SOS#33 - From PTSD to Purpose Through Psychedelics with Jesse Gould

Jesse Gould: 0:00

It is pretty promising and that's because of how effective it is and how many veterans not only that we've served, but there's been thousands upon thousands of veterans that have done the variety of psychedelics and it's been consistently effective, changed lives, allowed them to come back to their family, to their children, and find new purpose and contribute to society, contribute to the economy.

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Marcus Arredondo: 0:23

Today's guest is Jesse Gould, an Army Ranger turned mental health trailblazer, whose journey began in Afghanistan and led him to Peru. After returning from three combat deployments, jesse found himself battling severe depression, ptsd and a VA system that offered pills instead of answers. He opens up about the moment he hit rock bottom, the fear he faced during his first ayahuasca ceremony, and how that experience rewired his brain and his mission. Jesse went on to found Heroic Hearts Project, a nonprofit that has now served over a thousand veterans and hundreds of spouses. From bipartisan advocacy to piloting US-based psychedelic programs, jesse's work is helping expand access and change lives across the country. His life is a study in breaking stigma, rebuilding purpose and rethinking what real healing looks like. Let's start the show, jesse Gould. Thank you for being on Welcome.

Jesse Gould: 1:10

Yeah, thanks, Nice to meet you and thanks for reaching out. Happy to be here.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:14

Likewise. So I stumbled on you through 60 Minutes. I'm a devout 60 Minutes watcher fitting myself into a demographic of octogenarians, I think but I was really fascinated. It was maybe three or four months ago that it came out Anderson Cooper's segment and I wanted to reach out for a number of different reasons. One I want to hear more from vets. I think their voices need to be heard more. But maybe more relative to this particular conversation is the Heroic Hearts Project.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:48

I'm super fascinated about what you're doing. I'm interested in sort of the lobbying side, how you're raising funds, what your interaction with the government is, what you think is in the future relative to the new administration. We're only four months in, so I want to hear a little bit more about that transition. But I want to talk about psychedelics out of the gates and I want to just start off with what do you think? And my audience is probably pretty mixed. I think there's a good cross-section of people who have experimented either with professionals or independently, that have strong opinions about it, and then there are others who conflated with something that was back from the 80s as a big no-no and also probably thinks a little frou-frou or hoity-toity or whatever the word might be I'm going to stop talking, but I'm wondering if you can just introduce the audience to what your take is on psychedelics before you go into what it's doing for

vets, specifically those with PTSD, and what do you think people get wrong about those? What are the wrong assumptions people have?

Jesse Gould: 3:03

Yeah, absolutely, and it's actually pretty timely too, because they're going to be doing a rerun of the 60 Minutes piece this June sometime, because it's like the off season, so they tend to, so people have another chance and it's on YouTube and all that.

Jesse Gould: 3:18

So I recommend people check it out, I'll put that in the show notes for the record. Yeah, they did a great job In the show notes for the record. Yeah, they did a great job. So I'll start off by saying you know, meeting me before all this began, I'd be like the least likely advocate for psychedelics. Not that I, you know, cast this version on anybody that did it. It just wasn't my thing. I had no interest.

Jesse Gould: 3:49

At a certain point in my life I would have been happy knowing that I never did psychedelics in the rest of my life. And then, you know, coming from the military background, I was kind of more about like performance and doing the right thing and you know, kind of grew up probably similar in the DARE generation and I just had my own viewpoints that you know, drugs across the board are tend to be escapism or tend to be, you know, covering, masking, something right, and I just didn't have an interest. I actually had tried that. I'd never done drugs before all this started. You know, it was just like in my mind those who do drugs are over here and that was not me, right, and I was happy about that. But I started this journey with psychedelics, uh, roughly eight years ago. Uh, post my military experience and we can get into that a little bit more. But the biggest thing I I tell people is this is not me like proselytizing, this is not me, you know, handing out psychedelics and handing it in the streets to kids and all this kind of stuff. I wouldn't be here if they weren't effective, and that's backed by research. That's backed by countless testimonials. And so what I just first say is come to this with an open mind. Right, it might not be for everybody.

Jesse Gould: 5:01

There's a difference between people doing it recreationally and doing it at a party versus how it's being used right now and a lot of the reasons that we have these strong beliefs around psychedelics. The stigma around it is essentially really good government propaganda and oftentimes a lot of misinformation, because it was backing up this political dynamic of the war on drugs, which can go deep into it. There's all sorts of different reasons for it, but a lot of it was based off of either no science or bad science, and that's still being pushed out today, and this is not, you know, pushing back on what people think about. You know, I'm not saying that some people's lives are not affected and there's not. All drugs are the same, right, and I'm not saying again that everybody should have this, but when we, when you look at the research, when you look at what the information is actually sharing and the lives that are being saved effectively by these treatments, you'd be quite surprised that this is not what you thought psychedelics were, this is not what you thought these drugs were, and we need to be a little bit more discerning of not all drugs are the same.

Jesse Gould: 6:12

And how do you, how you use them, what context you use them, and you know the surrounding dynamics all play a big aspect, and so I think you know one of the quickest ways I can get there with a lot of people is just how much our perspective on things like cannabis have changed, and people are still going to have a strong opinion on cannabis, and cannabis works differently than psychedelics. But early on, even things like CBD which is, for those who don't know, a cannabinoid, a part of cannabis plant was viewed as you're doing illegal drugs. Right, it's had the same sort of stigma. Now you know grandparents are using it on bulbs and it's pretty open that you can buy it, and you know some of the most conservative people are using it because it can be effective. Right, no-transcript, but it's becoming harder and harder to deny that there's some degree of medical value. So that's kind of what we're seeing, especially in the last 10 years with psychedelics. So that's always how I start.

