

Psychedelic trips aid anxiety treatments in study

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In this April 13, 2010 photo, one gram of psilocybin, the psychoactive ingredient in hallucinogenic mushrooms, is seen on a scale at New York University in New York. A study being conducted at the university examines the effects of hallucinogenic drugs on the emotional and psychological state of advanced cancer patients. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

(AP) -- The big white pill was brought to her in an earthenware chalice. She'd already held hands with her two therapists and expressed her wishes for what it would help her do.

She swallowed it, lay on the couch with her eyes covered, and waited. And then it came.

"The world was made up of jewels and I was in a dome," she recalled. Surrounded by brilliant, kaleidoscopic colors, she saw the dome open up

to admit "this most incredible luminescence that made everything even more beautiful."

Tears trickled down her face as she saw "how beautiful the world could actually be."

That's how Nicky Edlich, 67, began her first-ever trip on a psychedelic drug last year.

She says it has greatly helped her psychotherapeutic treatment for anxiety from her advanced ovarian cancer.

And for researchers, it was another small step toward showing that hallucinogenic drugs, famous but condemned in the 1960s, can one day help doctors treat conditions like cancer anxiety and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

The New York University study Edlich participated in is among a handful now going on in the United States and elsewhere with drugs like LSD, MDMA (Ecstasy) and psilocybin, the main ingredient of "magic mushrooms." The work follows lines of research choked off four decades ago by the war on drugs. The research is still preliminary. But at least it's there.

"There is now more psychedelic research taking place in the world than at any time in the last 40 years," said Rick Doblin, executive director of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, which funds some of the work. "We're at the end of the beginning of the renaissance."

He said that more than 1,200 people attended a conference in California last weekend on psychedelic science.

But doing the research is not easy, Doblin and others say, with government funders still leery and drug companies not interested in the compounds they can't patent. That pretty much leaves private donors.

"There's still a lot of resistance to it," said David Nichols, a Purdue University professor of medicinal chemistry and president of the Heffter Institute, which is supporting the NYU study. "The whole hippie thing in the 60s" and media coverage at the time "has kind of left a bad taste in the mouth of the public at large.

"When you tell people you're treating people with psychedelics, the first thing that comes to mind is Day-Glo art and tie-dyed shirts."

Nothing like that was in evidence the other day when Edlich revisited the room at NYU where she'd taken psilocybin. Landscape photos and abstract art hung on the walls, flowers and a bowl of fruit adorned a table near the window. At the foot of the couch lay an Oriental rug.

"The whole idea was to create a living room-like setting" that would be relaxing, said study leader Dr. Stephen Ross.

Edlich, whose cancer forced her to retire from teaching French at a private school, had plenty of reason to seek help through the NYU project. Several recurrences of her [ovarian cancer](#) had provoked fears about suffering and dying and how her death would affect her family. She felt "profound sadness that my life was going to be cut short." And she faced existential questions: Why live? What does it all mean? How can I go on?

"These things were in my head and I wanted them to take a back seat to living in the moment," she said. So when she heard NYU researchers speak about the project at her cancer support group, she was interested.

Psilocybin has been shown to invoke powerful spiritual experiences during the four to six hours it affects the brain. A study published in 2008, in fact, found that even 14 months after healthy volunteers had taken a single dose, most said they were still feeling and behaving better because of the experience. They also said the drug had produced one of the five most spiritually significant experiences they'd ever had.

Experts emphasize people shouldn't try psilocybin on their own because it can be harmful, sometimes causing bouts of anxiety and paranoia.

The NYU study is testing whether that drug experience can help with the nine months of psychotherapy each participant also gets.

The therapy seeks to help patients live fuller, richer lives with the time they have left.

Each study participant gets two drug-dose experiences, but only one of those involves psilocybin; the other is a placebo dose of niacin, which makes the face flush.

The homey NYU room where Edlich had been getting psychotherapy was the setting for her drug experiences. She had brought along photos of her son, grandchildren and partner. She met with two therapists she'd come to trust, knowing they would stay with her through her hours under the influence.

Taking the drug followed a ritual, including the chalice and the hand-holding, because ritual has been part of psilocybin's successful use for centuries by traditional cultures, said Ross, the lead researcher.

After swallowing the white pill, Edlich perused an art book for about a half-hour while waiting for the psilocybin to take effect. Then she lay on the couch with headphones and listened to music with eyeshades over

her eyes.

After her vision of the brilliantly colored dome, Edlich went on to two more experiences involving parts of her life. She won't describe those much, even to friends. They "brought me profound sadness and profound grief" but also transformed her understanding of what was important to her in the areas of relationships and trusting, she says.

She sat up and talked with her psychotherapists about what had gone on. And after nine hours in that room, she went home and wrote 30 pages in a diary about what had happened. And she thought about it for weeks afterward.

Did the drug experience help?

It let her view the issues she was working on through a different lens, she said.

"I think it made me more aware of what was so important and what was making me either sad or depressed. I think it was revelatory."

All three people in the study so far felt better, with less general anxiety and fear of death, and greater acceptance of the dying process, Ross said. No major side effects have appeared. The project plans to enroll a total of 32 people.

Ross' work follows up on a small study at the University of California, Los Angeles; results haven't been published yet, but they too are encouraging, according to experts familiar with it.

Yet another study of psilocybin for cancer anxiety, at Johns Hopkins University, has treated 11 out of a planned 44 participants so far. Chief investigator Roland Griffiths said he suspected the results would fall in

line with the UCLA work.

In interviews, some psychiatrists who work with cancer patients reacted coolly to the prospects of using psilocybin.

"I'm kind of curious about it," said Dr. Susan Block of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. She said it's an open question how helpful the drug experiences could be, and "I don't think it's ever going to be a widely used treatment."

Ross, meanwhile, thinks patients might benefit from more than one dose of the drug during the psychotherapy. The study permits only one dose, but all three participants asked for a second, he said.

Edlich said her single dose "brought me to a deeper place in my mind, that I would never have gone to ... I feel a second session would even take me to more important places.

"I would do it a second time in a New York minute."

More information: NYU experiment: <http://bit.ly/dBZVGs>
Johns Hopkins experiment: <http://www.cancer-insight.org>
Psychedelic research organization: <http://www.maps.org>
Heffter Research Institute: <http://www.heffter.org>

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