PSYCHEDELICS

Ayahuasca: Ancient Healing for Modern Minds

Let's explore the science of the tea that promises mental health breakthroughs.

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KEY POINTS

- Ayahuasca is a traditional Amazonian tea made from the ayahuasca vine and chacruna shrub.
- Ayahuasca can be effective in treating mental health conditions, including depression and addiction.
- It can potentially dampen the brain's fear center activity.
- Ayahuasca is a new paradigm for mental healthcare by focusing on well-being rather than suppressing symptoms.

We are in the midst of a mental health crisis, with reports of common mental health problems like stress, depression, and anxiety increasing every year. Millions of people suffer from these debilitating mental health problems, which not only decrease your overall quality of life but also disrupt work and sour relationships.
While different medical and psychological treatments exist, most focus on treating symptoms rather than addressing their root cause. However, recent research shows alternative plant-based medicines may provide new hope for relief. One that's recently risen to fame is known as ayahuasca.

This traditional Amazonian tea is generating increasing scientific support for its ability to provide deep healing for the mind and soul. Recent research suggests that this ancient plant medicine may have beneficial effects for many mental health conditions that conventional treatments have struggled to address.

What Is Ayahuasca?

Ayahuasca is a psychoactive tea made by brewing the ayahuasca vine (Banisteriopsis caapi) with other plants like the chacruna shrub (Psychotria viridis). The ayahuasca vine has substances called harmala alkaloids that act like a kind of brain chemistry regulator. The chacruna leaves, on the other hand, contain a powerful hallucinogenic compound called N-dimethyltryptamine (or DMT for short).

Normally, when you consume DMT on its own, enzymes in your stomach break it down before it can affect your brain and create psychedelic experiences. However, when you mix DMT-containing plants with the ayahuasca vine, which has those harmful alkaloids, it prevents the breakdown of DMT in the stomach. This combination allows people to undergo a unique and intense altered state of consciousness induced by DMT.

When ingested orally in a ceremonial setting, the effects of ayahuasca typically begin within 30-60 minutes and can last between 4-6 hours. When taken, people tend to experience vivid visions, gain emotional insights, and have profound spiritual experiences that not only help self-discovery but create new pathways to dealing with the root causes of severe psychological distress.

Ayahuasca ceremonies are facilitated by spiritual healers, psychologists, or "shamans" and are usually accompanied by ritual music that guides the participant throughout the experience. While the hallucinogenic effects can be intense, several studies show that ayahuasca is safe when used responsibly and under the supervision of trained professionals.
New Hope for Treatment-Resistant Depression

One of ayahuasca's most promising uses is for treating treatment-resistant depression. In a 2015 study, people with chronic, treatment-resistant depression were given a single dose of ayahuasca and, within a day, showed dramatic improvements in their overall mood, which lasted for over three weeks. This led to a randomized controlled trial in 2018, with participants showing similar and sustainable changes in mental health after a single session.

But how and why would you get these effects from a single session? Researchers found that after ingesting ayahuasca, there is increased blood flow in areas of the brain related to memory, emotion regulation, and cognitive processing. It also shows new connections between neurons. This suggests it allows people to reprocess or redefine memories and traumas in a healthier way. By helping people gain new perspectives on their past struggles, ayahuasca seems to help alleviate depression over the longer term.

Effects on Anxiety, PTSD, and Addiction

These results have also led scientists to explore ayahuasca's effects on other mental health problems. A recent study with people exhibiting treatment-resistant anxiety found that a single ayahuasca session led to significant reductions in such over 21 days. Similarly, studies have shown that ayahuasca can dampen activity in the brain's amygdala (the brain's fear center that is usually hyperactive in people with anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This points to potential uses for ayahuasca-assisted therapies for these conditions as well.

Additionally, several studies have shown that ayahuasca consumption leads to decreased cravings and substance use among people with drug, alcohol, tobacco, and even food addictions. In a survey of ayahuasca users, over two-thirds reported reducing or quitting substance use after taking ayahuasca. This spiritual medicine seems to allow people to gain insight into their addictive behaviors and find the willpower to change.

Self-Discovery and Improving Well-being
Beyond mental health treatment, many people report that ayahuasca provides a sense of meaning, connectedness, and enhanced well-being. Studies show it can increase mindfulness, creative thinking, and natural connections between people. The vivid visions and spiritual encounters often provide people with new perspectives on life, relationships, and personal issues. Some describe meeting spirit beings who provide healing wisdom.

A recent study also showed that regular ayahuasca users score higher on measures of happiness, hopefulness, mindfulness, and environmental mastery than non-users. By temporarily expanding consciousness, ayahuasca allows many people to return to their daily lives with an improved sense of purpose and direction.

The Future of Psychedelic Medicine

The increased interest in research on ayahuasca reflects a potential paradigm shift in psychiatry and the traditional medical model. After decades of focusing on developing treatments that suppress symptoms, scientists are now exploring ways to enhance well-being by modulating brain dynamics, emotion, and consciousness. The renewed ability to scientifically study psychedelic compounds like ayahuasca is leading to breakthroughs in our understanding of mental health and its treatment.

While more research is still needed, the evidence so far indicates that ayahuasca-assisted therapy could provide much-needed help for people struggling with treatment-resistant mental health issues. By combining traditional talk therapies with the unique potential of ayahuasca to reshape how people process thoughts, emotions, and memories, this integrative medicine approach may succeed where pharmaceuticals alone have failed. As we learn to harness ayahuasca's healing potential, we may be witnessing the dawn of a new era in mental healthcare.

References


About the Author

Llewellyn E. van Zyl, Ph.D., is a professor of positive psychology at the Optentia Research Unit within the North-West University and is attached to the Eindhoven University of Technology.