

Building Congressional Support for Psychedelic and Medical Marijuana Research in Washington, D.C.

TONY MACIE



Tony Macie

MY EXPERIENCE IN MAPS' MDMA-ASSISTED psychotherapy study was a truly life-changing experience, not just because it opened me back up to myself and helped me conquer some demons, but also because it started me down the road of a different fight.

The reason I signed up for the military was my desire to help people and do what is right. Soon after going through MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, I stopped taking all my prescription medications, which I had been taking (unsuccessfully) for my post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. I stopped taking them mostly due to my overwhelming sense that they were not healthy for my mind or body. This catapulted me into learning how to take care of myself without medications.

As I learned more about how to incorporate a healthier and more natural diet and lifestyle, something else kept coming up repeatedly. Other veterans kept telling me how marijuana was useful for a wide variety of things. I started to wonder why it is that I could receive MDMA-assisted psychotherapy through a government-approved trial while this plant that grows out of the ground is illegal. I learned how much harder it still is for scientists to research marijuana. In fact, it is even harder to research marijuana than it is to study MDMA, LSD, heroin, or any other Schedule I drug. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) holds a monopoly of the supply, and requires scientists to go through an extra legal process when they want to research marijuana as a medicine. In fact, MAPS' study of marijuana for symptoms of PTSD in U.S. veterans is actually on hold because NIDA doesn't have the marijuana MAPS needs for the study.

My desire to level the playing field between marijuana and psychedelic research led me to fly to Washington, D.C., with a group of fellow veterans, including Michael Krawitz of Veterans for Medical Cannabis Access, and with support from MAPS, to exercise our rights. Beginning in March 2014, we have been lobbying Congressional representatives to add their signatures to a Congressional sign-on letter initiated by Rep. Earl Blumenauer (a Democratic from Oregon) urging the Public Health Service (PHS) to end the NIDA monopoly on marijuana for research. It was interesting to see the different responses we got from various Congressional offices when we approached them. One of the first things I realized was that people—even elected representatives—are extremely uneducated when it comes to the topic of medical marijuana research. Along with that, whenever the word “marijuana” comes up, you can see that it still has a fringe connotation, even in this day and age.

Through persistence and diligence, we successfully got a few key Republicans to sign the letter. The fact that Republicans were willing to sit down and listen to the issue, and then sign on to the letter was extremely relieving. It made me feel very optimistic that our country is finally going to come out of the closet and stop being so afraid to study marijuana's medical value. The turning point came when a fellow veteran and I sat down with Rep. Morgan Griffith, the Republican Congressman from Virginia. Since that day, Congressman Griffith has been an advocate for allowing proper medical marijuana research and having the federal government respect state



Tony makes frequent trips to Washington, D.C. to lobby for medical marijuana.

laws. It is true leadership that I witnessed in the Republicans who decided to take a stand and sign this letter. These are the types of leaders that we need: the ones who follow the facts and do what is best for the people.

Unfortunately, on September 22, 2014, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell responded to Congress's request and rejected their request to end the PHS protocol review process. This is extremely frustrating and disheartening, since this continues to delay proper research. This has not stopped me from joining MAPS in going down to D.C. and continuing to collect signatures from Senators to increase the pressure on HHS.

A few days after Veterans Day, I had the opportunity to meet with the Veteran Affairs Committee health liaisons. The conversation went extremely well, and I had the opportunity to share my MDMA-assisted psychotherapy experience with them. I was also able to bring up some crucial problems that veterans face when trying to access medical marijuana through the VA, including veteran patients not being able to seek guidance from their VA doctor. I also mentioned that it is unfair for veterans who need MDMA-assisted psychotherapy to be blown off by their politicians and the VA. If something works, they need to pay attention, and not blow it off because they believe it to be fringe. The meeting went extremely well, and I am proud to say that the staffers on the Veterans Affairs Committee do have very open minds to these treatments.

Working with others on this issue, especially fellow veterans, has been particularly motivating for me. With so many issues right now in the United States surrounding veterans'

health, more veterans need to stand up and let their voices be heard. I guarantee that you will not be ignored if you go to the capitol and try to talk with your Congressman or Senator. It is their duty and obligation to listen to their constituents, and they will pay even more attention if you are a veteran. I am not saying that they will necessarily follow through on every issue, but you have the right and the ability to grab their ear and plant that seed. 🌱

★

The Congressional sign-on letter may be viewed at: blumenauer.house.gov/images/stories/2014/Medical_marijuana_research_letter.pdf

HHS Secretary Burwell's response may be viewed at: maps.org/research-archive/mmj/Marijuana-Research-Response-from-HHS-9-22-14.pdf

Tony Macie was a forward observer in the U.S. Army from 2005–2008. He served in Iraq during the “surge” of 2006–2007 for 15 months with a reconnaissance unit in southeast of Baghdad. After getting out of the army, he struggled with years of PTSD and ineffective treatments from the Veterans Administration. As a participant in MAPS' MDMA-assisted psychotherapy study, he found that one experimental therapy session changed his life for the better. He now advocates for the legal use of marijuana and MDMA-assisted psychotherapy. While he mainly focuses on veterans issues, he believes that these medicines should be available for all of humanity. He can be reached at tonymacie@gmail.com.