

Red states join push to legalize magic mushrooms for therapy

February 16 2023, by Sam Metz



Shawn Blymiller, poses for a photograph in front of the Utah State Capitol on Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2023, in Salt Lake City. Blymiller, a 39-year-old father of two from suburban Salt Lake City, said he started magic mushroom therapy for treatment-resistant depression after becoming disillusioned with traditional anti-depressants. Lawmakers throughout the United States are weighing proposals to legalize psychedelic mushrooms for people. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

Shawn Blymiller spent 10 years of feeling mostly numbed while prescribed traditional anti-depressants, trudging through his day-to-day life as a suburban Salt Lake City father of two kids balancing the obligations of family and work selling technology software.

When his son was diagnosed as having special needs a few years later, the stress became increasingly difficult to endure. So like many with treatment-resistant depression, Blymiller, 39, sought out alternatives and found one he said worked: Psychedelic mushrooms.

Under a therapist's supervision, Blymiller took psilocybin—the most popular of the hallucinogens known broadly as "magic mushrooms"—and for several hours, was able to confront past traumas, work through mental illness and ultimately become a better father, husband and friend, he said.

"It's almost revealing. These curtains in your psyche are being opened and you feel like, 'Oh my gosh, this is how I operate; this is how I present myself,' " he said after a sunrise mountain hike in the Salt Lake City suburb where he lives.

A group of patients like Blymiller would be able to use them legally for their ailments under a new Utah proposal that would create a pilot program for the medical and therapeutic use of magic mushrooms. Currently, magic mushrooms are illegal under federal law, and therapists who guide patients like Blymiller through trips typically require they find them on their own out of fear of jeopardizing their licenses. Blymiller declined to say how he procured them. He said like a lot of plant-based medicine, it wasn't difficult to find.



A vendor bags psilocybin mushrooms at a cannabis marketplace on May 24, 2019 in Los Angeles. Lawmakers throughout the United States are weighing proposals to legalize psychedelic mushrooms for people. They say alarming suicide rates and a shortage of traditional mental health practitioners has led them to consider research into alternative treatments for depression and anxiety, including so-called magic mushrooms. Credit: AP Photo/Richard Vogel, File

Amid growing acceptance of psychedelics, advocates in blue states like Colorado and Oregon began their pushes with ballot measures proposing to decriminalize psychedelics like magic mushrooms. Advocates in red states like Utah and [Missouri](#) are starting in a different way, proposing studying them or first making them legal for medical use—a strategy that mirrors how many states including Utah have handled [marijuana](#)

[legalization](#).

Last year, lawmakers in Utah's Republican-supermajority statehouse [commissioned](#) a study on the benefits and liabilities associated with psychedelic mushrooms. And this year, state Sen. Luz Escamilla, a Salt Lake City Democrat, wants to create a pathway to legalization and allowing patients to consume magic mushrooms for therapeutic benefits. Her primary motivation is confronting a ballooning mental health epidemic, she said.

"This is an opportunity to add to the toolbox for our massive mental health crisis," Escamilla said. "The policy question as a lawmaker is: Do we have 10 more years to wait for people to get access to mental health care when they need it?"

Utah, a conservative state where culture and politics are dominated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has become a global hotspot for psychedelics, attracting spirituality-seeking individuals leaving traditional religion as well as outdoor hobbyists looking to use hallucinogens recreationally in places like the red rock deserts of Moab.



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As psychedelics become less counterculture and more mainstream, they are also drawing interests from suburban dads like Blymiller struggling with mental health and disillusioned after years of taking anti-depressants.

A series of [studies](#) from Johns Hopkins University's psychedelics research unit found that magic mushroom-assisted therapy can reduce

depression symptoms for up to a year and be effective for individuals for whom other treatments haven't worked.

In Utah, which has among the highest suicide rates in the United States, all 29 counties have a shortage of mental health professionals. Blymiller hopes lawmakers consider legalizing magic mushrooms for therapeutic use this year so more people like him—whether struggling with post-traumatic stress, anxiety or depression—can pursue treatment without fear of breaking drug laws.

The push would follow successful efforts in Oregon, but make Utah among the first states to create a legal framework for medical magic mushrooms. After successfully decriminalizing psychedelic mushrooms, Oregon voters approved measures to decriminalize all drugs and legalize psilocybin for use in controlled circumstances. Oregon will soon issue licenses for professionals to facilitate therapeutic use.



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"I don't think Republican legislators would ever favor a decriminalization model that says 'Live and let live, have fun and you won't go to jail,' " Connor Boyack, a lobbyist with the libertarian-leaning Libertas Institute, said, comparing Utah to Oregon and Colorado. "The arguments that work in a Republican Legislature are oversight, control and regulation—to ensure safety and that youth and the wrong people don't get it."

Sen. Evan Vickers, a Republican pharmacist, said based on the studies he was intrigued by the prospect of legalizing psychedelic mushrooms for medical use and believes many feel confident in the way Utah regulates medical marijuana.

"The challenge always, with a substance like this, is you have the positive nature of it, but you also have the abusive potential," he said.

Legislation to allow research on the therapeutic benefits psilocybin is under consideration in states across the political spectrum this year, including in [Arizona](#), [Hawaii](#) and [Oklahoma](#). Legislation to legalize therapeutic use or create pilot programs is under consideration in states including [California](#), [Connecticut](#), [New York](#), Utah, and [Washington](#). In Virginia, two magic mushroom-related bills failed to advance this year in the politically divided General Assembly.



Shawn Blymiller, looks on during a news conference on Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2023, in Salt Lake City. Blymiller, a 39-year-old father of two from suburban Salt Lake City, said he started magic mushroom therapy for treatment-resistant depression after becoming disillusioned with traditional anti-depressants. Lawmakers throughout the United States are weighing proposals to legalize psychedelic mushrooms for people. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

In most states, legalization efforts face opponents who argue potentially opening a door to widespread and debilitating drug use outweighs the benefits therapy could have for the few who can afford to pursue it. Doctors' lobbies, including the Utah Medical Association, tend to oppose legalization efforts.

"While there may be some limited benefit to using appropriately controlled and appropriately implemented psychedelic medications in mental health that have gone through the FDA approval process, we do not believe Utah should create a program to grow, process, produce and distribute psychedelics. These are [psychoactive substances](#) that cause hallucinations," Michelle McOmber, the association's CEO, said in a statement.

Desiree Hennessy, the executive director of the Utah Patients Coalition, understands the idea of [magic mushrooms](#) may not be something many—including lawmakers—want to pursue personally. But she's hopeful, regardless of their partisan leanings, that the way most people have close ties to someone struggling with mental health will lead them to seriously consider legalizing therapeutic use.

"You talk to the legislators, families or anybody on the street and they

will tell you that they know somebody that has committed suicide or is struggling with anxiety, depression or PTSD so severely that they are incapable of living their life. Everybody can find somebody that they know or as close to them that has had these experiences," she said.

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