

Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy:

Putting Practice into Focus

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Psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy (PAP) is a therapeutic approach that has growing interest surrounding it. Social workers and social service workers may increasingly encounter questions about providing services in this emerging area of practice.

Registrants may participate in PAP in certain circumstances by providing psychosocial and psychotherapeutic services; however, they must not prescribe, possess, administer or use psychedelic substances as part of this treatment. It is important that registrants fully understand the legal requirements and their professional limitations when considering or participating in treatment modalities. Registrants are encouraged to obtain advice from a lawyer to understand their legal obligations.

The psychedelic drugs most frequently being used in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy are psilocybin and methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). Psilocybin and MDMA are both classified as restricted drugs. Psychedelic substances are subject to the Food and Drugs Act (FDA) and its regulations and are also controlled substances under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA). The prescribing, possession, administration and use of these substances for therapeutic purposes are restricted and subject to federal regulation and require authorization under applicable Health Canada pathways, including the Special Access Program (SAP) and exemptions under the CDSA.[1] Only physicians and nurse practitioners with prescribing authority may apply for exemptions and file a request to the SAP for the use of PAP.[2] Of note, the SAP is for access to emergency treatments only where conventional treatments have failed, are unsuitable or unavailable to treat individuals suffering from serious or life-threatening conditions.

Registrants must only participate in PAP models that meet all the legal criteria and occur within an authorized treatment framework. The *Regulated Health Professions Act* (RHPA) defines the governing framework for Ontario's regulated health professionals and outlines the 14 controlled acts that pose significant risks of harm to the public. To protect the public, the RHPA restricts their performance to certain legally authorized regulated professionals. With these considerations in mind, it is critical that College registrants understand that the only controlled act that registrants of the College are authorized to perform is psychotherapy. Since registrants can perform the controlled act of psychotherapy (provided they possess the requisite competencies), they may provide psychosocial services as part of lawfully authorized PAP models, including preparation, integration and follow-up support, in accordance with the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* and applicable legislation.

Key Practice Considerations

Registrants supporting PAP must ensure they are competent to provide services that comply with the Standards of Practice and applicable legal and legislative requirements. They should complete specialized training and engage in ongoing supervision with a PAP experienced supervisor. They must maintain clear, accurate and complete documentation that demonstrates informed consent and supports the services provided. Due to the heightened vulnerability of supporting PAP clients, it is crucial that registrants seek legal advice to discuss the risks associated with providing this service and confirm coverage with their professional liability insurance provider.

[1]Health Canada, "Notice to stakeholders: Requests to the Special Access Program (SAP) involving psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy," Government of Canada, February 27, 2023, online: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/drug-products/announcements/requests-special-access-program-psychedelic-assisted-psychotherapy.html.

[2]Health Canada, "Requests under the Special Access Program for psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy," Government of Canada, online: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/drug-products/announcements/requests-special-access-program-psychedelic-assisted-psychotherapy.html

Registrants practising PAP must consider all Standards of Practice requirements in conjunction with their professional judgment, including the following:

- Principle I: Relationship with Clients, interpretation 1.5
- Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretations 2.1.1, 2.1.3, 2.1.4, 2.1.6, 2.1.7 and 2.2.12
- Principle III: Responsibility to Clients, interpretations 3.3, 3.8 and 3.9
- Principle IV: The Social Work and Social Service Work Record, introductory paragraph and interpretations 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, and 4.1.5

Registrants should also be aware that, among other provisions, the College's *Professional Misconduct Regulation* considers it professional misconduct to practise in a manner that would reasonably be regarded as disgraceful, dishonourable or unprofessional and/or to contravene any federal, provincial or territorial law related to public health or relevant to the registrant's suitability to practise. This would include contravening the requirements of the FDA, CDSA, RHPA, or other legislation and regulations relevant to PAP.

Continued Learning

PAP is a complex and evolving area of practice. Registrants who provide psychotherapy or related psychosocial services as part of a PAP treatment model should continuously assess their competence, remain current with their knowledge and seek supervision and legal advice when needed. The following College resources are also available and provide helpful guidance to review:

- Practice Notes: The Importance of Professional Judgment
- ETHICS→A: Ethical Decision-Making Tool
- Practice Notes: ETHICS→A: Ethical Decision-Making Tool
- Webinar: Supervision: The Cornerstone of Competence
- Practice Notes: Supervision At the Core of Competent and Ethical Practice

Registrants with inquiries on this topic can consult with the College's Professional Practice team at practice@ocswssw.org or by booking a consult.

