

Vision for Ending Psychedelic Abuse

2020

Towards a Membership Ethics Oversight Association for Psychedelic Practitioners

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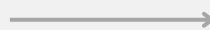


Purpose

With a growing interest in psychedelic therapies, allegations of abuse and ethical misconduct are continuing to arise, and the need for standards, regulation, and enforcement is ever more apparent. As individuals seek opportunities to engage in psychedelic healing, or to become psychedelic practitioners, it is of paramount importance we ensure safety in these practices. Arising from informal community discussions over the past few months, this document presents a preliminary draft vision of what oversight and ethical guidance for psychedelic practitioners could entail.

We envision something similar to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) in scientific research.

<https://publicationethics.org/facilitation-and-integrity-subcommittee>



Psychedelic abuse is repetitive and ongoing.



Scan or [click here](https://bit.ly/3QfedGp) to learn more about abuses happening in psychedelic spaces through survivors' who have come forward about their experiences.

<https://bit.ly/3QfedGp>



Scan or [click here](https://bit.ly/3KNKFyq) to read more about the authors' work to highlight the concerns within psychedelic therapies, including ways forward. More work on this can be found [here](https://bit.ly/3QhknGc) and [here](https://bit.ly/3eqthUw).

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A Need for Oversight

The potential of psychedelics and entheogens is now reaching greater legal accessibility around the world. At the same time, ethical protections by regional criminal and civil law, as well as professional licensing associations, may not be sophisticated or responsive enough to meet the unique ethical considerations of these substances. **We are suggesting that a membership association of psychedelic practitioners be established to promote ethical standards and provide a means for people to find redress and repair when problems arise.**

To put it simply, psychedelic users who run into problems with their guides or therapists engaging in unethical behavior need more options than just "call the police, hire a lawyer, or report to the licensing board." While users might find these avenues useful, more often than not, existing police-lawyers-licensing boards are an all-or-nothing approach that just do not work or only work in the most flagrant cases with overwhelming evidence. As a result, abuse in the psychedelics world, historically, has rarely been addressed properly. **We want to hold psychedelic practitioners to a higher standard. And we want that standard enforced.** We believe the psychedelic community can lead the way in doing this.



The justice system is failing us. We need responses that will provide meaningful protection to psychedelic users and practitioners alike.

A higher, enforceable standard also gives practitioners greater safety. An unhappy client who feels a line was crossed, but doesn't go to police, lawyers, or the licensing board, is a client we care about and who we want to take care of. **Practitioners need a way to have problems and accusations addressed properly so their names can be cleared and their reputations respected** - rather than just more rumors and gossip. Practitioners who can say, "I'm a member of an ethics association, my clients can always complain there and I will work for resolution," is a much better message to share publicly than, "You don't have any proof I broke laws so I will ignore you to protect my own interests."

Setting up the Association

The idea is an association (possibly called TripGUARD?) that is member-run, with officer elections by members, and full transparency of finances and decision making.



Members pay an annual fee to fund the organization.

No donations or foundation grants are accepted (due to potential conflict of interest since the psychedelics world is so tight-knit). The annual fee (such as one equivalent session hour) from members covers association costs.

Anyone working with psychedelics is welcome.



Whether working in an underground, decriminalized, or medical setting; any therapist, guide, teacher, shaman, coach, integration counsellor, doctor, or other person working with psychedelics would be welcome. **Membership does not imply illegal activity, and confidentiality would be respected***.

*Confidential where needed is a vital consideration: we aim to learn from other harm-reduction contexts. For example, the association could hold information related to legal activities only, with public listings as integration practitioners or guides, not substance provision. For practitioners who prefer anonymity, membership could be confirmed through encrypted tokens and enforced through the code rather than disclosing names in the community where not appropriate.



Members may use the association logo and name to promote their work.

Clients who see the association membership feel more confident with the added layer of protection.

