MDMA users more empathetic than other drug users

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Long-term MDMA users have higher levels of empathy than cannabis and other drugs users, new research suggests.

University of Exeter scientists compared the [empathy](link) levels of 25 people who used multiple drugs including MDMA, 19 people who used multiple drugs not including MDMA and 23 people who used alcohol only.

Users of MDMA reported feeling much more empathy – and were better at identifying the emotions of others on a computer task – than people who took multiple drugs not including MDMA. The other drugs were cannabis, cocaine and ketamine.

MDMA (3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as [ecstasy](link)) is known to increase empathy for a short period, and these findings about longer-term effects could have implications for possible medical uses.

MDMA is a Class A banned [drug](link) in the UK and is not currently licensed for any medical use.

Lead author Molly Carlyle, of the University of Exeter, said: "We recruited long-term but mild users (a minimum of ten times), in order to reflect doses that may be used for medical purposes,

"It has been suggested that MDMA, combined with therapy, might be an [effective treatment](link) for psychological trauma and alcoholism, but it has previously been suggested that MDMA may cause heightened social distress. Our findings indicate that isn't the case in our study, MDMA users were better able to understand the emotions of others and had better [emotional](link) empathy than people using other drugs, and on a similar level to those who only drink alcohol."

The study's 67 participants completed a questionnaire about their own empathy, and took computerised tasks in which they had to identify emotions on the faces of others. They also reported how strongly they felt emotions based on seeing others in emotional states.

The researchers wanted to measure both cognitive empathy (the ability to understand the emotions of others) and emotional empathy (experiencing emotions due to the emotions of others).

The study says:

- MDMA users reported feeling significantly greater emotional empathy, and computer tasks revealed greater cognitive empathy, compared to people who used multiple drugs not including MDMA (there was little difference between the MDMA group and the alcohol-only group)
- All participants showed declines in mood and self-esteem in response to social exclusion, but there were no differences between the three groups.
- The levels of empathy and social pain in MDMA users were consistent with "normal psychosocial functioning".

The findings contradict previous suggestions that long-term MDMA use may cause heightened social distress.

Professor Celia Morgan, senior author of the research, said: "Our study suggests that mild MDMA use is not associated with any problems in how we function socially. Instead, it seems to make people better at empathy when compared to drug users who don't use MDMA, with a suggestion of better empathy compared to alcohol users.

"We cant say whether differences in empathy are due to taking MDMA, or whether there were already differences in the people who use MDMA and those who don't before they started taking the drug. But importantly this study suggests that MDMA may be used safely as a treatment without side effects on these crucial social processes."

The study, published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, is titled

"Greater empathy in MDMA users."

Provided by University of Exeter