

# mind



## Fresh Perspective

A CLASS OF DRUGS KNOWN FOR THEIR RECREATIONAL USE IS EMERGING AS A FIX FOR TREATMENT-RESISTANT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES. WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF PSYCHEDELICS, WHERE HEALING IS ON THE HORIZON.

By Kristin Canning  
Photographed by Yasu + Junko



When Theodora Blanchfield stepped out of the ketamine-infusion clinic and into the Los Angeles sunshine after her first treatment, she felt as if she were seeing clearly again for the first time in years—literally. “It was like I’d had cataracts removed,” she says. “I noticed the flowers by the sidewalk I never paid attention to before. I called my dad, and he could hear a difference in my voice—he started crying because he was so happy.”

Losing her mother to cancer two years earlier had sent Blanchfield, 37, into an emotional tailspin. She’d been struggling with her mental health for a while, but this grief was all-consuming. After two years and two hospitalizations, she felt more like herself but still wasn’t where she wanted to be—and she was on a combo of three medications that didn’t seem to be doing enough. At a visit with her psychiatrist, she asked about her options. “Have you considered trying ketamine?” her doctor asked. Though skeptical it would work for her after all the meds she’d tried, Blanchfield was willing to give it a shot.

Her first 40-minute IV infusion was in September 2019, and after it, she felt as if she were “looking at the world through a normal lens and not a depressed one,” she says. She kept going to the clinic, receiving six infusions in two weeks, and talking with her therapist between sessions to unpack the memories and feelings that came up during the trips. “I could be productive again, like I wasn’t trudging through quicksand, and my negative self-talk was

quieting down.” Since that first round of treatment, Blanchfield has gotten booster infusions every four to six weeks, plus whenever she anticipates a low period coming on, like before the anniversary of her mom’s passing. She’s been able to go off one of her meds too. “Ketamine hasn’t cured me,” she clarifies. “I still have bad days. But it can pull me out of dark places and suicidal ideation, so I can function and even feel joy again.”

It may sound like magic, but a growing body of research shows that psychedelics (or drugs typically known for their hallucinogenic effect) can be a life-changing choice for people who’ve run up against a wall in therapy or aren’t getting relief from traditional interventions. And it’s no longer a fringe notion, either: Last year, Johns Hopkins launched the Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research, a privately funded initiative to explore the promising effects of psychedelics on depression, PTSD, eating disorders, Alzheimer’s, chronic Lyme disease, and addiction to opioids, alcohol, and tobacco.

The power behind these psychedelics is thought to be twofold, says

Amy Emerson, CEO of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) Public Benefit Corporation, the leading nonprofit supporting the research of therapeutic uses for MDMA (more widely known by its nickname, ecstasy). “For one, these drugs cause the production of new nerve cells and neural pathways in the brain,” she says. And two, “they can turn down activity in the amygdala, or the part of the brain that ramps up fear, and turn up activity in the prefrontal cortex, which controls logic.” That switch allows people who’ve felt blocked by their emotions to open up and explore painful memories in therapy while feeling safe. Researchers are also seeing that what patients learn from their trips carries over into their daily life as well, leaving them more equipped to handle negative thoughts when they arise.

The reports from people who’ve used these drugs illustrate that the effects on your body can work. And for the 10 to 30 percent of people with depression and PTSD who don’t respond well to traditional drugs or treatments (mostly women, btw!), these options offer a new solution. Curious? The future of mental health care awaits.

#### ●● On the Menu

The three biggies are ketamine, MDMA, and psilocybin. Already used as an anesthetic in emergency departments, ketamine was approved by the FDA last year in nasal spray form for treatment-resistant depression. Many clinics also administer it off-label via IV infusions or dissolvable pills for bipolar disorder and PTSD. Psilocybin and MDMA aren’t currently FDA-approved or available on the market, though therapists commonly used



# 72%

of people had more brain receptors to absorb feel-good serotonin one to three days post-ketamine dose.

Source: *Translational Psychiatry*

them before they were turned into Schedule I drugs (meaning they're illegal and labeled by the Drug Enforcement Agency as having no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse) in 1970 and 1985, respectively. Researchers have been pushing back and fighting to prove their therapeutic benefits through clinical trials ever since.

#### ●● **Bigger Breakthroughs**

These three psychedelics all cause a slightly different reaction in the brain, making each well suited for the treatment of specific conditions. Ketamine, for example, acts as a dissociative; it's been shown to alleviate physical and emotional pain and "helps the brain break free of negative ruminating thought patterns," says Mona Kim, a psychiatric nurse practitioner with Mindbloom, a mental health company and ketamine therapy provider. "Patients often report having major revelations and greater perspective after sessions, because they're able to go beyond their critical inner voice and think about their lives in a fresh, positive light," she says. The drug has been shown to boost the function of brain circuits damaged by stress, then later actually repair

those circuits, per a study on mice in the journal *Science*. It can also up the number of serotonin receptors in the brain, found a small Swedish study, making it easier to absorb the “happy” hormone. For 72 percent of the 30 participants, this boost occurred within 24 to 72 hours, which explains why ketamine can provide rapid relief for depression.

