

# Psychedelic Drugs in Palliative Care

Authors: [B. Martins](#), A. Matos & M. Sardinha (Unidade Local de Saúde do Norte Alentejano, EPE)

## Background and aims

Physical suffering of a person under palliative care is frequently associated with psychological (or *existential*) suffering. In fact, people with potentially untreatable diseases present a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and anxiety than general population. Nevertheless, conventional therapeutic options seem to be insufficient.

Inspired by 1950-1960's studies, some researchers have recently been investigating what therapeutic role **psychotherapy combined with serotonergic psychedelics** may have in the **approach of palliative care patients**.

## Materials and methods

A research in Medline was done for the following terms: *Hallucinogen + palliative care*, *Hallucinogen + end-of-life*, *Psychedelic + palliative care*, *psychedelic + end-of-life*, *Psilocibine + palliative care*, *Psilocibine + end-of-life*, *LSD + palliative care* and *LSD + end-of-life*. Only the relevant articles were selected.

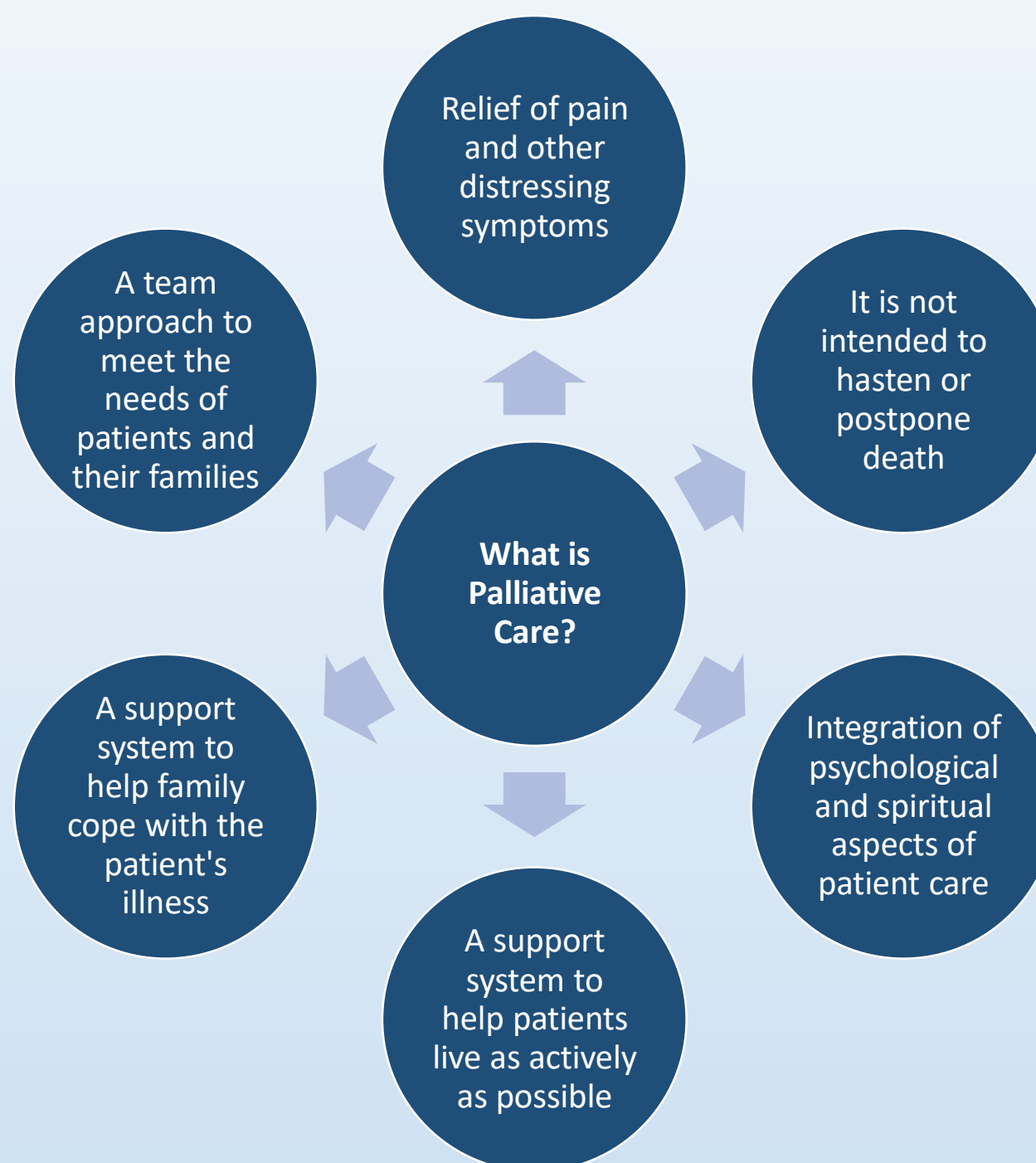
## Results

Article	n	Drug and dosage	Main Results
Grob, et al., 2011	12	Psilocybin 0.2-mg/kg vs. Placebo (250mg niacin)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sustained reduction of anxiety that reached significance 1 and 3 months after treatment.</li> <li>No significant increase in anxiety levels at 6 months</li> <li>Mood improvement from the 2<sup>nd</sup> week to the 6<sup>th</sup> month</li> <li>No changes in pain perception</li> </ul>
Gasser, et al., 2014	11	LSD 200 µg vs. Placebo (LSD 20 µg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significant reduction in anxiety at 2 months, which remained at 12 months</li> <li>6 patients described easy access to emotions and important introspection</li> <li>7 patients with sustained reductions in anxiety / fear of death and improvements in quality of life.</li> </ul>
Griffiths, et al., 2016	51	Psilocybin 22-30 mg/70 kg vs. Placebo (Psilocybin 1-3 mg/70 kg)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5-week symptom remission rates of 60% and 52% for depression and anxiety, respectively</li> <li>Overall 6-month response rate of 78% and 83% for depression and anxiety, respectively</li> <li>Symptom remission rate at 6 months was 65% and 57% for depression and anxiety, respectively.</li> <li>High Dose Group reported significantly higher personal meanings (related to psychedelic experience), spiritual significance, and improved well-being rates, sustained outcomes at 6 months.</li> <li>Improvement in quality of life</li> </ul>