How Oversight Would Work

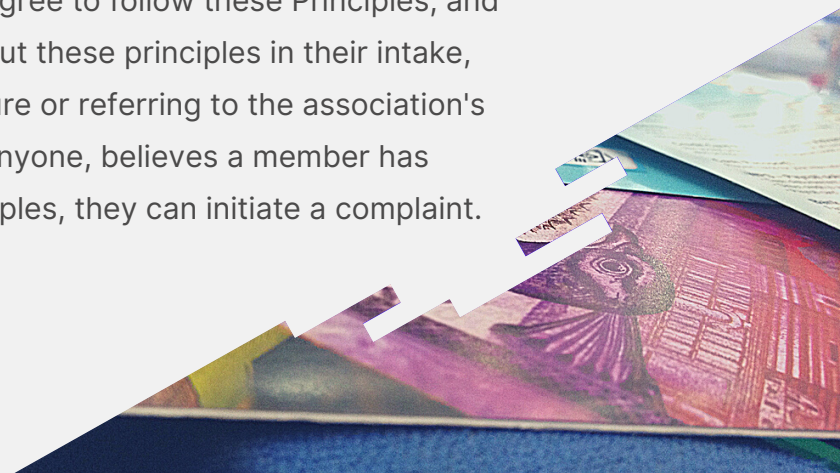
The association will publish a list of Core Ethical Principles. The principles embrace and expand local and regional laws, as well as relevant professional codes. Where laws or professionals codes are stricter, they supersede the association.



The Core Ethical Principles reflect **leading edge values** and the most **rigorous protections for clients and practice.**

The principles are established collectively by members and volunteers. A clear code of conduct will be established for guiding psychedelics and working with people who have taken psychedelics.

Association Members agree to follow these Principles, and must inform clients about these principles in their intake, such as giving a brochure or referring to the association's website. If a client, or anyone, believes a member has violated the Core Principles, they can initiate a complaint.



Investigating Complaints



The association uses a clear and transparent process to investigate complaints.

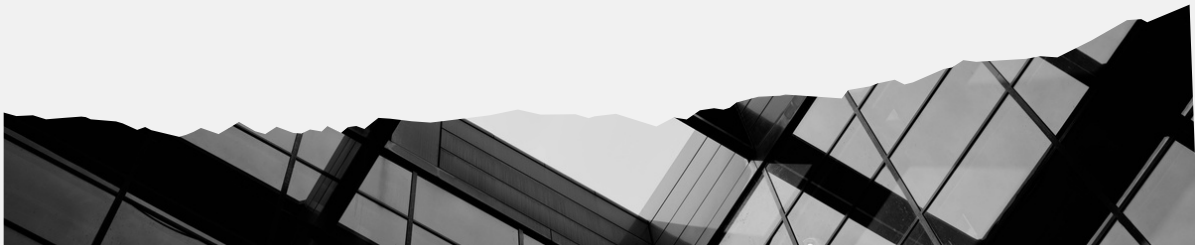
If a member is found to have violated Core Principles, or has confounded or resisted investigation, the association can make **recommendations for resolution** (similar to COPE).

Member responses to complaints, including responses to recommendations, may be transparent and listed on the member database of the association.

Successful resolutions can strengthen member reputations by demonstrating a willingness to admit mistakes and change.

Members who defy or will not cooperate with resolutions can now be seen openly by the community deciding who to hire or associate with. More ambiguous or lower level problems can be reported transparently to allow clients and the community to make their own judgments.

The association can remove membership when Core Principles are found to have clearly been broken and no redress has been agreed to by the member.





Ethics Accountability In Practice

Members can freely advertise that they are ethics association members through their website, business cards, etc. using the association's trademark.

Members are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the Core Ethical Principles and practices established by the ethics association. These standards are higher and stricter than just local laws and psychotherapy ethics or legal liability, and more responsive and accountable.



If a client feels that their experience deviated from these high ethical standards, they have the added assurance that the ethics association offers complaint and mediation resources to hold members accountable. All members of the association have their complaints history, where appropriate, listed publicly on the association's website, giving potential new clients/users an added layer of pre-screening to find practitioners with integrity.

The following scenarios demonstrate how a membership with the Psychedelic Ethics Association would benefit both practitioner and client.

Example 1

Simone's community decriminalized psilocybin, and she has been called by spirit to guide others. She apprenticed as a guide and has strong community recognition and support. She adheres to the highest standards of safety, harm reduction, and ethics. She also welcomes feedback when she makes mistakes, and if she were ever in a confusing conflict with a client, she would want them to have a place to go to help them both sort things out with the highest outcome.

To demonstrate her commitment to these values and prepare practically for any challenges, she joins the ethics association with an annual fee equal to one hour of her payment. She does not charge for her work, and estimates a median donation of \$40 (other members pay differently). In return she puts on all of her outreach material and her website the "ethics association member" banner and link. She is bound by the laws of her region, ethical standards of any profession she is a member of (including being an ordained minister for example), as well as the standards of the ethics association.

If anyone ever has a complaint or issue with her, they have recourse through contacting the ethics association's Complaints and Integrity process. Of course, they can also still consult local laws, and seek redress through lawsuits and the legal system.



