# Exploring the link between psychedelics, nature connectedness and mental health



In recent decades, the world has witnessed significant increases in both ecological degradation and mental health disorders, with mental illnesses now ranking as the leading cause of disability, affecting one in eight people globally. Concurrently, global temperatures are rising, and extreme weather events persist, posing threats to people and ecosystems alike. Estimates suggest that by 2030, climate change could result in 250,000 deaths annually from malnutrition and heat stress.

Amid these converging crises, researchers have identified a potential common factor: the increasing disconnect between humans and the natural environment. A blog by Macey Webb, Co-Chair of the Drug Science Student Society Network, explores the relationship between nature connectedness, mental health, and ecological behaviours, while examining emerging research on the role psychedelics may play in restoring this vital connection.

### The Role of Nature in Mental Health

Historicity shows that human cultures have long drawn inspiration and a sense of belonging from nature, as evidenced by art, literature, and philosophy. Modern scientific studies support this intuitive understanding, revealing that spending time in natural environments correlates with reduced depression and anxiety, lowered stress, and an increased sense of life’s meaning. One proposed explanation is Attention Restoration Theory, which argues that natural settings offer a mental respite from the constant stimulation of urban life, including screens and social media. Moreover, nature may foster a sense of being part of a larger whole, helping individuals gain perspective and feel connected to the wider world.

### Growing Separation from the Natural World

Despite the benefits of nature connectedness, contemporary lifestyles increasingly drive people indoors and towards screen-based activities. Urbanisation and technological advancement have diminished opportunities for regular contact with natural environments, causing global nature connectedness to plummet to historic lows. This psychological detachment has consequences beyond personal wellbeing; individuals less connected to nature tend to show weaker motivation toward environmental action. Conversely, those with stronger bonds to the natural world are more likely to engage in behaviours such as recycling, water conservation, and sustainable transportation—actions vital in addressing environmental challenges.

### Psychedelics and Nature Connectedness: Emerging Evidence

Over the last twenty years, research into psychedelics has expanded considerably, particularly regarding their therapeutic potential in mental health treatment. A notable effect observed in clinical studies is psychedelics' ability to enhance feelings of connectedness—to oneself, others, and the environment. This has sparked interest in examining whether psychedelics can strengthen nature connectedness and promote environmentally conscious behaviour.

One study involving 654 participants utilised the "Nature Relatedness Scale" before and two weeks after psychedelic use, finding significant increases in connection to nature maintained for up to two years. These enhancements correlated with experiences of ‘ego dissolution’—a state in which participants feel a diminished boundary between self and surroundings—and feelings of unity with the natural world during the psychedelic experience. However, the study cautions about potential selection bias, since participants were generally well-educated males, possibly limiting the findings' applicability.

Additional research involving psychedelics such as psilocybin and ayahuasca has shown similar associations with increased nature relatedness. Contradictory evidence exists regarding the effects of different psychedelics, with some studies indicating only psilocybin reliably predicts increases in nature connectedness.

### Mechanisms Underpinning Psychedelics’ Impact on Nature Connectedness

Three main theories have been proposed to explain how psychedelics may enhance feelings of connectedness with nature:

1. **Ego-Dissolution:** Psychedelics target serotonin receptors in brain regions tied to self-processing, such as the default mode network, leading to a disruption in the ordinary sense of self. This can result in experiences where the boundary between self and environment blurs profoundly. One participant described, “I couldn’t tell where my body ended and the trees began, when the wind moved through the leaves, I felt it as my own movement.”

2. **Enhanced Empathy and Positive Emotions:** Psychedelic experiences often include intense emotions such as love and interconnectedness, which may foster strong empathic connections to living things. Another individual recounted feeling “such deep love for every living thing around me. Every living plant felt precious and alive.”

3. **Changes in Beliefs About Nature:** Psychedelics may increase brain connectivity, facilitating cognitive flexibility and openness to new perspectives. This can lead some individuals to reevaluate their relationship with the natural world, embracing ideas such as ecological interconnectedness. Participants expressed insights like, “we’re all part of the same ecosystem,” or “I could see how everything in nature depends on everything else.”

Such cognitive and emotional shifts may underpin reported increases in pro-environmental behaviour following psychedelic experiences.

### Indigenous Perspectives and Ethical Considerations

While the contemporary research—often termed a “psychedelic renaissance”—holds promise, it predominantly involves Western participants and perspectives, primarily from the United States and the United Kingdom. Indigenous communities from regions spanning Turtle Island to Abya Yala possess long-standing traditions and worldviews involving psychedelics, treating these plants as living entities engaged through ritual and ceremony. For these communities, connectedness with nature is already deeply woven into cultural identity.

This situation raises concerns of epistemic injustice, where Western-centric research and interpretations risk overshadowing Indigenous knowledge systems that have preserved relationships with nature and psychedelic practices for centuries. Yuli Celdiwan, a scholar of Nahua and Mayan descent, has emphasised that such medicines “are not about the human mind alone, they reveal Spirit, the very animating principle of Life.” Celdiwan also highlights the risks of cultural appropriation and the insufficient recognition of sacred Indigenous practices in the current research landscape.

### Early-Stage Research and Future Directions

Though promising, existing research on psychedelics and nature connectedness is preliminary and primarily based on self-reported data from experienced psychedelic users. Given potential biases and demographic limitations, findings should be interpreted cautiously.

As societies confront intertwined ecological and mental health challenges, exploring interventions that might restore the human-nature connection takes on increased relevance. The Drug Science Student Society Network expresses optimism about the future research trajectory, seeking to further explore how psychedelics might contribute to enhancing nature connectedness and well-being.

In summary, growing mental health issues and ecological threats coincide with an increasing disconnection between humans and the natural world. Emerging scientific inquiry into psychedelics suggests potential pathways to repair this disconnection, presenting new areas for investigation amidst complex social, cultural, and ethical factors.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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