Jesse Gould: 7:36

These is if you have a knee-jerk reaction of like, oh, I don't want to hear these hippies talking about psychedelics. One, I don't think I'm representing that side of things. But two, come with an open mind because you never know whether it's yourself or who in your life this can benefit. Because there is absolutely a mental health crisis increasingly year over year, especially at the veteran population, but broadly there is massive amounts of depression, massive amounts of suicide, ideation, especially among younger kids, teenagers, and a lot of anxiety, a lot of these mental health issues that we really just do not have good tools for. The current medications, if you look at it, are just not effective enough for the vast majority of the population. So that's where the start of this conversation is. You'll learn something new. It's a little bit interesting and again, this is not. If I'm successful tomorrow, everybody's going to be high on mushrooms. This is a different conversation than that.

Marcus Arredondo: 8:33

Well, I appreciate you opening it up that way, because I think I'll just specifically address the people who may be listening or watching this who are dubious about the subject matter. I think it is just important to pause those judgments before moving forward, and I think why you are probably having success, in addition to a number of other reasons, is because the data is so compelling, and I'm just going to refer back to the 60 Minutes episode where Dr Sharif El-Nahal talked about the clinical studies where nearly half of all participants resulted in no more evidence of PTSD. They effectively were diagnosed as normal for lack of a better word a normal disposition. That's pretty staggering. The fact that you're also an Army Ranger and that you come with pedigree adds validity to this. A couple of follow-on questions to this One. Do you find that? Are you seeing any tailwinds helping from the cannabis push that has come through over the last decade?

Jesse Gould: 9:41

I'd say, if anything right now, sort of the opposite. Uh, I would say, if there were any tailwinds, it is just our generation or younger generations are not as tied to when there was big backlash around these sort of things, right. Right, it seems like the more you came out of the 60s or 70s, the more you have very strong intention and entrenched opinions about it one way or the other, and so I think the more separated you are from that. And on the opposite side, it's actually pretty interesting on the federal and both state sides is in a lot of ways, psychedelics have actually leapfrogged the advocacy within cannabis, but there is also this sort of dynamic, like I said, I think, generally speaking, people are sort of rethinking their view on drugs where it fits in society and have a much less knee-jerk reaction than maybe even 20, 30 years ago.

Marcus Arredondo: 10:36

Well then, mental health has become such a priority, I think, in today's world, especially I think post-COVID also to some degree, right, yeah, absolutely, world, especially, I think post-COVID also to some degree. Right, absolutely. So on that topic, let's just bifurcate the conversation between vets suffering for PTSD and others, and I'd rather just focus on the PTSD vets for the time being and ask what are you witnessing? What do you see? You, yvette, maybe start there. What was your on-ramp to this experience? What was your feeling about doing it at the onset and how has it evolved since you started?

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Jesse Gould: 11:16

Yeah, and there's going to be a lot of overlap with PTSD, with veterans and the rest, because a lot of veterans they kind of have comorbid dynamics where within the diagnosis of PTSD often includes depression, anxiety. A lot of these other and actually the vast majority of people in the US that have PTSD are not veterans. They're sexual assault victims or people who've been in, you know, accidents, have childhood trauma, all sorts of you know there's a huge population. So, yeah, my journey and this is how we somewhat connected is kind of unconventional path, originally going in finance, cornell economics degree, was working in Wall Street. Around that time it was like during the 08-09 financial collapse Always had an inkling or a yearning, I guess, to join the military, just sort of testing my mettle coming of age, just something that I was lacking coming from university.

Jesse Gould: 12:15

I sold a field and then just the global crisis was like all right, let's do this. Wall Street's spreading down, so I have some time to figure this. So I ended up joining the military, enlisting, uh, did a straight path, became an army ranger. I was at first battalion in savannah, georgia. Uh, that you have to go through selection and all sorts of other stuff, and then over that time I did three combat deployments to various parts of afghanistan and you know very high intensity sort of situations, and overall my military career was pretty straightforward. You know, learned a lot about myself, about it, was challenged. But when I got out of the military this was around 2014, just landed myself into a pretty good job. I was in Tampa, florida, going back into finance, reutilizing the degree, and on the outside it was a pretty good job, pretty good career prospects. I was doing well on the outside.

Jesse Gould: 13:14

But that's when my life slowed down because of the 9 to 5 job and that's when a lot of these mental health issues that I probably had for some time but was able to move of, move fast enough to tell pace and finally they caught up with me. And so for me that was in the form of was diagnosed with PTSD, but also just had severe depression, had anxiety, had sort of an abusive relationship with alcohol that was kind of my medication at the time. Relationship with alcohol that was kind of my medication at the time. And when I went to the VA to seek therapy, that time I understood it. I saw the red flags like all right, there's something wrong here and I'm not handling it well by myself. So let me get some professional help.

Jesse Gould: 14:01

But I was not necessarily ready to go on medication. So medications like SSRIs, which antidepressants, anti-anxieties, and that was for my own personal reasons I just didn't think that was the next step. I

wanted to talk through some stuff, talk to a professional, and I'd seen the pluses and minuses of medications. Buddies had served for some people. It really helped them. For others it really just took away sort of their their spark and made them almost a shell of themselves. So they weren't necessarily reactive but they also were not necessarily living life.

