

In Canada, psychedelics re-emerge in treatment of depression

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In this file photo taken on August 28, 2020, a woman demonstrates what a patient would experience in a therapy room at Field Trip, a psychedelic therapy clinic in Toronto—psychedelics are being reconsidered as a treatment for mental health issues

To manage her stress and fears, Andrea Bird—who is suffering from

terminal cancer—uses psychedelics, which are seeing a sudden re-emergence in Canada as a possible treatment for mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

The 60-year-old Canadian was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012. Despite aggressive treatment, the disease returned five years later, spreading to her lungs, bones and brain.

As she tries to cope with her incurable ailment, Bird uses psilocybin, the psychoactive substance of hallucinogenic mushrooms that was banned in the 1970s.

"I found it to be the most helpful thing that I did in coming to terms with the fact that my life is ending much sooner than I thought it would," Bird told AFP.

"I'm still dying," she said matter-of-factly, but added that psilocybin "makes me feel like I can stand up."

"I really love my life, and I really don't want to die, but I have to find a way to surrender to what is actually happening."

Bird, who lives in Ontario province, is among about 30 Canadians, most of them struggling to face the end of their lives, who have received federal dispensation since August 2020 to use psilocybin for therapeutic purposes.

TheraPsil, a non-profit organization based in British Columbia, has helped most of them get exemptions to Canada's controlled substances and drug act for "compassionate treatment."

The group also has connected patients to doctors and therapists who oversee their use of the drug.

These trial cases come amid mounting interest from researchers and investors, as well as a public push to reconsider bans on psilocybin, LSD, DMT, mescaline and other mind-altering substances such as MDMA, commonly known as ecstasy.

The US state of Oregon legalized psilocybin for therapeutic use last November.

'Revolution in psychiatry'

Psychedelics have been used by [indigenous peoples](#) for millennia, but Western researchers only started delving into their properties and potential uses in earnest in the middle of last century.



Beyond psilocybin, ketamine lozenges are another drug used in psychedelic therapy

But that work came grinding to a halt when the substances quickly became symbols of the anti-establishment counter-culture movement of the 1960s and were banned.

Over the past 20 years, however, the persistence of some researchers, a mental health crisis and a shift in public opinion towards greater tolerance of drugs such as cannabis—which Canada legalized for recreational use in 2018—paved the way for a psychedelics renaissance.

"Now there are more people who are willing to just look at the facts rather than the political weight they may carry," explains Rotem Petranker, associate director of the University of Toronto's Psychedelic Studies Research Program, which looks at the effects of micro-dosing on mood and creativity.

Researchers are studying the potential benefits of these substances for treating depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance addictions and anorexia.

The most advanced clinical trials are focused on using psilocybin for severe or treatment-resistant depression, and MDMA for PTSD.

Some of the studies have yielded promising results.

A recent clinical trial from Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University—which has just opened a research center dedicated to psychedelics—showed that two doses of psilocybin, accompanied by psychotherapy, produced "large, rapid and sustained" effects in patients

suffering from serious depression.

Of the 24 participants, 71 percent showed a reduction of more than 50 percent of their symptoms after four weeks and half went into remission, the study revealed.

Another small-scale study involving 59 participants, conducted by Imperial College London's Centre for Psychedelic Research, showed psilocybin was "at least as effective" as conventional antidepressants, the research team said this week, though adding that larger trials were needed.

"We're experiencing a revolution in psychiatry," Alexandre Lehmann, a cognitive neuroscientist who teaches at McGill University in Montreal, told AFP.

"There are new approaches to alleviating and curing serious and disabling mental health problems, which affect a large number of people, and for which there are currently no good solutions."

'Transformative experience'

Since their discovery in the 1950s, drug treatments for depression have hardly changed at all.



Field Trip Health in Toronto, a psychedelic therapy clinic, has a spa-like feel

Conventional antidepressants—which notably target serotonin, a key hormone that regulates mood—have been criticized for being slow to act and for their side effects, including dulling emotions and reducing creativity.

They also don't always work, explains Nisha Ravindran, psychiatrist and professor at the University of Toronto.

"We know that standard antidepressants don't help a significant proportion of the population. In fact, more than 30 to 40 percent simply don't respond and require alternatives," he said.

For some patients, psychedelics could come to the rescue through a new model of therapy involving a limited number of doses providing a "transformative experience" that might address their core issues.

Psychedelics can cause a profound alteration of perceptions and consciousness. The experience is unpredictable. For some, it can seem otherworldly.

Although much is still not known about how the drugs work, researchers believe they act on the brain's default mode network, associated with introspective thoughts and ruminations, by "temporarily lulling the ego," explains Lehmann.

Animal studies suggest they enhance brain plasticity, helping to re-organize neural connections, he says.

Learning to face death

Psychedelics have low toxicity and are generally not addictive, but they can cause paranoia and anxiety attacks, especially in high doses. Researchers are still unsure about the addictive nature of MDMA, a derivative of amphetamines.

For therapy uses, doses are prepared in labs and the experience is supervised, so the "risks are limited," says Lehmann.

The substances make patients more sensitive to their emotions and allow them to examine their thoughts from a new perspective.

"Psychedelics are catalysts for psychotherapy," says Lehmann.

Before receiving government dispensation to use the drugs, Bird had twice tried psychedelics on the sly, ingesting them at her home in the

company of a "guide."

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