

Hallucinogen Misuse

Understanding altered perception, difficult experiences and where to get help

Hallucinogens are a broad group of substances that can significantly alter perception, thinking, mood and a person's sense of time or reality. Classic psychedelics include LSD and psilocybin, while other drugs can also produce hallucinogenic or dissociative effects. Experiences vary enormously. Some people describe curiosity, insight or intensified sensations; others experience fear, confusion, panic or loss of control. A substance being described as 'psychedelic' does not make every use predictable or harmless.

How perception can change

Effects can include intensified colours or patterns, altered sense of time, unusual sensory experiences, changes in body perception, powerful emotions and changes in the meaning attached to thoughts or surroundings. Hallucinations or distortions can make ordinary environments difficult to interpret. Judgement may be impaired even when the person feels unusually clear or certain. The setting, dose, substance, expectations, sleep, mental state and other drugs all influence the experience.

When an experience becomes difficult

Anxiety & panic Intense fear, racing thoughts or the belief that the experience will never end can become overwhelming.	Confusion & disorientation A person may struggle to understand where they are, what is real or whether they are physically safe.
Paranoia or frightening beliefs Altered meaning and perception can lead to severe suspiciousness or ideas that feel completely convincing at the time.	Accidents & vulnerability Impaired judgement and perception can increase risk around roads, heights, water, strangers or other unsafe situations.

Mental-health considerations

Hallucinogens can sometimes precipitate or worsen severe anxiety, mania-like states, psychotic symptoms or other mental-health difficulties, particularly in vulnerable individuals. Persistent symptoms after the acute drug effect need professional assessment. Someone who remains highly suspicious, confused, distressed, unable to sleep, or detached from ordinary reality should not simply be told to 'wait it out' indefinitely.

Flashbacks and HPPD

Some people report later recurrences of perceptual changes. Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder (HPPD) is a recognised condition involving persistent or recurring visual/perceptual disturbances after hallucinogen exposure. It is not the same as simply remembering an experience. Symptoms can be distressing and should be discussed with a clinician, particularly when they interfere with driving, work, sleep or everyday functioning.

When urgent help is needed

Call 999 if someone is unconscious, has a seizure, has severe breathing difficulty, collapses, has a serious injury, becomes dangerously agitated, or is at immediate risk of harming themselves or somebody else. If someone is frightened but physically stable, reduce stimulation, move away from obvious hazards and speak calmly. Do not challenge frightening perceptions aggressively or leave a severely confused person alone in an unsafe environment.

Signs use may be becoming problematic

Concern may be warranted when a person repeatedly uses despite frightening experiences or mental-health effects; needs increasingly frequent altered states to escape ordinary life; neglects responsibilities; takes greater risks; mixes substances; spends significant time obtaining or recovering from drugs; or continues despite relationship, financial or psychological harm. Patterns of dependence vary between substances, so the assessment should focus on the actual drug and behaviour rather than assuming all hallucinogens work in the same way.

A useful first reflection

Ask: **What am I looking for when I change my perception?** Curiosity, escape, connection, meaning, relief from trauma, emotional intensity or distance from ordinary life can all matter. Understanding the function of use can help identify what support is needed alongside reducing risk.

Hallucinogen Misuse - Support and Recovery

Practical support, persistent symptoms and UK routes to help

Where to get help in the UK

GP / mental-health support	Seek assessment for persistent perceptual changes, severe anxiety, paranoia, mood disturbance, sleep disruption or other symptoms continuing beyond the expected intoxication period.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services can discuss hallucinogen use alongside other substances, mental health, risk and patterns of repeated use. Many accept self-referrals.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . FRANK also provides information about local services.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings with practical tools for motivation, urges, behaviour change and maintaining recovery.
Narcotics Anonymous UK	Peer-led recovery fellowship with in-person and online meetings. Helpline: 0300 999 1212 .
Urgent / emergency help	Use NHS 111 for urgent medical advice where available. Call 999 for a serious medical emergency or immediate danger.

After a frightening experience

Give the nervous system time to settle. Reduce alcohol and other non-prescribed substances, prioritise sleep and ordinary routines, and talk through what happened with someone safe rather than repeatedly exposing yourself to triggering material. If perceptual changes, panic, paranoia or altered beliefs persist, seek clinical help. An intense experience can feel deeply meaningful, but decisions about relationships, money, work or major life changes are usually better made after normal sleep and judgement have returned.

Persistent perception changes

If visual trails, after-images, halos, visual static, movement in stationary objects or other perceptual disturbances continue or recur, make a note of the symptoms, when they began, substances used and whether sleep, stress or other drugs affect them. A GP can consider physical, neurological, ophthalmic and psychological causes rather than assuming every symptom has one explanation. Avoid driving if visual changes make it unsafe.

Supporting somebody else

During an acutely difficult experience, use a calm voice, reduce unnecessary noise and crowds, and help the person stay away from obvious hazards. Do not mock, threaten or aggressively argue with what they are perceiving. Afterward, encourage medical or drug-service support if the experience was severe, repeated, or followed by ongoing symptoms. Keep boundaries around your own safety and seek emergency help when risk becomes immediate.

One book to explore

***How to Change Your Mind* - Michael Pollan.** This book explores the history, science and changing cultural understanding of psychedelics. I include it because it provides useful context for why these substances can feel psychologically powerful and why interest in therapeutic research has grown. It is not a guide to recreational use and should not be read as evidence that unsupervised use is safe. I would pair its broader perspective with reliable harm, mental-health and drug-treatment information.

A message from Maggie

An altered state can feel beautiful, frightening, profound or confusing - sometimes all of those things at once. If an experience has left you unsettled, or if changing reality has become your main way of escaping ordinary life, you deserve somewhere to talk about it without being laughed at or automatically judged. Support can hold both things at once: what the experience meant to you and what it may be costing you now.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not replace medical or mental-health assessment. 'Hallucinogens' covers substances with different pharmacology and risk profiles. Persistent perceptual, psychotic, mood or neurological symptoms require individual assessment. Emergency symptoms or immediate danger require urgent help. Service details can change and should be checked before publication.