## ● ● Ego Evaporation

Psilocybin has its own special abilities. Brain scans of people who’ve taken the drug (found in magic mushrooms) show that it decreases activity in the part of the brain that drives your ego, per a study in the *International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology*. This makes people who’ve taken ‘shrooms less likely to sweat the small stuff, and it leads them to feel connected to something bigger than themselves, which can be a nice escape from a mind that’s on a loop of depressive, anxious thoughts. “Psilocybin also seems to deactivate a part of the brain known as the default mode network, which contributes to a lot of rigidity in thinking,” says Brian Pilecki, PhD, a psychologist at Portland Psychotherapy who helps patients integrate psychedelic experiences into their therapy. “Mushrooms allow people to get out of mental ruts, get in touch with their body and emotions, and feel more open to spirituality,” he says.

## ● ● Trauma, Transformed

Moving on to MDMA: You might think of it as an illicit party drug, but in a controlled setting, the



**GREAT ESCAPE** Traveling to the Amazon for a (legal) soul-awakening experience has become a bit of A Thing in the wellness world (ya know, when travel was also A Thing), whether to attempt to reconnect with a lost loved one or to see the universe in a new

light. The earthy antidote people are seeking out? Ayahuasca, an ancient brew made from plants with psychoactive compounds, traditionally used by the indigenous people of South America to induce spiritual experiences. Might sound out there, but the active

# 56%

of people with PTSD no longer showed signs of the condition after MDMA psychotherapy.

Source: *Psychopharmacology*

warm and fuzzy feeling it can bring on lets users revisit trauma without going into fight-or-flight mode. This leads to what's called memory reconsolidation, or "examining and refiling a traumatic memory, so it no longer feels like a current threat," Emerson says. Eighty-two percent of people with treatment-resistant PTSD who took part in MAPS-led studies had a clinically significant drop in their symptoms after treatment (which involved three doses of MDMA, taken while monitored by therapists and followed by talk therapy). And 56 percent no longer met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD at all, per a meta-analysis in *Psychopharmacology*. That 56 percent increased to 67 when researchers followed up a year later, meaning participants' results got better with time. Whoa.

Trish Graves, 40, is one of the participants whose life was altered. "MDMA cracked me open, so I could finally talk about my trauma," says the former Navy vet, who, after facing a series of horrifying

events including sexual assault while deployed at sea, was honorably discharged with major depressive disorder in 2008. When a cocktail of antidepressants didn't work, she sought out alternative treatments and was selected for a MAPS clinical trial in 2018. The visions Graves experienced during the MDMA trips, which she'd later dissect in therapy sessions that followed, were often metaphors for what she'd gone through. "In one, I was a soldier who was shot and lying on the ground. All my comrades were stepping over me because they thought I was dead...but I wasn't," she says. "The work was painful and challenging, but I felt safe enough to explore these themes because of the drug and the space my therapists held for me. Now, I feel more alive than I ever have before."

#### ●● Wait, Is All This Even Legal?

Depends which drug you're trying to access. Ketamine is kosher for medical purposes, but it usually isn't covered by insurance and requires an Rx. Still, shelling out for treatments may be less of a financial burden over the long run, since some women, like Blanchfield, can wean off long-term drugs they took before. MDMA and psilocybin aren't legal yet, but access is on the horizon. MAPS is halfway through the last phase of clinical trials to make MDMA an FDA-approved drug for assisted psychotherapy for PTSD, aiming for widespread availability in 2023. A psilocybin med for depression looks to be a few years behind that. Studies of people with OCD, anorexia, and opioid addiction are also in the works at

various facilities—and the steady decriminalization of psilocybin in states like Colorado, California, and Oregon has led to increased support for legal therapeutic use.

#### ●● So You Wanna Take a Trip...

Clinics that offer guided ketamine experiences, like Field Trip Health, Eleusis, and Mindbloom, continue to open across the U.S., so start by searching for ketamine clinics and doctors who have experience with the drug (specifically from a mental health standpoint) in your area. Mindbloom even facilitates virtual trips, like it did for Melanie Lowery, 53, in March: "I do video consults with my clinician before sessions, and then my partner acts as my 'trip-sitter.' I feel lighter, carefree, after. I've been able to go off my antidepressants, and my mental health is better, which feels major given the circumstances of the pandemic." As for the others, visit [clinicaltrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov) to find studies you can volunteer for. Also, support groups for people who've experienced psilocybin and want to integrate their learnings into their life are popping up in areas where it's decriminalized. Resources like The Sabina Project, which offers Black-led psychedelic education, can provide more insight into potential healing options. Bottom line? The stigma around these drugs is dissipating; when used in a safe, controlled environment, with the guidance of a professional, they can be a game changer. Explore away.

ingredient, DMT, may have lasting effects on users' brains and outlooks on the world. In fact, 80 percent of people reported that the experience altered their fundamental conception of reality, per a study in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* (the largest

DMT study to date). The majority of respondents also labeled it as one of their "most meaningful, spiritual, and psychologically insightful experiences" and said it led to "persisting positive changes in life satisfaction and purpose." Talk about a higher power.