Jesse Gould: 14:34

And then it oftentimes can come with all sorts of different side effects, right. That just leads to pills after pills after pills. And so went to the va and unfortunately I was told that if I wanted to continue seeing a therapist I would likely have to go on medication. It's just kind of how the system works. There's so many people demanding treatment and if you don't go with their protocol then in their minds there's only so much they can do, right, and so there really was no option. It was like go on medication, otherwise we can't help you, and that didn't seem like something I wanted to acquiesce to. And oftentimes what people don't know with PTSD is for the vast majority of people you mentioned the Shreve Elmahal data A lot of these medications SSRIs have less than a one in three success rate, and that's often continuing taking it and so PTSD almost becomes a life sentence almost. We're going to teach you, we're going to help you maintain it, but you're not necessarily going to improve. Some people do, but a lot of people don't. And then they're just on medication for 30, 40, 50 years with all the side effects and at 28,. That's not what I wanted to just get myself into. And so I walked out there just like frustrated right, like, uh, the professionals don't seem to know how to help me either. This can't be it. This can't be my sort of mental health future for the rest of my life where I'm just struggling.

Jesse Gould: 15:59

And around that time, uh, her was listening like Joe Rogan podcasts.

Jesse Gould: 16:04

I was at work, just kind of more and more miserable each day, and he had a guest on that was talking about ayahuasca and just kind of listened to it more out of curiosity than anything else. It was just this guy's crazy trip and seeing dragons and all sorts of other stuff and again it didn't appeal to me. I had my advice with alcohol, Like, okay, what's seeing a dragon going to help me out at all? But for whatever reason, just listening to that and then hearing some other stories of people being helped by it, which you said, you've had it planted some sort of seed in my brain and I think just with no other options. And also, like I said, coming from this dynamic where I was proud that I never done psychedelics, never smoked pot, all this kind of stuff, uh, but I also knew I was on a pretty bad trajectory down and if I didn't do something, that uh, there would be some reversible, irreversible course kind of dynamic and I just got to that, by the way.

Marcus Arredondo: 17:02

What, um, where did you see this starting to surface in your everyday life?

Jesse Gould: 17:06

Uh, in terms of like my mental health affecting my life, yeah, yeah, yeah yeah. I mean it would just be um, I was highly productive, but I'd like come into work hungover, right, where I'd have to have like a bottle of beer just to like be functional, or uh, just um, you know, when depression hit, bad, I'd be friday night just staring at ceilings and walls and not being able to go to sleep just because of like everything was gray,

right and there I couldn't even listen to music as distraction. It was just nothing I was, and so my options like stare at the ceiling all night or drink till I pass out, right, and that was kind of it.

Marcus Arredondo: 17:47

Are you ruminating on anything in particular at that point?

Jesse Gould: 17:51

No, it's that. So for me and this is sort of the hard part and this is kind of what we've also been learning, you know, for a lot of it, especially with our you know what we see in movies and stuff we have this very singular view of what PTSD is right, like some sort of very traumatic event in the person's past that they just can't forget about and they just have dreams about it, and that is. That is a lot of cases. But there's also kind of more complex PTSD where you know, for me is less of a traumatic event, more of kind of the mental wear and tear that my time in service did, where there's times when I was in these high, high vigilant states and your brain kind of gets stuck in this cortisol loop or you're kind of in this constant spot where you know you have no control over life and death and there's mortars dropping on the bases and all this kind of stuff. You get into these different sort of dynamics and then also with the training and with the operations, you're in these spots where you don't sleep for days and you're just taking in all these inputs that tend to actually affect your brain negatively and it gets stuck in these sort of feedback loops as well. As this is the other complexity there.

Jesse Gould: 19:04

What they're learning more and more is that a lot of veterans are exposed to a lot of concussive blasts and forces from either explosions or high caliber rifles, and that's constantly causing micro damage. So it's called micro tbi traumatic brain injury and so they're seeing similar symptoms in a lot of veterans, especially special ops, that you would see in professional athletes. You know there's a whole cte thing with like nfl and so, although it's not necessarily physical, uh, the concussive force is having similar dynamics, and I was a mortar man in the rangers and so I was just constantly around these. So for me it was just this kind of complex thing of just being in these hyper stressful, vigilant states as well as all the damage, wear and tear and then all these other, as opposed to one specific thing that was hyper traumatic, right, right, and so for me it wasn't ruminating on something, it was just sort of like my brain just was off as well as like sort of the emotional um balance, like my ability, my ability to balance whatever I was going through was not there, and so then it would lead to just kind of nihilistic behavior.

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Jesse Gould: 20:13

You know, I was fortunate I was not suicidal myself, but I was also, you know, putting myself in situations where I just didn't care what happened. You know, like there'd be times I'd just like sleep outside just because I didn't care. I happened. There'd be times I'd just sleep outside just because I didn't care, I didn't think I deserved sleeping inside, or just being reckless on a motorcycle or things like that. There's many different ways to get to the same sort of end.

Jesse Gould: 20:36

That's also the complexity of actually treating these things. It's not just one person, one trauma. This is the guidebook on how to treat it. Everybody deals with trauma differently. A lot of veterans, actually, their trauma comes from childhood, which is then accelerated from their experience, and then it could be trauma, head trauma, the all sorts of different things. That just gets it very tricky that if it's a one size fits all solution, which is how we traditionally deal with mental health, you're going to get what you see right now a very with mental health. You're going to get what you see right now a very ineffective mental health system.

Marcus Arredondo: 21:08

I want to take you back to you getting onboarded, but before that I just want to ask one last question on this particular subject, because I think it's important not just for vets, but for others who are suffering from this type of anxiety, depression, emotional instability. You had the soundness of mind. Was there ever a moment, did someone say something to you that triggered this? Or were you cognizant enough to say, hey, this is not the way I want to live my life, moving forward.

