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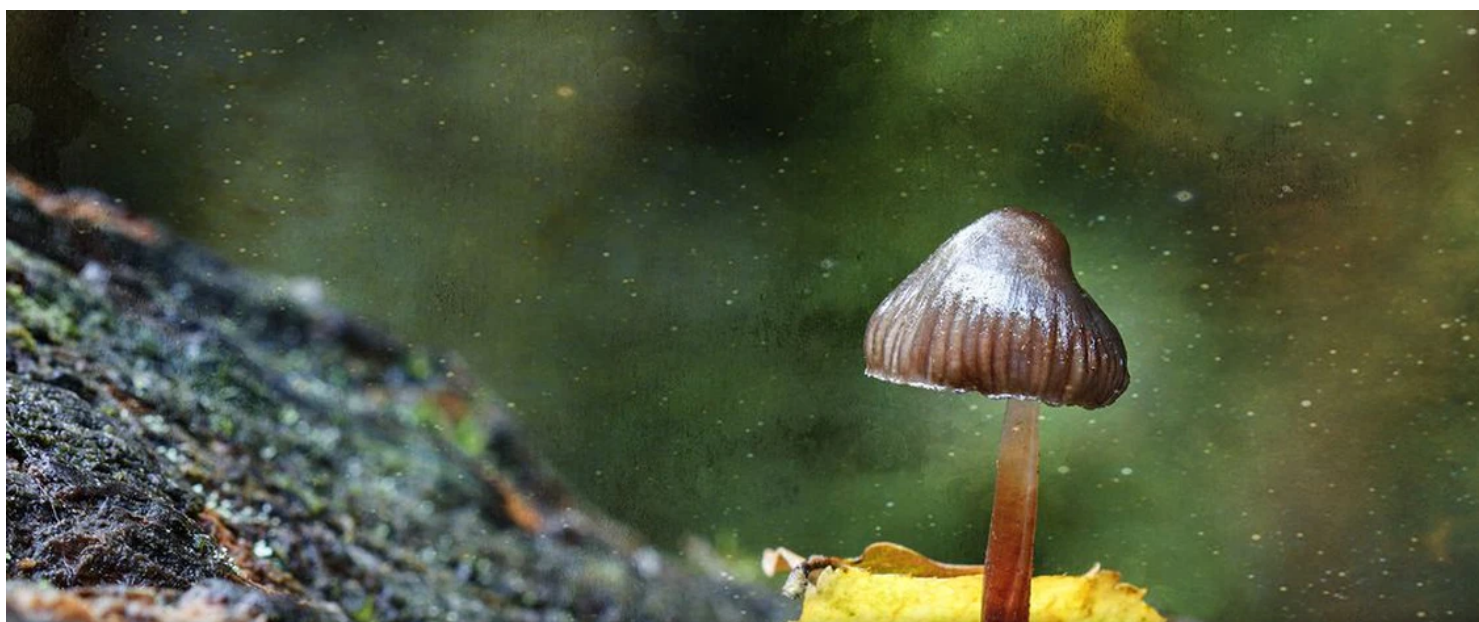
News / Local News

A clinical counsellor describes his legal trip on magic mushrooms

"I'm more open and curious now. I really want to hear how people are feeling. I am an experienced psychotherapist yet here is an area I need to work on. My journey really did that for me." — Clinical counsellor Dave Phillips

Tiffany Crawford

Jun 01, 2021 • June 1, 2021 • 5 minute read • [Join the conversation](#)



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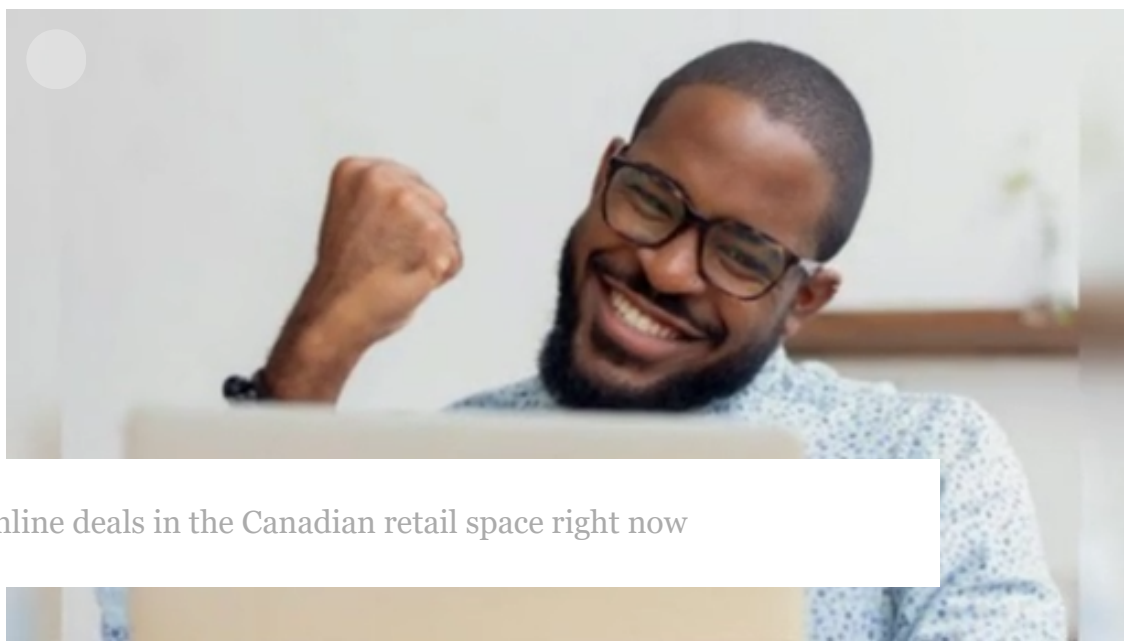
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Psilocybin is a naturally occurring psychedelic prodrug compound produced by more than 200 species of mushrooms, collectively known as psilocybin mushrooms. PHOTO BY JAX10289 /Getty Images/iStockphoto

When registered clinical counsellor Dave Phillips’ legal trip on magic mushrooms ended, and he heard the soothing sounds of Louis Armstrong’s What a Wonderful World, he took off his shades and said: “Oh wow that was the most powerful personal experience I’ve ever had in my life, and I’m never doing it again.”

