

herbal

"ecstasy"

- an

experiment

into the

placebo

effect

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FEW WEEKS AGO, I was phoned by a man who told me he had a terrific new product, an herbal extract that had the same effect as MDMA, called e-line Ecstasy, "Better, actually, it's great for sex". He told me how it was becoming really popular in the States because it was safe and nontoxic, 100% vegetarian – vegan, in fact – without chemicals, additives, preservatives, sugars or anything artificial. He said its effects last 4-8 hours without causing disorientation, and he would like me to see for myself so I could recommend them.

I was planning to go to Glastonbury – a three-day festival which is traditionally experienced in a pleasantly altered state of consciousness by well over 100,000 people – so I asked for plenty of samples. They arrived complete with a leaflet telling of all the good things they contained such as Gurana and Ginseng. The instructions said that you should "open your heart and allow yourself to become overwhelmed, because then and only then can you feel the true force of this experience"... "All six senses may become intensified. Things may seem crisper and clearer. Sounds may sound louder and feel more intense. Touch becomes more enhanced, things just simply feel better to touch, taste, see, smell, and feel. Imagination will flow more rapidly, thoughts may become clearer and new ideas may appear at a more rapid pace."

At Glastonbury I set up a stand with a sign offering people the opportunity to try a new herbal substitute for Ecstasy for free, providing they left a deposit, to be returned upon completion of a questionnaire. Each of 100 people got a small brown envelope containing two pills, along with instructions and the questionnaire. This asked them how to rate the herbal product's qualities compared to the best E they'd ever had, scoring 1 to 10 for empathy, free-flowing movements, insight, well-being, hangover, etc. However, I was sneaky: only half were e-line Ecstasy, the rest herbal vitamins. But instead of buying matching funky brown lumpy vitamin pills which were expensive, I went for cheap little white pills. This turned out to be a false economy. Although giving out 'placebos' is an accepted procedure, I'll never do it again: I not only had to mislead people and use them as unwitting guinea pigs, but when they questioned me, I had to lie. And when a group called the Rainbow Tribe all decided to take it together, they of course noticed that the pills were different and quickly guessed the truth. I was then lectured by self righteous tribe members

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**as an easy method of evaluating overall positive**

about the divine principles of trust and of our bodies being our temples, while trying to avoid a riot by lying through my teeth that both types were as real as each other.

But this mistake had a virtue. Besides the test group and control group, I now had a third group – people who believed they were given a placebo. And they weren't going to get their £5 deposit back until they filled in the questionnaire like the others. It was hardly surprising that these people reported that the white pills had practically no effect and valued them at nil. But other people reported all kinds of effects from a bad hangover to providing the best E experience they'd ever had! The e-line Ecstasy also produced an extreme range of responses, although there was a tendency to report a more speedy effect. As an easy method of evaluating overall positive effects, I asked "How much would you have paid?", and the result was much the same: those who put more than £0 valued e-line Ecstasy at an average of £3.98 compared to vitamin pills at £4.12.

The conclusion is not that people can be fooled. It is that even veteran drug users' experiences are largely determined by other factors than the substance they have just consumed. Everybody's response to drugs depends very much on what they expect; how good they feel and how supportive are their surroundings. But, when you experience some definite change in mood, it can be hard to believe that it was caused by anything else than the chemical in the pill you've just taken. It may well be that the same mechanism occurs naturally inside the brain, in any case. Ecstasy puts the mind into a particular state by releasing 'neurotransmitters' called serotonin and dopamine, resulting in a particular mood. But when moods occur naturally, for instance when falling in love, it is through these

neurotransmitters being released. So expectations and situations may cause this release, resulting in a mood change even without the need for a drug. It's like the thought of eating making your mouth water, i.e. releasing saliva in your mouth. The same explanation is thought to apply to 'contact high' – being surrounded by people who are in a particular state triggers the release of a neurotransmitter in the brain to match the mood of those around. It could be a similar mechanism at

work when excitement spreads through large crowds.

Maybe, way back in evolution, our tribe would have to be in the same mood to survive – like when under attack – and developed ways to match one another by releasing the right neurotransmitter. It may also explain how the mood at a rave can be so universally luvvy when the majority of people 'on E' have been sold other drugs such as mixtures of speed and LSD. The lesson to know and accept is

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that the E you take is just one factor affecting your experience. Realise that MDMA is not a 'happy pill' but one that allows you to let go, but not in any particular direction. When you feel good in yourself, comfortable with the people around and expecting to have a great time, then a good E can let you take off. Ravers often get into the rhythm of the bass, which helps to launch them in a fairly predictable direction, but in quieter situations the direction you take is more dependant on surroundings and expectations.

There is another lesson to be learned from this, and one that I suspect many dealers and the makers of e-line Ecstasy already know: that if you can convince someone that a particular pill will produce a particular mood, then it will. Users will write glowing testimonials. And pay you good money. ■

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