



Rachael Kaplan

Coming Back to Life: My Story of MDMA-Assisted Psychotherapy for PTSD

RACHAEL KAPLAN

AS I SIT IN A FIELD of tall green grasses, feeling the earth beneath me and listening to the songs of meadowlarks, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for not only being alive but for finally wanting to be alive. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for often feeling a sense of peace in my self and feeling connected with myself, with others and the world. These are all new experiences for me that I never believed were possible until now, after being a participant in the MDMA-assisted psychotherapy study in Boulder.

This last year, after integrating the healing that happened in my MDMA-assisted psychotherapy sessions, has been a drastic contrast to the rest of my life. For the majority of my life I prayed to die and fought suicidal urges as I struggled with complex PTSD. This PTSD was born out of chronic severe childhood abuse. Since then, my life has been a journey of searching for healing. I started going to therapy 21 years ago, and since then I have tried every healing modality that I could think of, such as bodywork, energy work, medications, residential treatment and more. Many of these modalities were beneficial but none of them significantly reduced my trauma symptoms. I was still terrified most of the time. I would have flashbacks that would leave me debilitated, having nightmares, dissociated, and self-harming, and I fought to keep myself alive each day. I had some of the best therapists, but I was so terrified from childhood trauma that my system would not let down its guard enough to let anything from the outside affect it. I was desperate for healing, and felt trapped by my level of fear.

It was this desperation to heal that led me to enroll in the Boulder MDMA-assisted psychotherapy study. I was terrified to take a medicine that would put me in an altered state, but it was more terrifying not to try it, because I knew that if I did not find a way to heal then I would not have the will to keep living.

In my first MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session I was surprised that the MDMA helped me see the world as it was, instead of seeing it through my lens of terror. I thought that the MDMA would alter my perception of reality, but instead it helped me see it more clearly. As I sat with my two incredible therapists in my MDMA sessions it was the first time that I could really let in love, first time that I felt completely safe, respected and fully seen. I was blessed to have two therapists who were authentic, truly cared, and felt love for me. The MDMA allowed me to hone in on the real feelings of care that they had. For the first time in my life, I felt safe enough to let their love and respect into the core of my being. I had the felt experience of being completely vulnerable and seen while at the same time being loved, safe, and respected. This

planted the seed in me that it is actually safe to let in love and be seen by other trusted people as well as to let in my own love towards myself. This in itself has transformed how I am in relationships with other people and how I am in relationship with myself. The first couple MDMA-assisted psychotherapy sessions organically ended up being about understanding safety from the inside out, and learning that it was safe to connect to others. After the safety was deepened, I naturally began to process traumatic memories.

For the majority of my life, I had suppressed my memories of trauma and only understood fragments of it through my flashbacks and body memories. I hated myself for having such horrible memories and believed that I was psychotic and just making the memories up. I did this because it was easier to blame myself than to face the pain that these horrible things actually happened. This left me in a state of hating and not trusting myself, which only added to feelings of shame and depression. When I would go to therapy to try to talk about the memories, I would immediately become numb, and leave my body. In some cases, I would black out and end up curled in a ball, screaming. The MDMA session was the first time that I was able to stay present, explore, and process what had happened to me. This changed everything.

A life-changing moment happened at the beginning of my third MDMA session.



There was this horrible feeling of darkness that I felt, and I was afraid to look at it. Part of my intention for this session was to see that darkness clearly, because I knew that it was something that needed healing. After I took the medicine, my therapist gently held my hand. I felt the relaxed support of the MDMA, the safety of the room, and the respect and care of my therapists, and I allowed myself to see what was behind the darkness. What revealed itself was another level of trauma that I had suppressed. As I explained the images that I was seeing to my therapist, she gently put her hand on my arm with so much kindness and named the category of abuse that it was. As I

continued to remember horrific things, I was also keenly aware of the safety, love, presence, and respect of my therapists. For the first time, I was able to look at and feel the pain of those memories. As I did this the love and respect that I felt from my therapists was able to touch the darkest memories of my life where I had felt so alone and terrified. It was as if their love entered into those memories and helped the child part of me know that I was loveable and innocent, no matter what had happened to me. Now whenever I think of those horrible things, I am also reminded to the goodness in that room.

