

Meet the women who regularly microdose psychedelics

Is 'magic mushroom therapy' really the key to better mental health?

by SOPHIE WILLIAMS  AUG 27, 2021



JESSICA LOCKETT | GETTY IMAGES

Every other day, after her alarm sounds, anthropology student Bea walks into the crowded kitchen that she shares with seven others, boils the kettle, grinds some micrograms of magic mushrooms into water and drinks them. She then completes a stretching routine, before eating precisely 30 minutes after her dosage.

Sporadic 'microdosing' has been a part of Bea's life for a while, however, when the "flat winter lockdown" came along, the practice fast became a non-negotiable, thrice weekly, part of her self-care routine. She says the regular dosage acted as a 'natural mood booster' and 'study aid', as well as providing the mental clarity she was so desperately seeking.

As her days "glided by", Bea found she could organise herself more efficiently, was attentive in conversations and could act as her 'true' stable, aware self. She was no longer the "people-pleasing, anxious version", but instead, a woman able to confidently charter the stresses of modern life.

Previously, she'd been struggling with a "huge amount of anxiety that was leading to panic attacks" – until, Bea says, she was introduced to the work of American ethnobotanist and mystic, Terrence McKenna, through friends. After absorbing many of his talks on YouTube, she began to search for alternative mental health remedies... and her quest led her to microdosing.



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Microdosing sees users, like Bea, take one-twentieth to one-tenth of a recreational dosage. It's anecdotally said that this amount isn't enough to produce mind-altering effects, but can instead improve mood, mental stimulation and creative thinking, as well as treat mental health issues (such as depression, according to one small-scale study). And this rhetoric is steadily infiltrating the mainstream, too.

"If it hadn't been for my discovery into the natural healing properties of psilocybin (magic mushrooms), meditation and yoga, I'm sure I would have veered off on a much more psychologically and physically dangerous route," Bea says. And she's not the only one to feel that way.



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From Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop promoting the healing benefits of 'magic mushroom therapy' to success-hungry professionals, there's an ongoing mental health revolution being fuelled by 'natural medicines' that can't be found over the counter. Groups of millennial and Gen-Z women are now passionately advocating for the de-stigmatisation and legalisation of psychedelics, like LSD and mushrooms, even just in trial therapy settings, in the hopes they could provide fundamental help to those suffering.

Then there's Silicon Valley in San Francisco Bay. Home to the world's major tech players, such as Apple and Google, many of the area's professionals have openly experimented with microdosing for the past, at least, seven years, extolling promises that it can boost creativity and enhance work performance. All while referencing Apple founder Steve Jobs' quote that LSD was a "positive, life-changing" experience.

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An online study from the Global Drug Survey involving over 15,000 participants also concluded that "using the likes of psilocybin, LSD, DMT, MDMA and other psychedelics [has aided] their wellbeing and mental health". The study showed that 52% of the respondents found their "condition improved significantly following their psychedelic experience", with proof of "a majority of positive results and that the use of psychedelics is increasing".

However, **in the UK, LSD and magic mushrooms containing psilocybin are still very much illegal (with possession of LSD being classed as an offence punishable by up to seven years in prison)**. In fact, they're labelled as Schedule 1 drugs under the UK Misuse of Drugs Act and UN conventions, reserved for drugs that are especially dangerous and that have no special medical utility.

This legal status of LSD and mushrooms is, Bea says, what subjects them to the stigma they receive. She recalls that most people she speaks to about microdosing label her as "eccentric" and often patronise her, but it's not enough to put her off.

A world of pure imagination

"The way I describe microdosing is that it's akin to a child-like wonder," Amber, a photographer from Manchester, says. "When I microdosed for the first time I found myself noticing the beauty of the things around me again." Looking out of the window made her "marvel at the trees" and watching an old favourite film suddenly felt "more emotive and beautiful". But overall, Amber recalls how she simply felt "more positive, open-minded and creative but still completely functional and sober".

Right now, she's looking to break down society's fear of psychedelic use as a form of therapy. She believes the majority of



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"Even if microdosing was made legal for medicinal purposes, this would greatly change the public view on psychedelics, as it has with the legalisation of medical marijuana," Amber urges. "By trialling these as treatments for certain illnesses, especially mental health, we could find a more effective, long-lasting, and natural treatment."

Amber has dabbled with psychedelics recreationally for over five years and has been microdosing for three. Recalling her battles with depression and anxiety, she found that the headspace that came with psychedelics really helped to bring her out of her "bad episodes", giving her the strength to tackle her issues head-on.