Jesse Gould: 21:37

Probably a combination of it. With my alcohol consumption I knew my like parents were worried. You know there'd be like slight sort of like, hey, are you doing all right? Kind of stuff. I mean really there's one moment I remember pretty vividly still to this day and again it's kind of like a all compassing sort of thing of and when I was in that mode I was also, you know, trying to date, find like a relationship, but I also would be like self-sabotaging and so, you know, just go to my local bar to be social or whatever, not necessarily date, but just be social, and one thing would lead to something. And then I'd get you know, somebody, would you'd be hanging out, having too many shots.

Jesse Gould: 22:22

And the next thing I know thing I know be like stumbling home, right, uh, drunk, and I remember this one time where uh did that, fell over, busted up my hand, got home and you know, had the drunk face but I was looking myself in the mirror and it was just such a departure from like my peak as a ranger right, where I was just like top performance physically and not saying I wasn't like drinking them, but it was. It was different, right, you know, gained some weight and was just like, just busted my hand, like what are you doing, dude? Like whatever you lost? And I was just not getting that sort of challenge creative challenge, physical challenge. I was just kind of in this rut and it was just like, why did you get that drunk this night? Like what was the point of that, right? Like what are you accomplishing? You're by yourself with a busted up hand. I just remember that juxtaposition of like you're, you're not living up to that sort of ranger dynamic or to your maximum capability. And it was just also like waking up the next day I'm like, yeah, this is not healthy behavior in any way. Like why are you going for broke? Uh, with these things, right? And so, yeah, those are the combination of like, uh.

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Jesse Gould: 23:33

And because during this time, I was actually trying to do certain things that would get me out of it, I was like, okay, something's wrong. Um, I tried to form good hobbies. Like started learning how to cook. I

started like meditating, journaling in the morning. Uh, I try to do more productive hobbies and not just go to the bar after, after work and stuff like that. And some of it helped to some degree, but I just couldn't get out of this. Like I just felt stuck right. I just felt like I was just walking through a swamp where I was keeping my head above the water, but it was like why is this so hard? Why I feel like something is holding me back that I can't get past and I couldn't necessarily make something tangible out of it. It's just like when you're in mental health states, that's your whole existence, right. You don't know what you're trying to achieve, you just know like this is not what it should be right.

Marcus Arredondo: 24:31

So what was your next step? To your journaling, your cooking, you're finding these alternatives to supplant what would otherwise be unproductive behavior. At what point did you say, like you know, I need to get to the next step, I need to try something else. What was that process?

Jesse Gould: 24:48

Yeah, it became sort of this cumulative thing. Like I said once I walked away from the VA and I've been at my job as international corporate finance. It's actually a decent job, but it's also very corporate to where a big part of corporate life is. You're kind of like automating your own job, like the better at it, like the less creativity you need to bring into it. But it's also the other dynamic where it's like you better not leave before the boss leaves, so you're just kind of fake cat typing on your keyboard, even if you were done at like 2 pm or what have you. And so it's just one of these things of like I was losing that sense of creativity or that sense of challenge, that sense of purpose. Sure, and I was ready, I was just starting to be ready to leave my job. I was like I can't. It was just after like a pretty challenging two weeks. We're going budget and you'd be, we'd be there till like 3am doing these financial models and you get done with that. And then it's like job well done, now let's rinse, repeat, we're going to do this whole yearly cycle. And it was just like maddening thinking about that and then also just knowing, despite what I was doing. I was not overcoming myself any of these challenges in any significant way. Like I said, it was not holding down any serious relationship and it was just looking at my life. It was like there's nothing here worth preserving If I just walk away. There's not anything that's like oh, I really missed that or it's a shame I walked away from it. It was just nothing like that.

Jesse Gould: 26:19

And so I think that culminating event of listening here in the podcast and in my brain starting to see like hey, there might be some other answer it seems crazy, but I got nothing else right. Like I just knew that whatever I was doing was not working. Hey, here's an option. At least it's getting me out of this toxic bubble that was like kind of forming. So why not?

Jesse Gould: 26:40

Like I, I just had this strong sense that if I kept on that path, I'd just get worse and worse and worse, and that's kind of the thing of like. When you start getting this sort of like what I was saying, like risky behavior, nihilistic sort of mentality, it only takes one mistake, like it only takes you getting too drunk and doing something, and it can completely change your life for the negative Right, and unfortunately I had that sense of that's where I was heading. And unfortunately I had that sense of that's where I was heading and so that was kind of that culminating event of just like all right, whatever I'm doing here is not working at all, so let's clean script and try something else.

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Marcus Arredondo: 27:15

So where'd you go? What was that next step?

Jesse Gould: 27:18

Yeah. So then I kind of made that decision. I got to get out of this, ended up putting in my two weeks notice at my job, or at least indicating I was gonna. I was planning on leaving and ended up being a couple months. I had some big projects that I'd finish up, but then I was also starting to plan and essentially at that point, made the decision of like, hey, I'm gonna go to south america and I'm gonna try this ayahuasca thing I did like due. This was in 2016.

Jesse Gould: 27:48

So there wasn't that much information as there is now, and so it was like internet forums how do I go do this? Because I have no idea what I'm doing and how do I go to a spot what does it mean to be a reputable spot with this sort of thing that I have no idea. So I just started looking into it and started planning I guess my exit. Have no idea. So I just started like looking into it and started planning I guess my exit and you know, like selling what I didn't need, packing up what I uh needed or putting in storage, uh, with sort of this one-way mentality of like I'm gonna go figure this out. I had a little bit of um, there was a little bit of a pathway in terms that actually at Cornell I studied abroad, in Ecuador during one of my semesters, and so I'd already had some experience traveling, living in South America.

Jesse Gould: 28:36

I look back at that spot as like a very formative time and always wanted to go back.