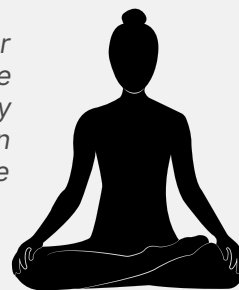
Ethics Accountability In Practice

Example 2

Colleen is the priestess of a goddess church and ethics association member. She does a session with a client where the client agreed to bodywork under the influence of psilocybin. The bodywork was consented to before the work with psilocybin. During the bodywork session, after the client took psilocybin, Colleen asks her client if she wants to take off all her clothes for a full body massage. This is the first time that total nudity was discussed. Afterwards the client feels weird and violated. She is too ashamed to contact Colleen and stops working with her.

A few months later she learns more about the ethics association and realizes Colleen is a member. She contacts the ethics association with a complaint. The ethics association takes her account of what happened and contacts Colleen. Colleen is extremely grateful as she had tried to contact the client and got no response. Colleen explains she just made a mistake, as full nudity is very common and expected in bodywork sessions in her professional community and region.

Colleen apologizes to the client, with the ethics association forwarding her email. The client accepts the apology as an honest mistake. The association reports the incident on the website after the client says they would prefer that it be public, and adds a comment that Colleen made an honest mistake and has restored her trust as other parts of the work were great.



Example 3

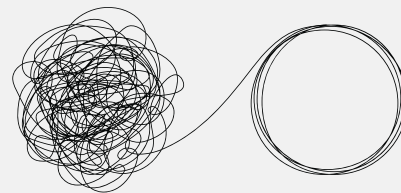
Martin is a member of the ethics association and pays \$250/year, equivalent to one hour of his fee. Celia does three MDMA sessions with him and has an extreme panic attack after the third. She talks to Martin and he tells her that panic attacks are a rare side effect of MDMA. Celia realizes that Martin never told her about this before. She looks up the ethics association website and realizes that Martin violated a Core Principle of full prior informed consent of risks and benefits of MDMA. She emails Martin, but he doesn't respond to the email.

Celia contacts the ethics association and they ethics association agrees to initiate an investigation. When the ethics association contacts Martin he agrees he failed to inform Celia, and agrees he should have responded to her email. He says he will contact her to apologize, and report back to the ethics association.

Celia and Martin reach an agreement that Martin does a free mediation session at his expense and refunds her the full amount of all of her 3 session fees as restitution to help her pay for additional therapy to process her panic. They inform the ethics association who agrees this is a valid resolution. Martin and Celia reach an agreement; later Celia decides to work with Martin again, relieved he has apologized and reassured by his continued caring and new responsiveness. Their relationship has improved through Martin admitting a mistake.

The ethics association website records the event and notes that Martin responded ethically to the complaint, admitted he made a mistake, and followed an acceptable resolution, and that Celia felt confident enough to work with him again. Future clients of Martin can now see the incident report on the association's website - some will be more wary, but others will trust Martin even more now because he ultimately recognized and resolved his mistake. Martin is also now more likely to make sure he informs future clients of psychedelic risks, and has a more honest and deeper relation to his own fallibility and is more trustable by many clients.

Ethics Accountability In Practice



Example 4

Manuel is a student of psychedelic therapy, and his licensed psychologist therapist/teacher offers free underground sessions in exchange for bodywork. They begin a sexual relationship that continues for 2 years. Manuel ends the relationship, and a year later learns the therapist/teacher had sex with two other students. He reports the relationship to the licensing board, who explains that because there is no written documentation or video of the relationship, they will treat the accusation as false and take no action. He reports it to the police who do not respond. He speaks with a lawyer who offers to take the case but it will take up to \$60,000 in legal fees and the lawyer says it is likely Manuel will lose in the end because of how the legal process works.

The therapist/teacher is a member of the ethics association so Manuel contacts them. The ethics association takes his account and initiates an investigation. The therapist/teacher denies the sexual relationship took place. Manuel shares with the ethics association the testimonies of 4 friends who corroborate his side of the story. The ethics association finds that the therapist/teacher's denial is not credible. The ethics association publishes an incident report naming the therapist/teacher but not Manuel or any other details, and informs the therapist/teacher their membership from the ethics association is suspended until they offer more cooperation in resolving the matter.

The ethics association advises the therapist that the incident will remain on the website and searchable on the internet under their name until there has been some resolution or development that would indicate it should be removed. After several months the ethics association discovers the therapist/teacher is still falsely advertising they are a member of the ethics association. The ethics association sends a notification to cease and desist for trademark violation, and the therapist/teacher removes the fraudulent listing. The ethics association appends this further violation on the website.