Observing that in the past, prescription anti-depressants often came with "a massive list of negative side effects", she says with microdosing she's experienced none.



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But, in contrast to this opinion, [Dr Toby Lea](#), Adjunct Senior Lecturer, Centre for Social Research in Health at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, says he has reservations. He urges that much more research needs to be done before anyone can "make any conclusive claims about the mental health benefits of microdosing".

After exploring the subject in depth, he also notes that because psychedelics are illegal in most countries, it's difficult to know the strength of the drugs you have obtained – or what you're actually taking. "They may contain higher or lower doses than you expected, or not contain psychedelics at all, or dangerous alternative substances," Dr Lea says, adding that he too has observed strong links between people using psychedelics (in varying dosages) as a form of self-medication. He says the most common ailments they were looking to treat included depression, anxiety, PTSD and to come off antidepressants, or stop or reduce their use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

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For those wanting to microdose, measuring out very small, precise quantities is also challenging if you don't know the purity of the substance you have obtained, Dr Lea explains. "Home testing kits can be used to determine if a substance contains psychedelic compounds but doesn't tell you how strong it is," he cautions.

Combining the fact that psychedelic use *is* illegal, along with it being an unregulated area, Dr Lea concludes that "research on microdosing is still in its early days" and it's not something he would recommend, especially not without "consulting with a regular doctor or a mental health professional" first.

Too good to be true?

Chelsey has always struggled to concentrate. A poet, painter and free-spirit by trade, she has a non-stop plethora of ideas constantly carouseling in her head, distracting her from focusing on one project at a time. Yet, she says, microdosing has proven to be the only tool ever to contain this frantic nature, allowing her to "stay fully present". As well as giving her the chance to look introspectively, to address and rationalise her emotions.

"I've had so many positive impacts, short-term and long-term," Chelsey shares. "I've noticed big shifts in my mental health, particularly with regards to anxiety. For over fifteen years, I had severe anxiety, but through microdosing, I could sit with and deliberate my fears. I now rarely suffer with it, and if I do, it's fleeting."

But while Bea, Amber and Chelsey strongly believe in their microdosing decisions today, there's no way to tell how they'll feel in the long-run. The long-term effects on mental health are still largely unknown – something that's a concern of Kim Kuynders, Associate Professor of Maastricht University's Psychology and Neuroscience department, who in 2019 conducted



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Her research and findings seemed to put a halt to the runaway success of the trend, with the large-scale report concluding that "while most anecdotal reports focus on the positive experiences with microdosing, future research should also focus on potential risks of (multiple) administrations of a psychedelic in low doses". And it's a compelling point.

We also don't know much about any potential physical implications that could arise later on. Kuypers writes "to that end, (pre)clinical studies including biological (e.g. heart rate) as well as cognitive (e.g. memory, attention) parameters have to be conducted and will shed light on the potential negative consequences microdosing could have".

For the three women I spoke with, there certainly seems to be common ground when it comes to their motives for microdosing; Bea was seeing a therapist "but was becoming more depressed". She was completely against antidepressants after seeing family members "become hooked on various pharmaceuticals", and was "categorically against going down that route". Amber was also in a "pretty bad depression funk", where she was finding everything "dull and uninteresting". Chelsey was looking for a way to "clear her mental fog".

A current socially-accepted observation, eloquently shared by Chelsey when reflecting on life in general, is that we have increasingly little time to connect to ourselves and nurture our mental, physical and spiritual needs. "Our passions have been replaced with careers, and people are becoming more stressed, depressed, and anxious," she says. "I think microdosing would shift the way in which we structure our lives. We would notice a change of pace, and our priorities would most certainly differ."

Whilst this may hold true for Chelsey and some others out there, it's important to note that we as humans also have the capacity to change the pace of our lives independently. From immersing ourselves further into nature, to proven self-care meditation methods or doctor-prescribed medicines, there are a variety of ways other than microdosing that can help us to begin our inner healing.

And, with one recent study suggesting the benefits of microdosing may even all be down to a placebo effect, perhaps we – as individuals – are the only ones that truly hold the power to becoming happier and healthier after all.

If you need support or treatment for drug addiction, you're entitled to NHS care in the same way as anyone else who has a health problem. Contact your GP for an appointment, or call FRANK for more information about drugs and substance abuse.

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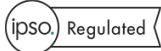
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