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Am I ready to drink ayahuasca?



Sean Chiddy Apr 7 · 7 min read

If you are considering drinking ayahuasca you might have heard some amazing stories about its healing potential and maybe you're wondering if it can help you. This article is intended to give you a few things to consider that might be relevant to your decision.

Working with ayahuasca requires that we can handle and take responsibility for very profound and confronting experiences, to face our shadow (the aspects of our psyche that we tend to ignore, repress or deny) and to work through whatever comes up in the process, including unresolved emotions and trauma. It is worth considering to what extent we are realistically confident that we have the time, space and resources to work through whatever arises, potentially for weeks or months after the ceremony or retreat.

What arises may include familiar things, like traumatic material resurfacing; or profoundly unfamiliar things, like aspects of our personality we didn't know existed, intense visionary experiences, encountering altered states of consciousness, including experiencing oneself beyond or without our normal identity (such as ego death or a sense of becoming something completely unfamiliar like an animal spirit) and many other incredible, wonderful or very challenging encounters with the unknown.

Ayahuasca can bring up challenging experiences for anyone who drinks it. However, just like any experience in life, the way we perceive and respond is influenced by our conditioning, including the level of trauma we carry or any psychological conditions we are prone to. If you are considering drinking, it is well worthwhile honestly reflecting on how you react when you are triggered and how available support is to you if you need it.

Many people experience all of these things without too much difficulty. For others such experiences can seem destabilizing for a period of time afterwards. Sometimes people may find it highly disruptive and confronting in a way they consider negative to the extent, it could be argued, they were not ready or were not in a life situation that made it suitable for them to do this work. These are not absolute statements, rather general ideas to help you reflect on your own situation.

If you are expecting ayahuasca to passively heal you, and do the work for you, you may be disappointed. It tends to be an active and relational process where we feel like we are developing a relationship with the medicine as a kind of teacher or ally who guides us towards self knowledge and healing, rather than passively doing all the work for us. Dramatic healings do occur, but the norm is that you will be shown things you need to work on actively in some way to heal yourself and bring lasting change into your life. It is normal that the process develops over time, requiring ongoing work on our part.

Even people who feel amazing after a ceremony, or retreat, are usually faced some time later, with the recognition that old patterns seem to be returning, and that they have to continue to work on these things for themselves to really uproot the problem they want to be free of and to cultivate the kind of life they want to live. Therefore, knowing how to work on yourself in advance is probably a sensible idea.

If you are not willing or able to do this kind of work, it may be better to prepare yourself by learning some practices, attending therapy or doing something that will help you develop the resilience and self-regulation abilities required to do so. Ayahuasca does teach us through experience, but it can be much easier to learn some spiritual, psychological or healing approaches, for example, in advance. There are some conditions where this could be considered highly advisable or essential.

It may be contraindicated to drink ayahuasca if you have a history of psychotic experiences, such as schizophrenia or bi-polar depression, or have a tendency towards self harming or suicidal behavior. Ayahuasca can invoke altered states and perceptions that for people with a tendency towards psychosis may provoke them. It may require considerable resources, specialist knowledge and support to safely contain someone experiencing such an episode. For people who are suicidal or engage in self harm, it is worth considering that, whilst ayahuasca can aid depression, it can also bring up unresolved emotional content into the mind. If someone tends to react to being overwhelmed by becoming suicidal or harming themselves, this needs to be considered a possible reaction to drinking ayahuasca. In practical terms, in the circumstances listed

above, and with respect to many people's living situation in the Western world, this may end up involving mental health, medical or psychiatric support. Therefore, in some cases, it may be better to avoid drinking ayahuasca due to these possibilities. Again, this is not an absolute statement, but something to consider to help people make informed choices about what they want to do.

If someone is currently experiencing symptoms of acute trauma (PTSD), complex developmental trauma (C-PTSD) or has a personality disorder like borderline personality disorder, that tends to imply they may have more complex or dramatic emotional reactions to challenging experiences. If they are well prepared and supported, they may still be able to work through what arises in a beneficial way, but they may feel quite overwhelmed for some time, depending on what arises. So this possibility should be considered and prepared for. Whilst many people with even severe trauma histories encounter ayahuasca as a positive, healing experience, the more trauma in someone's history, or complex their psychological state, the more we can anticipate they could experience challenges during a ceremony and in the period afterwards.



Ayahuasca can bring up traumatic memories. When that happens there is an opportunity for healing, and even people who have a trauma history may benefit from that, but there is a need to be able to face, work willingly with and ultimately to

surrender to the experience as it happens and afterwards. A ceremony will usually have an on-flow where what arose in the ceremony continues to be in effect for days, weeks or sometimes months afterwards. For some people with a significant trauma history, their tendency may be to go into a state of resistance, strong fear, or numbing and dissociation when faced with these experiences. They may also not recognize what is happening to them, especially when pre-verbal or severe trauma arises. If so they may benefit from support in resolving these reactions. So it is necessary to consider honestly how much knowledge, resourcing and support you have available and if it is not available to seriously consider delaying ayahuasca work until you have a solid support base in place and ideally have done some significant work on your traumas so that you are less likely to be overwhelmed or surprised by what comes up. In some cases, you might be better off not drinking ayahuasca at all, and working on things in a different way.

The willingness to surrender to the experience is an important aspect of working with ayahuasca. If you don't surrender, you may learn a challenging lesson about resistance. There is nothing wrong with this per se; in fact, learning about the boundaries and limits of your will and identity is one of the many benefits of working with this medicine. Nevertheless, this requires a preparedness to face considerable discomfort. The more you resist, the more intensity you often have to face. Learning to surrender is the other side of that polarity, and is often the gateway to elevated and beautiful experiences that are profoundly life affirming. Therefore, some understanding and practice of surrendered presence such as that taught in mindfulness or an equivalent modality, is likely to be very helpful.

It is also worth reflecting on the situation you are living in. If your family or the people around you are going to react negatively to you experiencing something outside of their worldview, you will have to find a way to manage that. If they are going to be frightened by you experiencing unresolved traumatic material arising in your mind, you will have to be prepared for that. If your doctor or therapist has no understanding of plant medicines they may react with some level of fear, concern or dismissiveness to your account of what you have experienced, which may also increase your fear and self doubt in response to their implied attitude. On the other hand, to be supported by people who have an understanding of the kind of experiences that drinking ayahuasca invokes, may reassure you and help you develop a beneficial understanding of what you encounter. Factors such as these will have a significant impact on your process. So it

is worth thinking about this in advance and honestly considering how well supported you are going to be after a ceremony or retreat.

Even if you think your state of mind is relatively stable and that you don't have any significant trauma in your history, you might still experience things that you weren't expecting or aren't as prepared for as you had assumed. So, it is always advisable to really be honest with yourself about how much time, space, knowledge, resourcing and support you have for after the ceremony or retreat in case something unexpected occurs.

Ayahuasca is a wonderful medicine, that can benefit many people; but it is very powerful and must be approached with care and respect. It's worth being well informed so we are not naive in our attitudes towards it. It is complex medicine and for some people, in some circumstances, it might not be a good idea to drink.

Please note: The intention of this article is to contribute to the discussion around the safe use of plant medicine like ayahuasca. None of the statements in this article should be considered medical advice, and they should not replace the advice of your doctor, psychiatrist or mental health professional. These are general statements and reflections only. They may contain errors, omissions and generalizations that do not account for any person's individual circumstances. Therefore please do not treat this article as a statement of fact, of proven science or as a recommendation that you should drink ayahuasca.

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