

Long trip: Psychedelic advocate nears goal of legal ecstasy

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Rick Doblin poses for a portrait in Vista, Calif., on Aug. 15, 2018. The founder and director of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, or MAPS, Doblin is pushing for the therapeutic potential of psychedelics including MDMA, best known by its street name, ecstasy. That effort moves into its final stage next month with two large-scale, government-sanctioned studies that will determine whether the Food and Drug Administration approves MDMA for post-traumatic stress disorder. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Growing up amid the tumult of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the

Vietnam War, Rick Doblin says he became convinced that humanity was "crazy" and "inherently destructive." As a teenager, he came to see the mind-expanding effects of psychedelics—including LSD and magic mushrooms—as the antidote to mankind's inner demons.

He set out to prove it. And now, after 32 years of false starts, setbacks and regulatory hurdles, he has brought MDMA—the illegal, all-night party drug also known as [ecstasy](#)—to the brink of medical legitimacy.

The Food and Drug Administration has labeled the drug a potential "breakthrough" for [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and cleared late-stage studies of up to 300 patients. The studies are to be conducted by Doblin's nonprofit group dedicated to promoting mind-altering drugs, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, or MAPS. Researchers will begin screening patients this month.

The goal is to win FDA approval by 2021. MDMA would become the first psychedelic drug—currently in the same ultra-restrictive category as heroin and cocaine—to make the leap to prescription medicine.

Doblin does not plan to stop there. His aim is the legalization of all [psychedelics](#) for recreational use by 2035.

"Psychedelics have been used for thousands of years for healing and spiritual purposes," says Doblin, 64. "I thought my contribution would be to bring them back."

MAPS' work is part of a resurgence of interest into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics, a field that captivated researchers in the 1950s and 1960s before the government ban on LSD and other hallucinogens slammed the door shut in 1970.

"This field was so taboo it was essentially erased from the history

books," says Stephen Ross, a New York University psychiatrist who is studying psilocybin, the ingredient in magic mushrooms, for depression and alcohol addiction.

Ross and other researchers are largely funded by the Heffter Research Institute, the other psychedelic nonprofit in the field. But Heffter executives adamantly oppose recreational use of psychedelics. They say the drugs are too risky to be used without professional supervision.

"Talking about full legalization of all psychedelics makes quite a number of people uncomfortable," says David Nichols, co-founder of Heffter and a retired pharmacology professor at Purdue University. "But that's Rick, he's got his base of people who give him a lot of money because they want to see him kick down the doors of government regulation."

Spectrum Of Support

Funding MAPS and the MDMA studies has meant relentless fundraising, more than \$70 million over the years from by a wide array of wealthy backers.

"Rick has this beautiful vision of healing the cultural divide of the sixties; having veterans and counterculture icons coming together," says David Bronner, CEO—Cosmic Engagement Officer —of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, the organic brand known for its quirky labels. Bronner has given \$3.1 million to MAPS since 2005 and currently chairs its board of directors.

Earlier this year Rebekah Mercer, the billionaire Republican and co-owner of Breitbart, pledged \$1 million to fund the PTSD trials.

"America's veterans deserve the very best care," Mercer said in a statement announcing the grant.

If prescription MDMA is ever approved, revenue would flow to a pharmaceutical company entirely owned by MAPS. According to the company's charter, profits would fund research into new uses for MDMA and other psychedelics.

Back To A Psychedelic Future

The small studies published by MAPS and Heffter are dwarfed by research conducted roughly a half-century ago. Between 1950 and the mid-1960s more than 1,000 papers were published documenting 40,000 patients receiving LSD and other psychedelics for conditions like depression and addiction.

Only later would psychedelics become intertwined with the dayglow hippie culture of the 1960s and figures like Timothy Leary, the ex-Harvard professor who promoted psychedelics as a pseudo-religion.

MDMA had its own medical history before being adopted by the electronic rave culture of the 1990s, thanks to its ability to trigger intense feelings of euphoria, intimacy and connection.

The drug was discovered in 1912 by a German drugmaker researching chemicals to control bleeding. A chemical cousin, MDA, became a drug of abuse in the late 1960s, producing a combination of hallucinations and intensified emotions. Users dubbed it the "love drug."

MDMA was largely forgotten until a handful of psychotherapists reproduced it in the late 1970s to enhance therapy sessions.

Doblin first met some of the drug's proponents at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California in 1982, a seaside mecca for New Age teachers and seekers. In college at the time, Doblin became convinced of the drug's power to enhance communication and healing after an MDMA session

with his girlfriend. His original plan was to become a therapist working with MDMA. But the federal government's 1985 ban on the substance pushed him into activism instead.

George Greer, co-founder of Heffter, was among the West Coast psychiatrists who first prescribed then-legal MDMA to treat anxiety and other issues, including domestic problems between couples. Greer and his wife, a psychiatric nurse, treated more than 80 patients with MDMA between 1980 and 1985.

The Brain On Ecstasy

It's not entirely clear how MDMA works, but Greer and others point to its effects on two key brain chemicals: It boosts the feel-good chemical serotonin, similar to antidepressants, and also increases the stimulating brain chemical dopamine, like amphetamines. The effect, Greer says, is that patients feel less fear and more motivation to face their traumatic memories.

The current standard of care for PTSD includes antidepressants and several forms of therapy. But only about a third of patients recover after treatment.

In studies funded by MAPS, more than 50 percent of patients who completed MDMA-assisted therapy no longer had PTSD, compared with 23 percent of patients who received therapy with either a dummy pill or inactive dose of MDMA, depending on the study.

Processing The Past

Nigel McCourry, a lance corporal in the Marines, returned from Iraq in 2004 beset by nightmares of ambushes, exploding mortars and gun

battles. For years he suffered insomnia, sometimes standing at his apartment door convinced that someone might break in and kill him.

He was especially haunted by one incident in which he accidentally shot and killed two young girls who were riding in a truck that approached his platoon during a firefight.

"A lot of what was tearing me up was having this viewpoint that I was a monster and dangerous," McCourry says. "On MDMA, I was able to forgive myself in a way that felt meaningful."

After MDMA treatment, McCourry was able to sleep through the night and stop taking antidepressants and anti-anxiety pills.

But MDMA has its own risks. When abused as a party drug it can cause life-threatening dehydration. And heavy, long-term users have shown signs of problems with memory and thinking.

Still, leading psychiatrists are cautiously supportive of MAPS' research, noting the need for new treatments. More than 800,000 U.S. veterans receive disability for PTSD and the risk of suicide among veterans is 22 percent higher than other adults.

Tufts University psychiatrist Paul Summergrad says he wants to see larger, more rigorous trials to confirm the benefits of MDMA and psilocybin.

Doblin says part of MAPS' mission is "harm reduction" to help people use psychedelics safely.

In August, MAPS flew several staffers out to Burning Man, the Black Rock Desert festival that attracts up to 70,000 people each year, including many who use hallucinogenic drugs.

Doblin and his staff trained festival volunteers who counseled 380 attendees through what they call "[psychedelic](#) crises," or bad trips.

These days, Doblin says he only occasionally uses MDMA for "therapeutic purposes."

"I don't go to raves and dance all night—although I certainly did," he says.

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