

Silvia Polivoy

What I have learned:

Over the course of many years I have learned to identify those people who are not good candidates for Ayahuasca experience. People who have tendencies to inflate their egos and who do not respect boundaries tend to be disruptive in the sessions and to disturb others. I want participants in the ceremonies who can follow the agreements that we have about their conduct. I do not accept those who are not able to stop their drug and alcohol use during the retreat.

I try to screen out those individuals who are psychotic or who may be suffering from a “spiritual emergency”. Since we are doing group sessions, I also want to make sure the participants are neither psychopaths or sociopaths. Those people who are suffering from bipolar disorders should not do Ayahuasca.

Ayahuasca is an amplifier in such a way that the natural tendencies of a personality may become exaggerated. During retreats I have noticed that paranoid tendencies may increase. Some retreat participants may have strong feelings of abandonment and rejection from prior life experiences which can be greatly amplified with ayahuasca. Others may look for an authority figures like a shaman or group leader to give them unconditional love and to “save” them. Those retreat participants who expect “unconditional love” from the shaman or facilitator set up a risky dynamic because any attempt to set boundaries with them (for physical safety, for instance) may be interpreted as a personal attack.

I have noticed that there a group of individuals who I call the “seekers of the light”. These kinds of people don’t want to see their shadow and believe that life experience should be all love, light and bliss. These kinds of people find it difficult to experience suffering, to re-experience old trauma or see their own tendencies to be angry or judgmental. They are so fixated to only look at the bright side of life, that when they have experiences that challenge their world they will go into denial. It is very likely that in an ayahuasca session this core belief will be challenged. In this case, these types of people, rather than feeling those feelings and owning the experience of these kinds of shadow experiences, they may end up projecting these feelings onto another participant, the facilitator or “negative spirit entities”. In the same way, unresolved issues with parents may result in the projection of hostile feelings onto the facilitator. This can result in the shaman or facilitator becoming the “bad parent” while another staff member may become the “good parent”. For these kinds of people it is important



that we help them to always own and reflect on their own personal experiences and not to project them onto others.

The ayahuasca sessions are very powerful and may lead to deep spiritual understandings. I am careful to help individuals nurture and integrate the wisdom they receive. Sometime I have seen that that spiritual knowledge attained in the ceremonies can be used for self-aggrandizement, adding to a person's vanity and egotism and resulting in a state of narcissism. A person with an inflated ego may think that they know everything about ayahuasca after having had only one or two experiences. In some cases they may believe they have become "enlightened".

I have seen many kinds of ayahuasca experiences. Some people in the sessions will experience their ego death and some may have an experience of "Oneness". It is common for people to have a deepened connection with the natural world, especially with plants. In sessions people may also have profound experiences which arise from their past. Some times people may re-experience their birth, some may revisit and re-experience a traumatic childhood episode. At other times they may visit past lives, communicate with spiritual guides, their ancestors, their higher self or God. I have seen people cease their addictions.

My job is to hold the space for these participants. I do this with compassion and detachment. I also need strong self discipline as I have described how participants may be particularly challenging as a result of the amplifications they experience on ayahuasca. It has been very useful to have both a psychological background and extensive experience in modified states of consciousness. I try to help people integrate these experiences into their lives so that it may empower their spiritual development.