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A Trip To Healing

When people hear the word "psychedelics," what comes to mind is typically hippies, rainbow art, and D.A.R.E. campaigns; not medicine. The idea of Psychedelic Therapy might seem out of this world to many, but scientists and psychedelic specialists are saying the exact opposite. Psychedelic Therapy is an abbreviation for "psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy," meaning a therapy style that uses psychedelics to help patients. Within the scientific community, researchers have studied these drugs and their benefits if used properly. They believe these drugs will allow their patients to remove themselves from their current thought patterns and aid them in seeing things in a new light. Psychedelics should be made legal to treat American patients struggling with depression, addiction, and P.T.S.D. because this country is facing a mental health crisis; they are safe and allow patients to understand their issues from a different perspective.

Psychedelic therapy, or, more accurately, "psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy," was first used in the 1950s, initially to treat chronic alcoholism. The technique consisted of administering a single, large dose of LSD to the patient in a supportive environment after significant preparatory psychotherapy (Richert). Since the '50s, the process has been tested in countless clinical trials and resulted in positive results leading patients to overcome their mental illness. The process of this treatment begins once the patients have participated in an initial therapy session to pinpoint their issues, after that they come in on a different date and are administered a psychedelic. Once the drug takes effect, they participate in another session with the original therapist they met and dissect the issues previously discussed. The psychedelic's impact on the brain allows the patient to break down their walls and open up in a more natural way, allowing them to reevaluate their issues and find the root of their problems. The process in total could be done in under a week and have a lasting impact on that person’s life. Even though this form of therapy has been held in high regard within the scientific community, it remains an illegal treatment for most Americans. Today in America, most people who experience psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy are war veterans in government hospitals. To understand why this seemingly successful form of therapy remains illegal, one must understand the history of psychedelics.

The history of psychedelics can be traced back to the beginning of civilization. Though psychedelics were not well known until the sixties in America, "the story of psychedelics starts long before. Indigenous communities around the world have used psilocybin (mushrooms) and other consciousness-changing compounds for healing for thousands of years" (Sanders). These drugs were used in countless ritual ceremonies to help people deal with hardships and change their perspectives. Within these Indigenous communities, it is believed that "psychedelic drugs, called sacred plant medicines by some Indigenous groups, are catalysts to help align mental, physical, spiritual and emotional health" (Sanders). Many scientists became curious about these "sacred plants" and began studying them and their chemical compounds. In the early twentieth century, "scientists at the pharmaceutical company Merck made MDMA in 1912. Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann synthesized LSD in 1938" (Sanders). These discoveries illustrate that the scientific community was interested in what these findings could lead to and how they could help people.

Just as these drugs started to show promise of becoming a solution to cure mental illness and addiction, America went to war on drugs. Shortly after the first psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy took place in the 50s, the United States government started to speak out against the use of psychedelics. Michael Pollan reports in How To Change Your Mind, his 2018 book about psychedelic science, that "the first wave of research ended abruptly when hallucinogens left the laboratory and became identified with the counterculture of the 1960s." This connection between hallucinogens and hippie culture began to plant seeds of doubt in the public's mind. Though the hippies were taking psychedelics recreationally and not for psychedelic therapy, the government pushed the idea that no good can come from these substances. "In 1960, the future of psychedelic research looked bright," Pollan writes. "Yet within the brief span of five years, the political and cultural weather completely shifted, a moral panic about LSD engulfed America, and virtually all psychedelic research and therapy were either halted or driven underground" (Gunther). Nevertheless, even underground scientists continued to study just how these drugs worked in case there was a resurgence of popularity in these substances. The revival of psychedelics did come, this time not for recreational use but as a treatment for the increasing mental health crisis.

With over 19 million people struggling with depression in America, the government must look for other options to help people. Psychedelics could be the answer; many scientists and specialists believe these substances can heal our society. In the United States, "an estimated 30 percent of people with depression, for instance, don't get relief from current treatments'' (Taylor). Hundreds of thousands of Americans are on antidepressants, but studies have shown that people who suffer from mild depression receive little to no effect from those pills. There is a need for treatment, and antidepressant drugs are not doing enough to satisfy those needs. Monica Williams, a psychologist at the University of Ottawa, explains, "Psychedelics have the potential to revolutionize mental health and change everything completely." Legalizing psychedelic therapy would give people access to a treatment that has far better results than traditional medicine and talk therapy. Researchers reported in the Journal of Psychopharmacology in 2020 found that psilocybin could help with depression and anxiety in patients facing life-threatening cancer; the benefits were still there about four years after the psilocybin treatment. When looking at these statistics, it becomes clear that the government should seek out this therapy to help the population.

Most people's issue with psychedelics being used in a legal matter to help heal people is the risks involved. People fear the long-term effects of these substances on the human brain and the immediate risk after consuming the drugs. This idea that psychedelics are inherently dangerous is a false narrative created by the government during the war on drugs. There is a risk involved in any medication; Tylenol has the potential to kill someone, yet people are not fearful of taking it. In legal psychedelic treatment, there would be strict guidelines and medical oversight during the treatments. David Nutt calls psychedelics "among the safest drugs we know of." He and a team of experts in addiction, drug policy, psychology, and other fields ranked 20 drugs on their harmfulness, using criteria ranging from drug-related mortality (death by overdose) to environmental damage. Overall, psilocybin mushrooms were classified as the least harmful drug, followed by LSD and the addiction drug buprenorphine, which had the same score. Alcohol was ranked most harmful (more than ten times as dangerous as mushrooms or LSD), followed by heroin, then crack. Referring to mushrooms and LSD, Nutt writes:

"It's virtually impossible to die from an overdose of them; they cause no physical harm; and if anything, they are anti-addictive, as they cause a sudden tolerance which means that if you immediately take another dose, it will probably have minimal effect" (Huber).

Psychedelics have proven to be safe, even safer than alcohol in many cases, which most Americans consume daily. This argument that they are dangerous is false and can not be a logical argument against the legalization of psychedelic therapy treatment. The research shows that psychedelics are safe to take and when taken for treatment with medical doctors present there is little to no risk involved.

Throughout humanity, we have looked to psychedelics to open our eyes to the world around us and teach us about ourselves. From Indgioues ceremonial practices to government-funded experiments, people continue to be astonished by these drugs and how they can help us live better lives. In recent years they seem to be the key to solving an all-time high mental health crisis in our country. By legalizing psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, hundreds of thousands of Americans could cure their depression, addiction, and P.T.S.D. with just one week of treatment. These substances have been studied for years, proven safe, and carry no adverse long-term side effects; the only long-term side effect is healing. If this therapy is legalized, people will think of healing instead of hippies when they hear "psychedelics'' in the next few years.

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