Jesse Gould: 28:42

So in my mind it's kind of been like okay, well, let me travel, let me get out of this. Hopefully maybe it helps me understand what I'm going through. Had enough saved that I knew I could live in South America at least for some time, to, to, to figure some stuff out, like I wouldn't be as burdened as I would living in the U? S in terms of cost of living and all this kind of stuff. And then, hey, there's this weird, mysterious, uh psychedelic that I'm gonna try who knows what's gonna happen, but at least I'll shake things up right, like at least it's a departure from the norm. That felt like it was killing me, and so found the spot. Uh, it seemed you know I had to like apply for it, which gave me a little bit more confidence, because some of the other ones were just enter your credit card number here and we'll have a good time, and yeah, then just, you have to get a doctor screening or anything before you went for that application.

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Jesse Gould: 29:41

They did, yeah, they did like some basic like survey, not necessarily like a doctor, but you had to like fill out some medical questions, that kind of stuff, right, and the biggest things are like main physical ailments, heart conditions, history of psychosis or schizophrenia, etc. And so none of that applied to me, so it was pretty straightforward. So none of that applied to me, so it was pretty straightforward.

Marcus Arredondo: 30:04

So what was your feeling before doing it, having never done any drugs? And then following it? What was that change? Was it immediate?

Jesse Gould: 30:13

Yeah, so I went there.

Jesse Gould: 30:14

I went to a place called Iquitos, peru, which is sort of an enclosed city in the Amazon in Peru, in the Amazon in Peru. And the moment I was on the plane out of Tampa I felt a little bit of relief of being more and more clear of just how bad a situation I was just leaving it, and so I felt sort of a breath of fresh air coming into that. Obviously super anxious leading up to it, just because I've never done anything and had sort of the same stigma that a lot of people that are listening might have of. Like I always heard, if you take psychedelics or something goes wrong, you could go crazy, right, like for me it was almost like a dice, a dice toss of you have one in six chance of going crazy with this stuff or if you take it too many times. And so, yeah, went and went to this retreat. Yeah, you had to go through. You know it was deep in the amazon and you know, didn't tell my my family knows going south america, but didn't tell anybody I was doing a psychedelic. Uh, you know, not the most comforting thing. Do you want to hear about your son?

Jesse Gould: 31:23

Uh, and yeah, went in, just very nervous, very anxious, uh, but I was there for a reason and was surrounded by a bunch of other, uh people that were there for their own reasons. You know a lot of variety of people all over the world for different, um, things that they're searching for, and, uh, it was a week long and over the course of that week there's four different opportunities to do a ayahuasca ceremony and, for people who don't know, ayahuasca is a combination of two amazonian plants. They're boiled together. Boiled together, distilled down, and it creates this very thick drink, and it's the combination of the chemicals in the two plants that actually cause this extremely powerful psychedelic experience. And it dates back thousands of years and amazonian cultures have been doing it for spiritual, religious health reasons, mental health reasons, all sorts of, uh, different things. And so, yeah, and it was just going through it, the four ceremonies, absolutely challenging, one of the hardest things I've ever done, and just some points scared the hell out of me, just because you know it makes you face your fears, and one of my fears was going crazy by taking a psychedelic and so it puts you up to the edge of that kind of stuff, not realistically, but at least in sort of your fear control sort of dynamic and uh, but yeah, like I said, I was there for a reason and uh, kept kept going through it um, and towards the end sort of had this breakthrough where, you know, coming from this sort of in the experience and experiences tend to last about five, six hours, generally happening at night, but you're just kind of in it seeing all sorts of different psychedelic shapes and sounds and all this kind of stuff but, like I said, what it does is it tends to, one, make you more sensitive, so you're experiencing all these emotions, and brings them up to the surface.

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Jesse Gould: 33:20

But, two, it interplays with your brain where you're having to face these different feelings, whether in a direct storyline, like the guy who was talking about the dragon or kind of more, an emotional spot that that kind of escapes words. That's hard to explain unless you're. You're going through it, but almost like you have to process your emotions on, just push them down Right, like you're having to experience it. You're having to dive into it. Why am I feeling this? What experience it? You're having to dive into it. Why am I feeling this? What's the why is? Uh? Why is this so significant? Or why is this guiding me? Uh.

Jesse Gould: 33:51

And then, yeah, eventually just being surrounded by anxiety to almost breaking through and feeling absolutely serene at peace, calm, um, and there's a back and forth element. It wasn't just like from one thing to another, but towards the end of it. After the four, so one, like I said, I felt this sort of sense of peace. I felt, uh, like a lot had been lifted, uh, and a lot that I couldn't necessarily again narrate why, but it felt different. And then two, from the physiological standpoint, it almost in that immediate sort of comparison, was like, oh, this is how my undamaged brain should work, right, yeah, uh, where it was like, oh, that brain was almost like a misfiring engine. You know, for years I've been driving on three cylinders instead of like four and the the full engine's finally working together, uh, and it just felt like, oh, this is like my brain's actually working together, not just like misfiring and all these spots. And so, yeah, the immediate just felt like one, you're just relieved of it being over. You tend to feel lighter, you tend to feel peace.

Jesse Gould: 34:56

Sometimes a cynicism or doubt comes in and you're just like was that, was that? But I had a lot of lasting benefits. So to this day I've never gone back to the same depths of depression or anxiety it doesn't mean I don't have anxiety some days, or it doesn't mean I don't get sad, or it doesn't mean it's perfect a lasting shift as well as the knowledge of patterns of behavior or ways of not returning back to this environment, because when you're in a trauma state, you also build your life around reinforcing it in a lot of ways, and so it's understanding those patterns of behavior that actually are bad for you, which are generally pretty obvious, but when you're in them it's hard to process and acknowledge of which things should be shifted.