It wasn’t a bad trip, only challenging, and one he says will make him a much more empathetic psychotherapist.



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Five B.C. health care professionals, including a palliative care physician, an emergency medicine doctor, a psychologist, a clinical counsellor, and a nurse were among 10 granted an exemption from Health

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Now a couple of them are ready to talk about their trip, and how it has prepared them to treat patients for end of life anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder with what is still considered an illegal substance.

For Phillips the experience was both cosmic and grounding.

At one point during the six-hour trip, which was guided by a physician, he saw his father, who died from cancer at home, and he felt his dying dad's burden of looking back at his life and wondering whether he'd done all he could for his kids.

"He had all this regret so I told him he was a great father and that I am who I am today because of him. And then I just held him," said Phillips.

"It was very heavy. I was bawling my eyes out. I took my shades off and I told my guide 'oh wow that was amazing.'"

With the shades back on and the music continuing, Phillips went deeper into the trip, which he described as "way more cosmic," and saw himself starting life as an embryo.

"I knew it was me and there was this energy force that told me 'I love you so much. I have always known you and I have and will never leave you.' It was the most overwhelming sense of being loved that I have ever had in my life."

Unlike many of his patients, Phillips is not dying of cancer or suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, but he has lost loved ones and as someone in his 50s, he has questions about death.

Before the trip he set out some of these questions and intentions. However as soon as he got comfortable with the shades on and the music had started he experienced some anxiety, and the first thought that went through his mind was "I don't want to do this."

But then a dog came over and laid down beside him.

"And I thought that's beautiful. If this dog wants to look after me then I'm good. I don't think there is any danger here. I'm with someone I know and I'm safe, so I thought 'hey I'll surrender.' And I did."

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The playlist that is used to guide patients on the trip is one that has been carefully curated by experts who understand how music works with a psilocybin experience, said Phillips. The one he used is typically used by councillors for cancer patients, made by Bill Richards, a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University.

The mushroom experience is an important tool for health care professionals who use it to treat their patients because it gives them an understanding of how to respond effectively, said Phillips.

The trip also made him more sensitive to how his patients feel.

“I’m more open and curious now. I really want to hear how people are feeling. I am an experienced psychotherapist yet here is an area I need to work on. My journey really did that for me.”

Having therapists and doctors who have tried psilocybin themselves may help a patient with some anxiety about trying the therapy, he added. There are no bad trips, he said, only challenging ones.

“This medication opens up the connectivity power of the brain so much,” Phillips said. “It helps your own brain solve your own problems.”

The exemptions, approved by Federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu, allow the individually approved health care practitioners to use, possess, and transport psilocybin mushrooms for the purpose of psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy training in accordance with the TheraPsil Training Protocol.

TheraPsil, a non-profit organization based in Victoria, advocates to provide palliative Canadians with access to psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. It’s also pushing for experiential learning with psilocybin, a practice where trainees undergo their own mushroom journeys and guide their cohort peers through the psilocybin therapy process.

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Thomas Hartle, the first Canadian to undergo legal psilocybin therapy in August 2020. Photo credit: Peg Peters

Since March 1, 21 health care professionals associated with TheraPsil have been learning skills training related to administering psilocybin therapy for palliative patients, in a 10 week course led by Phillips.

A Vancouver Island-based palliative care physician was among those trained. She didn't want her name published because she said the demand is so huge to try psilocybin to treat end of life anxiety that she would be overwhelmed with requests.

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“It changed my perspective,” she said.

She treats patients with what she calls “extreme existential suffering” and said the anxiety can be so overwhelming that some seek medically assisted dying. They begin to wonder what is the point of being

alive with a terminal illness. But the psilocybin experience can change their perception and end that suffering.

“We can’t change their illness from being terminal but we may be able to help people live well before they die.”

She hopes more physicians and clinical counsellors will be trained, and that the government will create legal sources of psilocybin so doctors can take the guess work out of using dried magic mushrooms.

Spencer Hawkswell, CEO of TheraPsil, said the altered state of consciousness when undergoing psilocybin therapy is substantially different than anything that would have been previously experienced by the physician or therapist.

“The professional, if they are to safely consult and guide this process must have experiential knowledge of this altered state,” he said.

“While psychedelics potentially represent an evolutionary leap forward in the treatment of mental health problems like end-of-life anxiety, the differences between psychedelic care and traditional talk methods are so vast that experiential learning is, in my view, mandatory.”

He said they receive hundreds of messages from Canadians seeking access to psilocybin therapy and therapists, but without the ability to complete professional training for therapists they won’t be able to help them.

To date, TheraPsil has supported 30 Canadians in accessing legal psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy since Aug. 4 2020, [including Abbotsford resident Laurie Brooks](#).

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