to their mental illness, and therefore, do not seek out the necessary treatment to live a healthy life.

Psychiatric nurses play an important role in providing care for individuals with mental illness, although this area of nursing can be under-appreciated. Halter (2002) explores the lack of discussion about the stigmas that plague the profession of mental health nursing and discusses the effects of these stigmas on nursing students. Halter (2002) found that some students have reported the idea of psychiatric nursing as being a backup option, or that they had been warned by their family to not enter into this field of nursing. Media sources have overdramatized the role of mental health nursing and have contributed to some of the stigma in this area of nursing (Halter, 2002). These stereotypes of what are expected in a psychiatric unit or hospital are usually thought of as something out of a movie, such as *One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest*, *Psycho*, or the negative images of these settings from TV shows and other media outlet influences, which are readily available to the general public (Anderson, 2003). Great strides have been necessary in

recent years to reduce the stigmas and negative stereotypes of what mental healthcare and psychiatric nursing consists of in the eyes of the public. Psychiatric nurses can play a significant role in changing the idea that receiving mental healthcare is embarrassing or will cause societal disapproval.

Stigmatism in the field of psychiatric nursing is not only seen with the general public, but also among other health care professionals. Halter (2002) described how some healthcare professionals assume nurses go into the psychiatric field because of their own psychological flaws or trauma from their childhood. These assumptions only fuel the stereotypes that flood this profession. Halter (2002) stated, “Psychiatric nursing’s silence on negative perceptions, and perhaps stigmatization by nursing students, colleagues, and the general public, is both noteworthy and alarming” (p. 25). It is important for not only the public, but also the health care community to credit the psychiatric profession with the recognition and value it deserves.

Psychiatric nursing care is much different than the care that is delivered by other types of nurses, such as medical surgical nurses, but is also an extremely important skill for nurses working in all settings. In all parts of the hospital, or any medical setting, you are guaranteed to run into a mental health situation. Many patients have mental health needs; thus, it is expected that all nurses will utilize psychiatric nursing skills during their career. As a psychiatric nurse, you still have the life of your patients in your hands; however, it is vastly different than making sure your patient stays alive from an illness that you can visibly see, such as hypertension or diabetes. The responsibility of the entire floor falls to the nursing staff as the patients are a danger to themselves or others or are unable to care for themselves. Psychiatric nurses then have the responsibilities of not only

their patients, but also the unit as a whole, which can obviously be extremely difficult (Thomson et al., 2019). Psychiatric nurses are also in unique a position to build rapport and trust with their patients and can assist with creating opportunities to help these patients with considering various modes of treatment options during their time of need (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020).

A holistic approach must be utilized in psychiatric nursing, which allows for a more individualized approach to each patient's needs. This holistic approach includes using the best evidence-based practice and may include the use of alternative drug treatments. Some of the drugs traditionally used to treat mental illness may not be as effective for patients as once thought (Wong, 2017). In recent years, the use of psychedelic and sedative drugs has been researched as a viable option for the treatment of a variety of mental illnesses, and some states have even legalized the use of these drugs. For instance, in 2020 Oregon became the first state in the nation to legalize the use of psilocybin, the hallucinogenic ingredient in mushrooms, as a treatment option for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Foden-Vencil, 2020). Psychiatric nurses may be in a prime position to play a role in the oversight of psychedelic drug use for the treatment of mental illness (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020).

## THE HISTORY OF THE USE OF PSYCHEDELIC AND SEDATIVE DRUG TREATMENTS FROM THE 1950's TO THE 1960's

The use of psychedelic drug treatment is not new to the medical field. In the past, clinical trials examined the use of hallucinogenic drugs for a variety of medical treatments; however, due to safety and ethical concerns these trials were halted. With changes in clinical research trials, the use of hallucinogenic drugs has again become a viable treatment option, especially for individuals with mental illness; however, it is important to look back at the history of psychedelic drug use before exploring the current use of these alternative treatment options.