Marcus Arredondo: 35:53

So what I find really interesting about this is, I mean, you talk about the engine and it's sort of coming together, and my journey in sort of finding out about ayahuasca and psychedelics is coming from a variety of places. But when you hear that it's been used for thousands of years, you read this in multiple cultures and the added benefits is it's a cleansing ceremony, something that's not to be taken lightly but something that does happen repeatedly. And then you couple it with sort of modern day pushes from people like Michael Pollan or even Tim Ferriss, who I'm an admirer of, and sort of their pushes into PTSD. I've had at least two other conversations with guests on this show talking about psychedelics and some of the benefits, but there's an underlying theme going back to your rather than four cylinders. An engine working together is sort of a dissolution of boundaries, that compartmentalization that I think a lot of hard-charging people like somebody like yourself. I would imagine that you really need to control or mitigate some of these situations from rearing their head at unwanted times and so by sort of I don't want to say burying it, but putting it off to the side, it becomes Carl Jung's type of shadow self. Off to the side, it becomes Carl Jung's type of shadow self right, where it sort of becomes something else. And I'll land the plane here.

Marcus Arredondo: 37:10

But my question to you has to do with time and what I'm specifically asking is in one conversation we had about ayahuasca, ricky Patel actually was talking about how I was able to revisit prior times in my life and come to terms from a different perspective about that event. That allowed me to get a little bit more comfortable with it or have a different relationship with it. That I was never able to do and I'm not putting this is not him speaking, but I'm surmising that it might be because you don't want to approach the beast right. That shadow self becomes a monster at some point where you just say like, look, it's in the closet, let's just keep it there. So I don't even want to open the door, but this sort of seems to like dissolve the walls between you per se, whatever you is, and sort of that beast to have a little bit of a dance with it. I'm curious if you think that there's any accuracy in how I'm describing this.

Jesse Gould: 38:10

Yeah, absolutely. It seems to work differently for different people in a lot of different ways, and that is one of the ones that tends to be reoccurring in terms of this reframing. And reframing is actually this process that people use therapists use with their patients of rethinking about certain events in their life and viewing it in a different level. It's just that psychedelics tend to cataclyze that ability or enhance your ability to actually do that right. It's putting you in these sort of states as well, as what they've been showing with research is that the psychedelics, instead of frying your brain like the commercials, it actually increases the connectivity of the brain, so parts of your brain that don't normally talk to each other are, which is why it's all visual and sound, and that actually is really good for therapy processing, because the creativity is actually an essential tool in terms of processing trauma, because it allows you to see trauma in a different way or allows you to reframe it or refile it. And so I have had that in certain circumstances, like so in terms of have a very loving family, but they have their own issues and you get some of that residual, and I've had a journey where, just viewing it from where they were, you know scared young parents and how they interact with situations, maybe not in the best way, but the best way they they were equipped to. Um, and what you're saying about this sort of demon in the closet. Sometimes we just don't have the tools at the time to deal with it. Like if you're a kid that's experiencing abuse, you have to build some sort of framework for you to survive. That's why it's there. It's what your brain is there to make you survive. Sometimes the survival causes these issues down the line.

Jesse Gould: 39:55

So I've had a lot of people veterans that come to us and same sort of thing.

Jesse Gould: 39:59

They maybe had a childhood abuse or something and the whole time they had this sort of back the brain where they're a victim, right, or that this was life's unfair or just self-destructive thing, because there's this lurking dynamic and these journeys allowed them to go to that were very scary because you're still dealing with a lot of emotion, but it allowed them to see, hey, this was not your fault, but also look how strong you have become since then.

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Jesse Gould: 40:27

So changing their brain from being the victim to like, look, you're an amazing success story, look what you've done, or just seeing these things in different ways that actually have a lasting permanence, that

they can walk away from that and not be reactive in that same sort of victim brain, but possibly reactive now or being able to sidestep of like, oh, this is my pattern, I'm reacting to my spouse this way because of that hurt child, as opposed to like, let me take a step back, no, that's not how I want to react, let me react this way. And so it is a sort of what we're discovering, a pretty amazing tool of reframing, having that time. I've heard the same thing with veterans. You know, if they've they've killed somebody overseas, of just seeing it from different perspectives and just understanding and you know either helping them overcome the guilt or just helping them not blame themselves as much of being young and in a situation that was kind of beyond their control.

Marcus Arredondo: 41:27

Yeah, there's part of this. I mean, I have to think that there's neural pathways that become either permanent or semi-permanent, that allow for that stability to take place and build on it, to break free from what would otherwise be your default network right, your default behavior that you're not always cognizant, that you're actually participating in. You're just going through the motions without considering what they are.

Jesse Gould: 41:50

Yeah, and that's actually like a pretty common analogy is even like our. How the neural network works is the more you have a pattern, the stronger that connection becomes right. And that's where habits come, because you associate being in this situation. You know, for a lot of people like smoking when they wake up or smoking with coffee. Right, it's so connected that that's like a hard thing to to detach.

Jesse Gould: 42:13

What a lot of people sort of view psychedelics, uh, is almost like you have a muddy path, you drive your bike there, you're stuck in this sort of muddy rut. This is almost like a paving, like you get this flat spot. So you still have to make the good decisions, you still have to take that bike into a better spot, reinforce that, but it gives you that ability to break free of some bad behaviors or bad patterns and actually form new ones. And so that's the big thing about psychedelics that I was kind of alluding to to is this is not just about taking a handful of mushrooms going to a party and you're going to be better. There's a whole thing about in a container with people who know what they're doing, to where you're safe, to where you can actually address it.