That moment will stay with me forever. It gives me faith when I see the horrible pain that happens in the world.



I know in my bones the goodness that is possible in people. Being able to fully look and feel my memories enabled me to come back to trusting myself. After a lifetime of thinking that I was psychotic for having such memories, I could finally accept the truth that my mind and body had been trying to tell me my whole life. I could finally honor the truth of what happened to me, and stop fighting against it, fighting against myself. This enabled me to find a sense of peace in myself and inner empowerment in knowing and trusting my truth.

After the MDMA sessions, the integration of the work was often turbulent, since so much healing and change had happened in the last eight hours. After my sessions I often felt emotional waves of deep grief, anger, and fear of being in the world in a different way, as I assimilated new information and explored new ways of living more authentically with myself and others.

So much happened in those sessions that the full integration took me years during which the healing that I did in those sessions built on itself. Before being in the MDMA-assisted psychotherapy study, I lived in my own bubble of fear and was too terrified to recognize that my current life was safe. Like many trauma survivors, I instinctually shut down the part of my brain that integrates sensory input from the outside world. Therefore, decades after the abuse, I still could not see the goodness or safety in my life. I saw everything as dangerous and even life-threatening, no matter what. This only reinforced being stuck in my world of terror. After being in the study, this changed. I started to be able to sense what was actually happening, and I continued to have experiences where I could see that the world might actually be safe, and people

might actually have good intentions.

A powerful example of this happened a few months after I had completed the study. I was in my house and suddenly had the most horrible pain in my stomach, which left me on the floor, throwing up, afraid that I was going to pass out from the pain. To make a long story short, I ended up have an emergency open abdominal surgery to remove a grapefruit-sized ovarian cyst, and was in the hospital for a week. I was surrounded by people that I did not know, put under anesthesia, and woke up unable to move, with staples from my pelvic bone to past my belly button. What I was most aware of was that these doctors, nurses, and strangers were fighting to save my life—to keep me safe—and they did not even know me. When I was at my most vulnerable these strangers cared for every part of me. Maybe it was not just my therapists in the study that had such good intentions: maybe the majority of people do? If I had had this surgery before I was in the study, it would have severely re-traumatized me, as I would have felt like all the people around me wanted to hurt me. Instead, the surgery turned into part of my healing. Experiences like this, although not as intense, continued to happen where I could see that there was actually goodness and safety in people.

As I continued to integrate the sessions and heal, something else extraordinary happened. After a lifetime of being numb and dissociated as a way to cope with pain, I started to feel good physical sensations again. The feeling of the warmth of the sun on my face and the feeling of the cool rushing creek was incredible. It reminded me that I was alive, and for the first time I was profoundly grateful to be alive. I can't even express how deeply grateful I am to be able to feel the world again. I am reminded every day of the gift of feeling sensations as a way to resource and feel connected to others and the world. Three years after completing the study, I am now amazed every day when I realize that I feel a sense of peace in myself. I often wake up with a love for myself, other people, and this earth.

Of course, things are not perfect. I still struggle with a lot of anxiety. I feel devastated by what happened to me and the pain that happens in the world, but I also fully experience the extraordinary love, goodness, and beauty in the world. I am finally able to do things that I have dreamed of forever, like finishing graduate school with a degree in Transpersonal Counseling Psychology and a focus in Wilderness Therapy, going out into the backcountry for a month to do a training to become a rite-of-passage guide, and doing a somatic trauma training to learn how to help others heal from the effects of trauma. After going through this journey, what I want the most is to guide and support other people in their healing. I am not sure exactly how this will look yet, and I am giving myself time to listen to myself and explore the best avenue for me to support others. Even though I am able to do so many more things that I could not previously do, it is the ability to be present and connected in my life that is the greatest gift.

There are no words for the gratitude that I feel. Thank you to everyone who has been part of my healing and to MAPS and its many donors for making this work possible. It is my greatest hope that I can now take what I have been through, and help support others who are in pain. It is also my hope that my story can bring at least a little hope to those in pain, who still believe it is not possible to heal. I know the agony of that place well, and I now know in the core of my being that healing from anything is possible. 🌱

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Rachael Kaplan is a massage therapist in Boulder, Colorado who is pursuing her passion for wilderness therapy and other healing arts. She can be reached at rayaiki@yahoo.com.