According to Wong (2017), “The idea that psychedelic drugs might be used to treat mental illness emerged in the 1950s, a decade or so after Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann first described his experiences of taking LSD” (para 4.) In the past, the drug LSD was used in a few unorthodox clinical trials. Most notably, in the 1960s, Doctors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, conducted the Harvard Psilocybin Project, where they used Psilocybin as a way to further understand human psychology as it relates to the environment and how psychedelics affect the human brain (Harvard University, Department of Psychology, 2021). The project was shut down by Harvard and both professors were banished from academia when it was discovered that their study did not follow the code of ethics. Leary and Alpert were said to have given the drug to undergraduate and graduate students without their consent, all while they themselves were using the hallucinogen (Harvard University, Department of Psychology, 2021).

Dr. Sidney Cohen made waves in the 1960s discussing the use of LSD as a treatment for alcoholism and as a method for enhancing creativity (Novak, 1997). Initially, Dr. Cohen stated that LSD appeared to be safe for medical use in a supervised setting; however, his opinion changed in 1962 when he stated that this drug was dangerous. The abuse of LSD led the government to crackdown on LSD regulation. Before he deemed LSD dangerous, Dr. Cohen conducted three different LSD clinical trials to attempt to understand the drug's effect on the human psyche. Initially Dr. Cohen believed that LSD had the possibility to treat some mental disorders. He mainly focused on treating minor personality disorders in the late 1950s. During these clinical trials, Dr. Cohen evaluated his patients six months after the therapy by the terms of their ability to find a job, sustain a relationship, or remain abstinent from alcohol, and his findings indicated a 73% improvement rate in these patients based on his criteria (Novak, 1997). Although Dr. Cohen's research showed promise for the future use of psychedelic drugs to treat mental illness, LSD was being abused at the time, which eliminated any idea that it could be a treatment option.

In the 1960s, a project funded by NASA attempted to examine an unusual way to communicate with dolphins (Burnett, 2010). Dr. John C. Lilly injected himself and a dolphin named Peter with LSD in search of a new way to communicate. As would be expected, when NASA got word of what was happening the study was immediately shut down. It is important to note that this study did not go without its benefits. As a result of Dr. Lilly's work, the idea that dolphins are an intelligent species was discovered and the Marine Life Protection Act was enacted (Burnett, 2010).

Another notable psychedelic drug research trial was conducted in 1957 by a psychiatrist named Dr. Humphry Osmond (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020). Dr. Osmond researched LSD and believed this drug was showing promise as a possible treatment for mental illness. Osmond tested the use of LSD as a way to possibly understand schizophrenia. He then shifted to examining LSD as a therapeutic option for alcoholism, which after one year demonstrated a 40-45% improvement rate in participants being studied; however, not long after these findings were discovered support for this type of research was withdrawn (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020).

After the cessation of the above mentioned experiments, the use of LSD, or any other form of psychedelics in the scientific realm became untouchable. In 1970, not long after these experiments, President Nixon passed the Controlled Substance Act, which made these once legal drugs, illegal (Philips, 2019). The idea of the therapeutic use of hallucinogenic drugs had become taboo and was no longer considered as viable treatment option for mental illnesses.

## CURRENT RESEARCH AND USE OF PSYCHEDELIC AND SEDATIVE DRUG TREATMENTS

The use of hallucinogenic and sedative drugs has recently been reexamined as an option for the treatment of mental illness, since some common drug treatment options have been discovered as not being as effective as researchers once thought (Wong, 2017). For example, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI's), which are drugs commonly used to treat depression, have only been found to be effective in 1 out of 5 people, and in addition, may come with undesired side effects (Wong, 2017). PTSD is a mental illness that can be difficult to treat and may not respond well to traditional psychiatric medications, and because of this psychedelics are again being researched as a potential treatment option for this disorder. For instance, MDMA (Ecstasy), which works by flooding the brain with serotonin, has recently been used in clinical trials for the treatment of individuals with PTSD. In these trials, MDMA allowed for 67% of participants to no longer experience symptoms of PTSD. These findings have led to increased studies into the use of hallucinogenic and sedative drug treatments for mental illnesses in recent years (Wong, 2017).