Jesse Gould: 42:54

There's not a lot of distraction, but then there's a big responsibility part of this. So even our program, we do four to six weeks of preparation. Even before the retreat there's many months of what we call integration and that's where you form the positive patterns and oftentimes people get these messages. But if you ignore them, if you go right back to your old ways of behavior, realistically a lot of that stuff's going to come back. And so there is this dynamic. It's not just take this and you're magically cured, but there's also a beauty to that where it's giving you this chance of reframing your life, but you still have to be responsible for it.

Marcus Arredondo: 43:32

Yeah, I appreciate you sharing so much about your personal journey here, because I think that helped to set the table, Because I want to give you some time here to talk a little bit more about the Heroic Hearts

Project and the genesis of it, what your experience has been and how far it's come. I know you've helped thousands of families in dealing with this, so I want to transition from you Thank you again for being so open, that nonprofit that you founded and tell us more about sort of where it started and how far it's come and what your what successes, what obstacles you've faced.

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Jesse Gould: 44:10

Absolutely. So pretty quickly after my own experience uh, this was early 2017. Uh, I started the nonprofit just because of that time One. My own experience was like hey, others deserve to at least know about this, right, if they tried everything At that point, I already lost double-digit people I served with to suicide. So it was just this looming sort of issue in my veteran community. So I started as, like one, maybe this is not for everybody and I still don't think it's for everybody, but everybody deserves to have every tool that they could possibly get if they're really struggling. But everybody deserves to have every tool that they could possibly get if they're really struggling. And if I was going to start advocating for it, I also wanted people to have the support, the success that I didn't have.

Jesse Gould: 44:51

I kind of went in there blind and so pretty early in 2017, so we've been in operation for eight years and it really was that just putting it out there like, okay, let me talk about this, let me advocate, and then we also, for those who are interested, help them connect to these treatments and these substances. Psychedelics are still Schedule I in the US, and so the way we're able to operate is connecting veterans to countries where it is legal so Peru, mexico, costa Rica because they have different laws or indigenous practice, rights and the long history of doing this. And so, little by little, that's what we formed the program of how do we set people up for success. What are the metrics that somebody shouldn't go? How do we make it as safe as possible? And it really was almost this risk reduction kind of thing where these guys were coming to us because they've tried everything else and not for anything else. They would like to be high candidates for taking their own lives or, uh, just you know, ruining their family and finances, and so it really was like this person's coming to us. So let's make sure they're they're set up for success. And so that's why I mentioned we have this whole preparation, we have this whole integration. We really bring in peer support so other veterans that have been served by this they can come back and be coaches and peer support for future cohorts.

Jesse Gould: 46:09

We in the past few years added on a spouse program, so every veteran that goes, their spouse gets coaching, but the spouse can also go on a retreat. So then that way you're getting a full family healing, because a lot of the spouses were the ones holding down the family during the trauma during the deployments, likely have their own trauma and so if you don't help both sides of it then you tend to get more friction than anything else. So we've been doing that, served over a thousand vets, a few hundred spouses, and then advocacy, if you've heard, in a lot of the different states there's been changing of these laws. You can now access legal psilocybin, which is mushrooms, through the health authority. So this is regulated. This is safe under the government in Oregon and Colorado. So those are big wins. She had another big win in New Mexico and then also advocating on the federal level to help move laws and get it through the VA.

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Jesse Gould: 47:06

So some degree of these psychedelics or something called MDMA, which is pretty prominent, all showing pretty amazing results. And we're working with different universities so that's the other people who are skeptics Johns Hopkins, stanford. So that's the other people who are skeptics. You know, johns Hopkins, stanford, yale, they're all having these psychedelic studying divisions or schools. They're notable people like Tim Ferriss, like Michael Pollan. They've all become pretty true believers and this is sort of across the board as well.

Jesse Gould: 47:38

As this is one of the last few bipartisan issues there is left. You have everywhere, from AOC to Matt Gaetz to Paul Rand, to even like Morgan Luttrell, who is the brother he's a SEAL and so you have both Republicans, independents and Democrats on pretty polar opposite sides have all pretty come up, have come out in support of this, and so it is. It is pretty promising and that's because of how effective it is and how many veterans not only that we've served, but there's been thousands upon thousands of veterans allowed them to come back to their family, to their children, and find new purpose and contribute to society, contribute to the economy. So it's been pretty amazing. Still a lot of work to be done, but we're pretty excited about how far it's come in a pretty short period of time.

Marcus Arredondo: 48:39

How are you seeing the new administration? I know that RFK, who seems to be the one who'd be the most likely individual to help spearhead this, has indicated openness prior to coming into office. What's your prognosis here?

Jesse Gould: 48:55

Yeah, it's tricky always with politics. It moves slow and oftentimes not in the direct direction that you want because there's all these layers and all this kind of stuff. But I would say, politics aside, just from this specific issue, there seems to be the most permeation of this topic in this administration at the highest level than any previous administration. So more people who have talked about this or been open to it than any other administration in the past, and that's to the point of even JD Vance was talking about it, I think, on the Rogan podcast.

Jesse Gould: 49:29

Rfk has tweeted an advocacy of psychedelics. It'll probably be on his agenda at some point. Doug Collins has actually said in a cabinet meeting Doug Collins is the current secretary of the VA that he's looking into it. So across the board it is getting on people's record. Dr Sharif El Nahal, who you mentioned he was a previous undersecretary of the VA, but still people within the VA talking about psychedelics is amazing in comparison to what it was. So, yeah, it's positive, and so we just have to figure out which way it's going to go, because on the other side there's reduction of staff in the VA, reduction of staff in HHS, so that's sort of cross currents there, how these things get administered and pushed forward makes a big difference.

