

COMMENTARY

# Opinion: I was traumatized by my time in Afghanistan and Iraq. Psychedelic therapy changed my life.



(Howard Lipin/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

## It's time for California to decriminalize psychedelics and allow for life-saving psychedelic therapies.

By JULIANA MERCER

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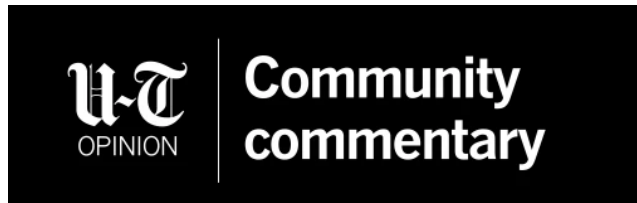
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***Mercer** is a former U.S. Marine. She lives in Mission Hills.*

Throughout my 16 years in the Marine Corps, including a decade of active duty and tours to both Iraq and Afghanistan, I witnessed many tragedies. Between those deployments I spent five years working with wounded Marines, seeing the true physical, mental and emotional cost of war, absorbing that trauma every day.

I saw firsthand the trauma, both physical and emotional, that service members carried with them as they began to integrate back into their communities. Deploying back to the Middle East after seeing the consequences of war everyday triggered fear and anxiety when I watched young Marines gear up to leave the wire. That year was the bloodiest of the post 9/11 conflicts for Marines; I lost track of how many flag-draped coffins I saluted as they were solemnly lifted onto the C-130s that flew service members' remains back to their families in the states.



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When I returned to San Diego and continued my work with veterans, I observed increasing levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder suicide among veterans. For myself, I found that I had been suppressing the loss and associated grief of

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I was lost and in a place I had never been before. I did not know that I was drowning in suppressed grief that was making it difficult to navigate this unknown territory. I beat myself up for not thriving. I told myself I was fine and that I had no reason not to be happy. I accidentally found relief and a glimpse of my authentic joyful self through the recreational use of psychedelics. I then found Heroic Hearts Project, and the Mission Within, nonprofits that connect military veterans struggling with mental trauma to [psychedelic therapy](#).

Through HHP, I was connected with life-changing ayahuasca therapy in Costa Rica and a coach who helped me integrate my experiences and begin my healing journey.

I pursued further psychedelic therapy at home, experiencing the release of all of my accumulated grief overnight with just one session with psilocybin. The session brought out feelings that for years I didn't even know were there, and allowed me to finally unpack years of suppressed grief-induced trauma.

As a result of my own life-changing experience with psychedelic therapy, I knew other veterans needed access to this therapy to help them overcome treatment-resistant trauma and life-altering injuries. Since then, I have worked with many organizations to connect hundreds of veterans who have struggled with brain injuries, anxiety, depression and PTSD to these breakthrough treatments.

I co-founded an organization called evolutio that connects veterans and others with treatment-resistant trauma to psychedelic and plant-based therapies. Our organization is also leading the charge on policy and legal discussions related to psychedelics so that these life-changing medicines can be more widely available.

California now has the opportunity to take meaningful steps toward addressing the

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Pioneering [research](#) from Johns Hopkins University and University of California, San Francisco, has found that psychedelic therapy can be effective in treating trauma, anxiety and depression that have been resistant to other treatments and medication. However, because this treatment isn't currently legal in the United States, many veterans, like myself, have had to spend a great deal of money to receive this therapy in other countries or risk arrest to get the help they need.

Too many veterans have lost friends to suicide, and our country's mental health crisis is only being compounded by the past year of isolation and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic. Past approaches have led to veterans being overly medicated and left feeling numb and hopeless.

California has a moral obligation to provide the veteran community with effective treatments, not criminalize new approaches. Decriminalizing psychedelics and beginning the process for establishing therapeutic access through a licensed and supervised program will give veterans in need of healing greater access to safe and affordable treatment.

It's time for California to decriminalize psychedelics and allow for life-saving psychedelic therapies to be accessed by those who need it most. I urge legislators to support our veterans by voting yes on SB 519.

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