

# Mushroom Magic

Recently in the U.S., there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of psychedelics such as psilocybin, MDMA, and LSD. Although most of these substances have been banned since 1970 as part of the Controlled Substances Act, when they were deemed to have no medical value, new research supports their mental health benefits. Placebo-controlled trials of psychedelic-assisted therapy, during which a patient takes a drug like MDMA in a controlled setting with the support of therapists, suggest that it is more effective than psychotherapy alone or with other psychopharmacological medications.<sup>1</sup> According to journalist and author Michael Pollan, research “suggests a single experience with psilocybin guided by trained professionals has the potential to relieve ‘existential distress’ in cancer patients; break addictions to cigarettes, alcohol and cocaine; and bring relief to people struggling with depression.”<sup>2</sup> In 2018, the Food and Drug Administration granted “breakthrough therapy” status to psilocybin as a treatment for depression. In 2020, voters in Oregon passed Measure 109, legalizing the sale of psilocybin in the state of Oregon.

Advocates point out that the reasons for banning psychedelics back in 1970 were largely a political attempt to curb the hippie counterculture. Advocates reason that psychedelics should be legal for individual consumption because they are not physically addictive and cannot cause fatal overdoses. Further, psychedelics can expand consciousness and may have spiritual significance in some communities. For example, Native Americans have used peyote in religious rituals for thousands of years.

Critics argue that psychedelics are psychologically addictive and may cause anxiety, erratic behavior, and even suicide. They point out that little is known about the long-term effects of these potent drugs or how they affect the brain. Another criticism points out that drug companies and entrepreneurs stand to make huge profits if a legal market for psychedelics opens up. Some argue that these financial incentives should not allow companies to be the ones to decide public policy. Any change in the law, they say, should be based on science, medicine, and what is best for potential patients. “Big business has caught onto a promising profit scheme: sky-high medical claims to sell new and largely unknown mind-altering drugs,” says Kevin Sabet, a former White House drug policy adviser. “It worked with marijuana, calling it medicine, and now they are using the same playbook with psychedelics.”<sup>3</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should psychedelic drugs like psilocybin and LSD be legal for individual consumption in the United States? Why or why not?
2. Is a ballot initiative (such as Oregon’s Measure 109) the best way to decide whether to legalize or decriminalize psychedelics? Why or why not?
3. What morally relevant differences, if any, are there between psychoactive drugs and other kinds of drugs which are often used recreationally?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12954-021-00489-1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/10/opinion/denver-mushrooms-psilocybin.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://nypost.com/2021/12/04/psychedelics-pros-and-cons-as-the-drugs-become-more-legal/>