The opportunity for previously illegal drugs to possibly become a treatment option is controversial and highly stigmatized. The lack of success in the past with hallucinogenic and sedative drug trials has contributed to negative views of these drugs as a credible treatment option. The concern for public safety as these drugs entered the black market made way for greater drug regulations and government intervention. Since

the role that these drugs play in the treatment of mental illness now have become less stigmatized, more research is being conducted on their potential use. Institutions, such as Imperial, John Hopkins, Berkley, University of California, and Icahn School of Medicine have all opened centers devoted to learning more about the treatment options of psychedelic drugs (Tullis, 2021).

Tullis (2021) states, “psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy could provide needed options for debilitating mental-health disorders including PTSD, major depressive disorder, alcohol use disorder, anorexia nervosa and more that kill thousands every year in the United States, and cost billions worldwide in lost productivity” (p. 507). The proof behind this bold statement lies within several small studies that have been safely conducted with psychedelics, which have indicated a positive impact on the outcomes of mental illnesses. With this new information coming to light in safe clinical trials, there is greater possibility that some of these previously illegal drugs could now become a new treatment option for some difficult to treat mental health disorders. Since these alternative drug treatments have just recently been reexamined in research, many clinical trials have just ended and the results should be released soon, which will then be given to regulators to decide if this could be a prescription option for patients (Tullis, 2021). Of note, patients with schizophrenia have been excluded from current psychedelic drug trials because it has been found that these drugs can potentially cause long-lasting psychotic reactions in patients with a personal or family history of psychosis (Tullis, 2021).

Recently, ketamine, LSD, and other psychedelic drugs have demonstrated the potential to be a viable treatment option for a variety of mental health disorders (Tullis, 2021). For instance, psychedelic drug treatments have shown to be one of the most



effective treatment options for PTSD (Tullis, 2021). Other non-psychosis related mental health disorders have also had positive results from recent smaller clinical trials, which indicates a strong likelihood for the future use of these alternative drug option (Tullis, 2021). Since these newer trials have been safely administered and have had reliable results, it is probable that soon there will be a drastic change in treatment options for mental health disorders.

It is important to note that psychedelic drugs are being studied as a potential treatment option for non-psychiatric disorders. Psilocybin, otherwise known as mushrooms, has been studied as a treatment option for end of life care and smoking cessation (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020). End of life care is a sensitive topic and can be difficult for patients to talk about and for providers to treat. In a recent study conducted with terminally ill patients, psilocybin was shown to have a positive effect on the palliative care by reducing the anxiety associated with dying (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020). Pilot research with psilocybin for smoking cessation has been conducted and has shown greater success than conventional and pharmaceutical treatment options, with minimal side effects (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020). These research trials demonstrate the expansive capacity that psychedelic and sedative drug treatments may offer outside of psychiatry.

Psychiatric nurses have the potential to play a crucial role in the implementation of psychedelic and sedative drug use as a treatment option in practice (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020). The literature indicates nurses have played an important role in studies examining psychedelic drugs, including providing therapy and other forms of support during clinical trials (Denis-Lalonde & Estefan, 2020). As previously mentioned,

psychiatric nurses are in a prime role to build a therapeutic and trusting relationship with patients and are well-aware of the stigmas that may accompany alternative forms of treatment, such as the ones discussed in this paper. Psychiatric nurses can use the safety of the therapeutic relationship to examine any concerns patients may have about using these drugs and can assist the patient with deciding if this is a viable treatment option for them.

There is a long and difficult path in front of the psychedelic and sedative drug treatment movement, due to the fact that there are many obstacles, such as stigma, to overcome; however, this has not deterred scientists from researching the use of these drugs in current and future practice. Many scientists feel confident that we are on a verge of a major breakthrough for how we treat mental illness with these alternative forms of drug treatment, which could lead to significantly improved patient outcomes (Tullis, 2021).

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