Future clients who search the therapist/teacher on the internet will find this account and can use it to better assess whether they want to work with this therapist/teacher and how, without the protection of the ethics association. New clients have better informed consent of this practitioner's lack of ethics.

Example 5

Tree is a psychotherapist who lives in a US region where offering psychedelics to clients is legal. They are bound by local laws, as well as the ethical requirements of their psychotherapy license. They advertise their ethics association membership with a badge and link on their website, intake forms, Psychology Today listing, and brochure to potential clients, who are reassured by this added level of safety.

As a result, a person who was previously mistreated by a psychedelic therapist, who then filed a complaint with the licensing board and was told nothing could be done, and then was told the same by the police, will feel confident coming to Tree because they now have an additional layer of protection. It also signals Tree's commitment to the highest ethical standards.

Ethics Accountability In Practice

Example 6

Miks has a terrible experience in a psychedelic session with his licensed therapist Julia. Julia is a member of the ethics association, and so Miks contacts the integrity committee of the ethics association to complain about Julia's abuse. The ethics association's screening committee reviews the email and advises Miks to provide detail on what Julia did that violated the ethics association's Core Ethical Principles. They also refers Miks to the licensing board that Julia is under, to local law enforcement, and to the ethics association list of legal referrals.

Miks says that Julia was a terrible therapist and didn't care about him. The ethics association writes back that Miks has not presented any evidence that a line was crossed, and they refer Miks to an educational resource: *What to do if your therapist did a terrible job, but didn't cross any ethical lines*. This resource lists community forums and resources for the client to turn to, including an ethics association forum where volunteers will assist clients who are unsure how to proceed. The resource has advice such as:

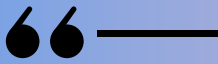
- Meet with your therapist and a trusted friend to support you in presenting your point of view
- Ask to record the sessions with your therapist
- Tell the therapist how they could make it right, would an apology work or do you need more?
- Leave a critical review on a review website such as Google Maps or Yelp.

The ethics association has no grounds to open an investigation or devote time to this issue. Miks discusses with others in the community who repeat what the ethics association said, that even though Julia was a terrible therapist in his opinion, no ethical line was crossed, and sometimes people have bad luck with therapists. While there are therapists that a lot of people consider terrible, Julia may have other clients who disagree, and she may not be terrible with everyone.

The community refers Miks to resources on how to screen/interview therapists to find a good fit, and how to leave the relationship early if things feel unhelpful. Miks meets with a lawyer for an hour consultation and the lawyer advises Miks that they do not have a strong case because no evidence has been presented of civil or criminal law violation, and will not take the case. Miks writes a one-star Google review, writes a blog post, and writes an angry letter to Julia. Julia responds with a letter offering to meet with Miks to discuss their experience, which she cc's to the ethics association, but says that because they did not cross the line into abuse Miks should remove the word "abuse" from his review and blog post. Miks will not remove the word, and so Julia contacts the ethics association. The ethics association refers Julia to an educational resource: *What to do if you are a therapist and your client makes false or unfair accusations against you, which includes information about defamation libel/slander law and free speech*. The resource points out that "while 'abuse' has a legal definition, a person who details what their intended meaning of the word is, such as misusing power or acting rudely, would likely be protected against defamation because they are not in actuality making a false claim, since they defined abuse as their opinion. However, saying publicly 'My therapist sexually abused me' could expose you to legal action, which would likely end in a ruling against you if the statement is demonstrably false, such as for lack of evidence. Evidence that could demonstrate the truth of the statement could be a friend that you told about the incident at the time, an email you wrote describing it at the time, or journal entries.

The ethics association resource also advises therapists to respond warmly and with a welcoming attitude to client complaints, to take time to discuss concerns, and to never invalidate a client, while also affirming their need to not be falsely accused and defamed publicly. The ethics association points out that most therapist-client conflicts can be prevented from escalating when a therapist takes a proactive approach to listening to and supporting the client when they offer negative feedback.

Support Psychedelic Oversight



Not Reinventing The Wheel

Nobody owns this idea; this is an open source, horizontal, collective effort involving existing organizations, initiatives, and individuals who support the integrity of this vision. Maybe you and your organization are already working in similar directions?

We are not gold rush startup entrepreneurs: we just really want ethics oversight!

Expression of Interest

This vision is in the early formative stages, and we are gathering people who feel this might be a viable way forward for safety in psychedelic spaces where no other options seem viable. We want to gather together to continue planning and discussing. If you support the vision of a Psychedelic Ethics Association in some form and wish to be involved in its support and/or development, please connect with us via your information at the [following form](#):



Contact us / share this document:

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