

Potential Applications of MDMA-Assisted Therapy for PTSD in the Treatment of Sexual Difficulties Post-Trauma

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Abstract

MDMA-assisted therapy has shown promising initial results for its efficacy in the treatment of PTSD. PTSD is often conceptualized as an interpersonal disorder due to the interpersonal meaning making that can occur post-trauma as well as PTSD’s impact on interpersonal relationships. Specifically, PTSD has been shown to be associated with a variety of sexual health difficulties, with the presence of PTSD increasing the likelihood of experiencing at least one type of sexual difficulty. Studies have shown that not only sexual trauma, but other forms of trauma, such as non-sexual childhood abuse and combat trauma are associated with impacts on sexual health, regardless of gender. Early life traumas have also been shown to impact sexual attitudes and behaviors into adulthood. Despite this link, sexual functioning is often overlooked when examining the treatment of PTSD. The impacts of PTSD on sexual functioning as well as treatment components often utilized in sex therapy may be well-suited for MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD. MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD may present unique opportunities to more directly address the impacts of PTSD on sexual functioning to enable clients to see improvements in sexual functioning within treatment for PTSD.

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Impacts of PTSD on Sexual Functioning

- A diagnosis of PTSD increases the likelihood of experiencing difficulty in at least one area of sexuality, including:
 - Sexual desire
 - Sexual satisfaction
 - Sexual distress
 - Genito-pelvic pain
 - Frequency of sexual activity
 - Overall sexual function
- Impacts of trauma on sexual health are seen across types of trauma and regardless of gender.
- Factors associated with PTSD that may impact sexual functioning include:
 - Avoidance of emotional and physical vulnerability
 - Increased fear response when relinquishing control to achieve orgasm
 - Emotional numbing and interpersonal disconnection
 - Emotional shutdown blocking feelings of love, attachment, and closeness
 - Disconnection from body sensations
 - Maladaptive sexual schemas and sexual shame
- Despite these links, sexual dysfunction is rarely addressed within the treatment of PTSD.

MDMA-Assisted Therapy for PTSD

- MDMA-Assisted Therapy for PTSD has been suggested to:
 - Support exposure-based therapy through the reduction of avoidance
 - Increase prosocial feelings and behaviors while thinking of difficult memories
 - Inhibit fear response to perceived emotional threat, allowing for new interpersonal learning
 - Allow for personality shifts in openness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and social connectedness
 - Relax prior belief systems to incorporate new beliefs
 - Increase feelings of openness and connection with others
- MDMA was historically utilized within a couples therapy context and recent trials have been completed with MDMA-assisted Cognitive Behavioral Conjoint Therapy (CBCT) for PTSD.
 - Results found improved PTSD scores and increases in relationship satisfaction, posttraumatic growth, and social intimacy for the partner with PTSD.
 - Secondary outcomes showed greater connection to others during and after treatment, increases in perceived support and decreased conflict, and improvements in psychosocial functioning and empathic concern for the partner with PTSD.

Treatment of Sexual Difficulties

- Sexual disorders have been linked to:
 - Depression
 - Decreased quality of life
 - Impaired body image
 - Lower self-confidence and self-worth
 - Feelings of less connection to one’s partner
- Some of the most commonly utilized interventions for sexual difficulties include couples and individual therapy focused on:
 - Improved communication, connection, and understanding
 - Cognitive behavioral techniques to address maladaptive belief systems surrounding sex and sexuality
 - Behavioral interventions, including:
 - Sensate Focus
 - Mindfulness Training
- Few studies have examined sexual problems as an outcome of PTSD treatment.
 - Of those, traditional PTSD treatment alone has been shown to be insufficient and it is recommended that additional treatment addressing sexual difficulties occur.

Potential Applications of MDMA-Assisted Therapy in the Treatment of Sexual Difficulties

- MDMA has been used recreationally for sexual enhancement for decades.
- Recreational users have reported:
 - Greater focus on sensuality compared to sexuality
 - More relaxation and openness during sex
 - Greater receptivity to a partner’s love
 - Reduced focus on expectations, success, and failure
- An enhanced ability to engage mindfully and connect to pleasure in one’s body has been associated with psychedelic use. For clients with PTSD who have struggled to access pleasure in their bodies or find it triggering, psychedelics may allow them to trace pathways back to these feeling states in a relationally connecting context, which can then be enhanced through integration utilizing traditional sex therapy interventions.
- Regarding communication, MDMA studies have shown:
 - Less fear and defensiveness when discussing painful or uncomfortable topics.
 - Reduced likelihood to interpret signals from others as judgmental.
 - Greater willingness to take risks in interpersonal communication.
 - Enhanced empathy toward themselves and their partner.
 - Increased trust and closeness to others.
- These factors may allow clients/couples to more openly discuss sexual topics with their therapist and their partners while in a state to enhanced incorporation of new belief systems

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Conclusion

Although PTSD has been shown to have an impact on sexual functioning, these effects are rarely directly addressed in trauma-focused treatments and traditional PTSD treatments appear to have limited effectiveness in this area. MDMA-assisted therapy may be uniquely suited to addressing sexual difficulties post-trauma. Results from studies examining MDMA-assisted therapy with both individuals and couples suggest a strong potential overlap with commonly utilized interventions in the field of sex therapy, such as exposure, mindfulness, incorporation of new belief systems, and development of greater connection and trust within relationships. MDMA-assisted therapy may provide an opportunity to more directly address PTSD-related impacts on sexual functioning compared to traditional trauma-focused treatments.