Ross, et al., 2016	31	Psilocybin (0.3 mg/kg) vs. Placebo (250mg niacin)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Immediate and long-lasting anxiolytic and antidepressant response rates (60-80% at 6.5 months)</li> <li>Significant depression remission rates</li> <li>87% reported increased life satisfaction or well-being attributed to experience</li> </ul>

## Conclusions

None of the studies reported serious permanent side effects, although transient non severe events were reported. The 4 trials showed a reasonable improvement in depression, and anxiety scales. According to their results, clinical responses appear immediately after the psychedelic experience, well before the response of conventional antidepressants. This is particularly relevant because of the shorter life expectancy of these patients who seek urgently for comfort. Also, the therapeutic benefit of a single administration may remain after a 6 to 12 month period.

Although there is still very little clinical evidence of it (small samples), psychotherapy combined with psychedelics seems to be a promising treatment for palliative care patients presenting ango-depressive symptoms.



## REFERENCES

- 1 - Blinderman Craig D Psycho-existential distress in cancer patients: A return to "entheogens" [Journal] // Journal of Psychopharmacology. - 2016. - Vol. 30. - pp. 1205-1206. || 2 - Byock Ira Taking Psychedelics Seriously [Journal] // Journal of Palliative Medicine. - 2018. - Vol. 21. / || 3 - Gasser Peter [et al.] Safety and Efficacy of Lysergic Acid Diethylamide-Assisted Psychotherapy for Anxiety Associated with Life-threatening Diseases [Journal] // The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease. - 2014. - Vol. 202. - pp. 513-520. || 3 - Griffiths Roland R [et al.] Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: A randomized double-blind trial [Journal] // Journal of Psychopharmacology. - 2016. - Vol. 30. - pp. 1181-1197. || 4 - Grob Charles S [et al.] Pilot Study of Psilocybin Treatment for Anxiety in Patients With Advanced-Stage Cancer [Journal] // Archives of General Psychiatry. - 2011. - Vol. 68. - pp. 71-78. || 5 - Kurland Albert A. LSD in the Supportive Care of the Terminally Ill Cancer Patient [Journal] // Journal of Psychoactive Drugs. - 1985. - Vol. 17. - pp. 278-290. || 6 - Kyzar Evan J. [et al.] Psychedelic Drugs in Biomedicine [Journal] // Trends in Pharmacological Sciences. - [s.l.] : Cell Press Reviews, 2017. - 11 : Vol. 38. - pp. 992-1004. || 7 - Reiche Simon [et al.] Serotonergic hallucinogens in the treatment of anxiety and depression in patients suffering from a life-threatening disease: A systematic review [Journal] // Progress in Neuropsychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry. - 2017. || 8 - Ross Stephen [et al.] Rapid and sustained symptom reduction following psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening [Journal] // Journal of Psychopharmacology. - 2016. - Vol. 30. - pp. 1165-1180.