Jesse Gould: 50:18

Again, we're not advocating for just throwing out a bag of psychedelics. Again, we're not advocating for just throwing out a bag of psychedelics. There are certain ways. No-transcript.

Jesse Gould: 50:44

Still a long way to go, but we have a lot of people and veteran advocates in DC that are just talking to a lot of different politicians and trying to give our opinion on if this were to go, what's the possible pathways, what does this look like? How do we make this go through not only the VA, but have broader access as well? We're doing work, and last year was the first full year we were able to work in the US. So before we sent all the veterans internationally last year, we did about 70 veterans in the US, and so we're building pilot programs of what does the future of this look like in the US, and we're having pretty amazing results with that as well.

Jesse Gould: 51:23

So that's the other thing I'll mention is this is coming. The results are just too strong, and so it's always better for people to inform themselves, just so that they know they can be informed of how to approach it, and just because it's coming and because you're able to do this in Oregon again. This does not mean that there's gonna be devastation in the and cities are going to burn down and all this other kind of stuff. It's actually quite a big positive that a lot of us who especially have our own mental health issues or people in our inner circles that had mental health issues, this is a big win.

Marcus Arredondo: 51:56

I know we're coming up on time, so I'll start to bring this into a close, but one thing that keeps going on circling in my mind is the fact that this is a nonprofit, and I do want you to address how people can support you and where you're getting the primary sources of your capital. But it's hard for me to digest, as a leading country in the world, by every measure, that it requires a nonprofit to treat the men and women who served our country to go outside up until now, the US to seek treatment that should otherwise. Long story short what's your opinion of the VA and how they're treating vets?

Jesse Gould: 52:40

Well, I think broadly it should be a national embarrassment that our service members had to go overseas to get life-saving care, still have to go overseas. That just should not be the case and that is an embarrassment and I hope everybody listens to that. The very core doesn't feel good about that. Not that it's their fault, but that's something we need to change. These men and women risk their lives One of the longest engagements past 20 years millions of veterans and they're having to fund themselves going overseas just to get some grasp on life, and it's unfortunate. It tends to be a repeated pattern with veteran issues.

Jesse Gould: 53:17

The VA itself it's tricky. I think it can be much more efficient. The people in the VA are amazing. You know, people might not always have, but I do. There's a lot of great, sincere people who are amazing within the VA and just doing the best with what they can. Yeah, it is the largest bureaucracy there. I think there's a lot of stuff they do actually do good. There's a lot of stuff they can really improve on Right, and so we just have to figure out how to do that.

Jesse Gould: 53:43

And that's always a tricky spot because it's not just say do better. It's not just say here's a sack of cash and do better. There's real ways to improve these initiatives. But also we need to understand that the VA is a big healthcare provider one of the biggest in the US, if not the world and it's not going to be the necessarily most innovative agent, it's not going to be the one on the avant-garde of these sort of things. So we need to maybe rethink how do we approach these things. If there's new ailments within the veteran community, whether it's Agent Orange or burn pits or head trauma, how do we get ahead of that and how do we give we defer to giving them care first as opposed to denying their claims, and what systems can help us allow that? So I think we can think of some out of the box. So VA definitely deserves some blame, but I shy away from giving them all the blame because I think there's other systems we can do to improve and give back to the veterans that have sacrificed so much.

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Marcus Arredondo: 54:42

Where's most of your funding coming from and how can people yeah, so we're registered 501c3.

Jesse Gould: 54:49

And we get all of our donations just through people.

Jesse Gould: 54:52

So, generally donations just through our website, heroicheartsprojectorg People donating $5 here, $10 here we fortunately have some big, high net worth individuals that have really helped us push it forward, because we're also in this category where we can't get government grants yet because of the federal legal status, we're not likely to get big corporate donations because Coca-Cola is not going to be sponsoring psychedelics anytime soon, and so it really depends on people.

Jesse Gould: 55:23

It depends on people who are adamant about psychedelics, about veterans, and just want to help and change the mental health landscape. So, for people who are listening to this, if you can donate, that's great. Or also just connections to people who you think might be wanting to support it, just connections to people who you think might be wanting to support it. It really has just been that network connection that brings us to people who can support us in big ways and small ways and it all is tax deductible as a nonprofit and you know, if we continue to expand, grow and lead in sort of this education and changing sort of the the landscape. But this is one of the biggest revolutions in mental health, even if it still seems a little bit scary. This is going to not only provide more treatment, but also better our understanding of trauma and the brain and how it all reacts.

Marcus Arredondo: 56:15

Well, I'm very grateful for your time. Thank you for your service and sharing your story. Is there any closing thoughts or things you think I might have missed?

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Jesse Gould: 56:24

No, I think you covered it all. Like I said, the 60 Minutes piece you'll link to it. We're on Instagram, too. Heroic Arts Project there's also. You can see it for yourself. There's a lot of amazing testimonials of veterans that have gone through this and you can just see in their eyes and their face how transformative this can be. And you can't you can't fake that. And, yeah, I'll just say come at this with an open mind, come at it with skepticism, but there's a lot of great resources that, the more you look at it, it pretty much speaks for itself in my mind. So I always appreciate people, even if they don't agree with it right away. Just you know, this is the best thing we can do for our veterans right now, bar none, and so, even if it's not gives you a little bit weird feelings like what can we do best for veterans is, I think, the common denominator there.

Marcus Arredondo: 57:20

Yep. Thank you, Jesse. I really appreciate it. Thanks, Marcus, Pleasure to meet you. Talk denominator there Yep. Thank you, Jesse.

Jesse Gould: 57:22

I really appreciate it. Thanks, marcus, pleasure to meet you, talk with you Likewise.

Marcus Arredondo: 57:30

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