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TRIP

THE PSYCHEDELIC MUSHROOM IS PUSHING ITS WAY OUT OF THE DARKNESS AND BACK INTO MAINSTREAM CULTURE, BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU'D EXPECT. ELLIE PACKER TRACES ITS MAGICAL RISE

PSYCHEDELICS WERE ONCE the domain of Peruvian shamans, hyper-creative types and tie-dye-wearing hippies at festivals in the Byron hinterland. Now they're being harnessed by Western medical practitioners for their ability to treat everything from clinical depression and anxiety to PTSD. While this psychedelic renaissance hinges on the magic mushroom – a naturally occurring psychoactive that contains psilocybin, a hallucinogenic compound (this is where it differs from, say, the kind of mushroom you'd throw in an autumnal risotto) – it also includes LSD, a synthetic psychoactive with a similar effect. These hallucinogens bind to the brain's serotonin receptors, leading to a higher state of consciousness – or what is known in layman's terms as "a trip" – and giving rise to the mushroom's "magic" prefix.

You've probably already heard of microdosing, where people take small doses of psychedelics so they can experience a subtle increase in focus, creativity and productivity. This process has been anecdotally enhancing productivity in Silicon Valley for the past few years, and James Fadiman, a Harvard- and Stanford-educated psychologist, estimates that 100,000 Americans have already experimented with the growing trend. While the supposed benefits of microdosing have more to do with boosting creativity, current studies are focused on the purported therapeutic effects of larger doses of psilocybin. This is not the first time the funny little fungus has been prized for its remedial qualities. The ancient Maya and Aztecs were believed to have relied on mushrooms in their spiritual healing practices and archaeological evidence suggests North African tribes were using them as early as 9000BC.

Fast-forward to the 1960s, and while pioneering American psychologist Timothy Leary was conducting psilocybin experiments at Harvard, psychedelics were entering popular culture. Icons such as the Beatles and The Beach Boys were instrumental in shaping '60s counterculture. Although they didn't publicly promote their psychedelic of choice, LSD, there were enough references in their music to hint that their spiritual enlightenment was psychedelically induced.

Yet for all its peaceful imbibers, the consumption of psychedelics was becoming increasingly reckless, culminating in a US government-led campaign against the drugs and a labelling of the culture as one that was morally "bad". "In many ways, [that was] the mistake of the '60s: that cavalier attitude," said Amanda Feilding, the director of UK-based think-tank The Beckley Foundation, in a conversation with Lynne Malcolm for the ABC's *All In The Mind* podcast. This

fear-mongering serves as the backdrop for a new book by Michael Pollan, an American journalist, the author of five *New York Times* bestsellers and the unofficial godfather of psychedelics. In the aptly named *How To Change Your Mind: What The New Science Of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, And Transcendence*, he heralds plant-derived psilocybin for its role in our "healing, habit, and spiritual practice".

In contrast to the recreational use of psychedelics back in the '60s, today's advocates are aligned on one crucial point: they need to be treated like a medicine – not as a shortcut to enlightenment. Speaking from experience, 75-year-old Feilding recounts that "in those days the size of the doses was big, whereas, in these days, the dose is under half [of what it used to be in the '60s]. The work I do now is in clinical settings, where there's a doctor [supervising]."

It's worth noting that psychedelics are an illicit drug in most places, Australia included, making their comeback anything but straightforward. Melbourne's St Vincent's Hospital was recently given the go-ahead to trial using psilocybin to help terminally ill patients cope with anxiety and come to terms with their mortality, but this approval process involved a year-long battle with an ethics committee and state and federal authorities.

Legality aside, many people in the Australian medical and research community are also standing behind the movement – and neuroscientist Melissa Warner is one of them. Vice president of The Australian Psychedelic Society and board member of PRISM (Psychedelic Research in Science and Medicine), Warner is a woman on a mission. After a harrowing incident in her teens, Warner struggled with PTSD that wasn't helped with medicine or traditional psychotherapy. It plagued her for years until she heard psilocybin could help her in a way antidepressants hadn't, and realised she had nothing to lose.

