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B.C. health researchers harness the 'magic' of psychedelic mushrooms

B.C.-based companies are among those experimenting with psychedelic drugs for mental health disorders

[Jon Hernandez](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 21, 2021 6:00 AM PT | Last Updated: June 21



Psilocybin is extracted from psychedelic mushrooms and then processed into pill form at Numinus Bioscience. (Camille Vernet/Radio-Canada)

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After beating what doctors told her was terminal cancer, Mona Strelaeff had hoped her health complications were behind her.

Instead, what followed were years of crippling depression and anxiety.

At the centre of her mental health struggle: childhood trauma, and the continued fear of her own mortality.

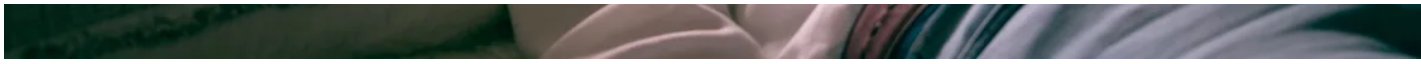
She sought an array of pharmaceutical treatments in Canada and the U.S., but none yielded any desired results.

"I've been on all kinds of [anti-depressants]," she said. "I would have terrible side effects, or they would take me to the extreme — I would cry all the time, or I wouldn't sleep."

That was until last November, when she received federal approval for psilocybin-assisted therapy. Psilocybin is the psychedelic component within magic mushrooms.

She says she dove deep into a psychedelic experience, where she revisited her childhood, and came to terms with many demons of the past.





Mona Strelaeff says her depression and anxiety were successfully treated using psilocybin-assisted therapy. (Sarah Xenos/Radio-Canada)

"When [the doctor] gave me the treatment and I came out of it in a place of peace," she said. "My anxiety was basically gone. And to this day I still feel at peace. I'm not afraid of death."

Psychedelics are a growing area of exploration within the mental health field, and Health Canada has approved clinical trials measuring their efficacy. A handful of B.C. companies are at the forefront of administering treatments, and researching ways to make them more accessible.

Banking on breakthroughs

For Payton Nyquvest, psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy was a last-ditch effort to remedy severe chronic pain and the depression that came along with it.

"The Western health-care system just couldn't rectify what was going on," he said.

Nyquvest is the founder of Numinus, a B.C.-based publicly traded company specializing in psychedelic research, production, and distribution. It's one of the few companies with a Health Canada licence to do so.

Later this summer, Numinus is expected to complete a clinical trial on a psilocybin extract it has developed. Dr. Evan Wood is the company's chief medical officer. He took a leave of absence from his post at the B.C. Centre for Substance Use to assume the role.

A lab worker extracts psilocybin at Numinus lab. (Camille Vernet/Radio-Canada)

"In addition to assessing safety, that study will also be measuring the psychedelic effects in terms of the type of experience that it brings about in people that are healthy," said Wood.

Wood points to other studies as reasons to be optimistic, including work at Johns Hopkins University that showed psilocybin as an effective treatment for both depression and [tobacco addiction](#).

"It's very much a paradigm shift and really, I think the most exciting area in mental health and addiction right now," he said.

Dried 'magic mushrooms' are commonly eaten to induce psychedelic effects. (Camille Vernet/Radio-Canada)

Wood says the jury is still out, however, when it comes to the benefits of micro-dosing psychedelics — taking a minimal dosage that doesn't cause hallucinations to improve health. Advocates contend that small doses [can boost mood and creativity](#), however research hasn't ruled out whether it's due to a [placebo effect](#).

Dispensaries emerging

Proponents like Evans and Payton are hopeful psychedelic drugs are on the same trajectory as cannabis when it comes to widespread medicinal use.

And, similar to cannabis prior to federal legalization, illegal dispensaries in Vancouver are open for business. Longtime marijuana advocate Dana Larsen is among those who have set up shop.

"Psilocybin mushrooms really remind me now where the cannabis movement was in maybe the mid-'90s," he said. "There's just starting to be increasing public awareness about the tremendous medicinal benefits of using these mushrooms."

Dana Larsen, a longtime marijuana advocate, has poured his energies into selling and advocating for magic mushrooms as a way to treat mental illness. (Camille Vernet/Radio-Canada)

Larsen's shop sells micro-doses of psilocybin, as well as macro-doses for those who can prove they have a medical need.

Despite operating illegally, Larsen says police rarely intervene in Vancouver, similar to how pot dispensaries were treated for years.

He says it's because they fill a void in the health-care system. His dispensary is in the Downtown Eastside where many residents suffer from homelessness, mental health disorders, and substance use.

"I serve a lot of members who are currently taking anti-depressants — and don't like being on those anti-depressants," said Larsen.

He hopes it's only a matter of time before shops like his become widespread.

"I hope that a few years from now, we see dozens, if not hundreds of these kinds of places in cities and towns across Canada."

With files from Camille Vernet and Radio-Canada

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