

# JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

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This month, Bill Richards, Una McCann, Bob Jesse and I published the first report on the Johns Hopkins States of Consciousness Research Project, and I thought you would be interested in learning more about our work. As described in the August 2006 issue of *Psychopharmacology*, our research explored psilocybin's ability to induce mystical/spiritual experiences with signs of lasting positive effects among the study's participants. This report has generated a tremendous amount of media attention (nearly 300 news reports globally, according to Google, plus television and radio coverage), as it represents an important area of research that has been not been explored in-depth for almost 40 years.

While this study represents significant progress in our understanding of psilocybin, we recognize that it merely lays the groundwork for exploring several intriguing questions. How do the effects observed in this study (ranging from extreme fear to deeply positive, spiritually significant experiences) vary with dose or other factors? What can we learn about the development of persisting positive effects on mood, attitudes, and behavior consequent to peak or mystical experience? What effects do psilocybin and similar substances (perhaps at lower doses) have on "insight," creativity, and cognitive function?

We find these questions, along with characterizing the neuroscience underpinnings of psilocybin experience using brain imaging and comparative pharmacology techniques, compelling in their own right.

Furthermore, as research decades ago hinted, continued study could lead to new therapies for psilocybin's use in clinical settings. For example, we are interested in exploring psilocybin's therapeutic potential in the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse. There is also opportunity to explore its use in treating terminal-illness-related depression and anxiety, through mystical experience and insight.

Our recently published study has elicited commendations from leading scientists for its sound methods, for its clear findings, and for the possibilities it opens up. It has re-established this area of inquiry, virtually shut down 40 years ago, as respectable and promising.

We're eager to build on this momentum, and yet we are challenged to secure the needed funding for continued study. As you might surmise, the need to seek private support is due partly to a lingering but significant legacy of the drug excesses of the 1960s that stigmatized all legitimate hallucinogenic research. National and private sector funding agencies remain reluctant to sponsor such projects because of concern that findings might encourage a significant outbreak of recreational abuse. We, of course, share this concern and are committed to a balanced scientific assessment of the possible risks and benefits of these compounds. With this in mind, examining

the determinants of acute panic reactions (which can lead to dangerous behavior under unsupervised conditions) and long-term follow-up to assess possible precipitation of enduring psychiatric conditions, persisting perceptual disturbances, and recreational abuse, will be also aspects of our research program.

For these reasons, we are establishing the “States of Consciousness Research Fund” at Johns Hopkins to ensure a foundation of support for this work. As a first step, we are developing a network of people who can assist us in raising funds – either through their personal contributions or by connecting us to other interested individuals or organizations. If you, or someone you know, are able to help or offer suggestions, I invite you to get in touch with Lisa Seischab at the Fund for Johns Hopkins Medicine. Her contact information is provided below, along with more about our new research fund.

We welcome hearing from you and look forward to sharing additional news about our progress with the scientific and medical communities. Until then, we are grateful for your interest and support.

Sincerely,

Roland R. Griffiths, Ph.D.  
Professor of Behavioral Biology  
Professor of Neuroscience

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To support psilocybin research at Johns Hopkins, checks may be made payable to "Johns Hopkins University/Department of Psychiatry." In the memo line, please include "States of Consciousness Research Fund." Contributions should be mailed to:

Lisa Ann Seischab, CFRE  
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
Fund for Johns Hopkins Medicine  
100 N. Charles Street, Ste. 412  
Baltimore, MD 21201  
Phone: 410-516-6133  
e-mail: [lseisch2@jhmi.edu](mailto:lseisch2@jhmi.edu)

People have long sought meaning and significance in their lives through a variety of spiritual practices including prayer, fasting, chanting, solitude, and meditation. Historically, some of these practices have included the use of certain psychoactive plants.... It is time for psychopharmacologists to open their minds and their laboratories to the full domain of human drug experience.... Griffiths et al. set an excellent example for such a venture.

*Harriet de Wit, Ph.D.*

*Editor of Psychopharmacology and Professor of Psychiatry at University of Chicago*

It is striking that majority of the participants reported 2 months later that the psilocybin-induced experience was personally very meaningful and spiritually significant. ... The report clearly demonstrates that we can objectively study the experiences...and that we can investigate the long-term positive consequences for the individual's attitudes and behavior.

*Charles R. Schuster, Ph.D.*

*Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience at Wayne State University  
Former Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)*

It's exciting to see neuroscience and the study of religious experience come together. It's especially exciting to see that convergence in a study of great technical merit that doesn't trivialize religious experience, but instead treats it respectfully and seeks to understand its consequences, which are sometimes life changing.

*Ralph W. Hood, Ph.D.*

*Author of The Psychology of Religion, developer of the Mysticism Scale  
Professor of Psychology at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

By showing that one can responsibly conduct clinical research with psychedelic drugs and by confirming the mystical influences of these agents, Griffiths et al. may help resurrect psychedelic drugs as major tools in probing the molecular bases of consciousness.

*Solomon H. Snyder, M.D.*

*Professor of Neuroscience and Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University*

Discovering how these mystical and altered consciousness type states arise in the brain could have major therapeutic possibilities, e.g., treatment of intolerable pain, treatment of refractory depression, amelioration of pain and suffering of the terminally ill, to name but a few, as well as the already noted and needed improvement in treatment of substance abuse and dependence states so that it would be scientifically shortsighted not to pursue them.

*Herbert D. Kleber, M.D.*

*Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia University  
Former Deputy Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy*

These commentaries were provided by leading psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists in response to publication of the first Johns Hopkins States of Consciousness Research Project. Philanthropic support will help accelerate continued investigation and allow faculty researchers to keep advancing this area of study with new discoveries in psychology, neuroscience, and the therapeutic potential of psilocybin and related compounds. To support the Johns Hopkins *States of Consciousness Research Fund*, please:

**Make checks payable to:** Johns Hopkins University / Department of Psychiatry

**On the memo line, include:** States of Consciousness Research Fund

**Or pledge your support by providing the following information:**

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- I pledge \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to support the *States of Consciousness Research Fund*
- Please send me a pledge reminder in (month) \_\_\_\_\_, (year) \_\_\_\_\_.

**Mail to:** Lisa Ann Seischab  
Associate Director of Development  
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
Fund for Johns Hopkins Medicine  
100 N. Charles Street, Ste. 412  
Baltimore, MD 21201

For more information about ways to support specific opportunities that are a match with your particular interests, please contact Lisa Ann Seischab at **410-516-6133** or **lseisch2@jhmi.edu**.