Today, she's a self-described case study for just how much can be achieved when psilocybin is harnessed as a therapeutic tool. Speaking at last year's Melbourne Knowledge, Warner said: "With traditional pharmacotherapy, you're required to take a pill every day for months, possibly years. Psychedelics – in a therapeutic setting – can relieve symptoms in one session." She stresses the difference: "Psychedelics aren't traditional pharmacotherapy: they're meaning-making molecules. It's not only the pharmacology that heals, but also the peak experience they facilitate." Coined in the '60s, the term "peak experience" was defined by psychologist Abraham Maslow (famous for his hierarchy of needs theory) >



as “moments of highest happiness and fulfilment”. According to Warner, those who’ve had peak experiences in psychedelic trials “describe them as some of the most profound in their lives – and they correlate directly with therapeutic outcomes”.

If it all sounds a bit loopy, that’s because in a way it is. But the idea of a peak experience being profound is something to which many can attest – and French-born Leti Passemier is among them. After 15 years as the marketing director for an international cosmetics brand, Passemier was burnt out. “I was managing 200 stores and a budget of hundreds of thousands of euros,” she explains. “But I was also selling millions of women the idea that products could bring them happiness, and I felt like a sham. So I quit, travelled to Thailand and had my first mushroom experience. I came out of it feeling completely enlightened in a way I never had with any other treatment.”

After meeting her ex-Silicon Valley partner Chi Shabkar in Thailand, the pair moved to Amsterdam to start Truffles Therapy, a retreat established with the intention of sharing the healing benefits of psilocybin. Set outside the city, the four-day retreat includes nature walks, yin yoga and homemade vegetarian meals. Participants set intentions for their “journey”: otherwise known as the six-hour stretch after a moderate dose of truffles are consumed. Passemier and Shabkar act as “trip-sitters” – sober bystanders on hand if participants want to talk, or just need a hand going to the bathroom. The yoga and the intention-setting might sound like unnecessary add-ons, but when combined, they create the kind of setting Feilding and others in the psychedelic space have stressed is essential to provide therapeutic outcomes.

In contrast to Australia, psilocybin is legal in the Netherlands. By default, the small European nation has become a hotbed for both psychedelic research and experimentation at a more grassroots level. After getting PTSD symptoms when a long-term relationship ended abruptly, Adelaide-born Alice* tried Truffles Therapy, and counts it as one of the biggest factors in helping her come to terms with her grief. “When a friend mentioned the retreat to me, I was a total sceptic,” says Alice. “At the beginning of the weekend, I had plenty of eye-roll moments, but it wasn’t until the night we ate the truffles that I finally realised – I felt safe to open up to it all.

“I came out of it feeling COMPLETELY ENLIGHTENED in a way I never had with ANY OTHER TREATMENT”

After the experience something in me shifted, it allowed me to see things from another perspective.”

The purported benefits psilocybin has over traditional forms of pharmacotherapy are being echoed by Warner’s peers internationally, where research is progressing at a much faster rate than in Australia. According to Dr Ben Sessa, a research psychiatrist at the Imperial College London, psychedelics are offering the psychiatric profession benefits mainstream drugs have never delivered. “We have a whole wealth of different maintenance drugs that treat symptoms: if they’re depressed, give them an antidepressant; if they can’t sleep, a hypnotic.” He emphasises that “none of these drugs cure the patient – they are treating the overlying symptoms. The underlying cause is trauma and pain... So what psychedelics offer is the opportunity to do focused psychotherapy that gets to the root of the cause; gets to the trauma.”

While progress to legalise the use of psilocybin in clinical settings has been slow, the underground movement is forging ahead. Researchers, experimenters and entrepreneurs alike agree on the legitimate healing power of psilocybin. If the experiences – and resulting effects – felt by women like Warner and Passemier highlight anything, it’s the potential that’s finally being recognised on an international scale. For now, the work of organisations such as The Australian Psychedelic Society and PRISM – as well as ordinary women like Alice coming forward and sharing their stories – is invaluable. Because if something that helps individuals feel empowered to face trauma head-on exists, then that’s a trip worth taking. E

NOT QUITE READY TO TAKE YOUR TRIP ALL THE WAY?

Non-psychedelic mushrooms (closer to the kind you’d buy in the supermarket) are also having a moment as 2019’s supplement of choice. Mushrooms such as reishi (also known as lingzhi) and chaga are adaptogens that “sharpen focus, beautify, support metabolism, boost life force and encourage peaceful empowerment”, according to CAP Beauty founder Cindy DiPrima. Dump half a teaspoon into a blender with brewed coffee or hot chocolate and blitz for 30 seconds before drinking.

