

DRUGS Brit Dawson / 1 week ago



## CAN SHROOMS RESTORE YOUR TASTE AND SMELL AFTER COVID?

Though experts aren't convinced, hordes of people on Reddit and Twitter claim a couple doses of psilocybin mushrooms improved their corona-ravaged senses

Not to sound too 2020, but I'm pretty sure I had COVID at the start of the pandemic. My case was what we've since come to describe as "mild," with my main symptom being a loss of taste and smell for seven miserable days. As those living with me at the time can attest to, I didn't shut up about it for those seven miserable days either. I indulged in my own self-pity whenever anyone dared to offer me a cup of tea or ask what I wanted to eat that night, wailing something about "textures" and "temperatures" and "my unimaginable suffering." If only the sleuths of Reddit had been clued onto mine and countless others' plights, I could have sought respite in the mind-melting, supposedly taste-restoring magic of shrooms.

Over the last year, an increasing number of people have taken to Reddit and Twitter to share their anecdotal experiences of how magic mushrooms alleviated or even cured their COVID-related anosmia-ageusia (loss of taste and smell). While I was lucky enough to have my senses fully restored after just a week, many of those who found shrooms to be a remedy had lost theirs for up to a year. Most of the stories follow the same pattern: Someone catches COVID, forfeits their taste and smell and never gets it back – or gets it back, but everything tastes like gasoline (aka parosmia, meaning a distorted sense of smell) – until they take one or several doses of shrooms, and voilà! The Jesus-like power of drugs has healed them.

One of these people is 30-year-old Morgan (not their real name) from Utah, who was among the redditors sharing their experience about this last year. Morgan tells me that they caught COVID in the spring of 2020, and they suffered from its trademark symptoms: fever, chills, head and body aches, fatigue, a cough and "shortness of breath so encompassing I couldn't get out of bed without fainting." They also lost their smell gradually over the course of their illness until there was "a total absence of anything" while their taste dissipated to the point that they could "perceive very salty or spicy sensations

total absence of anything,” while their taste dissipated to the point that they could “perceive very salty or spicy sensations, but not discern flavors.” In the months after testing positive, Morgan continued to suffer from exhaustion, asthma and **brain fog**, and although their taste had returned, their smell never came back. “When a neighbor’s house caught fire,” they recall, “I couldn’t smell the smoke.”

In this time, Morgan had started experimenting with **psilocybin** mushrooms as a way of coping with their “treatment-resistant major depression,” but the shrooms had an alternative effect. “After a few weeks of microdosing, I started

experiencing phantom smells,” explains Morgan. “Particularly the smell of an electric fire. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, as I hadn’t heard of anyone taking shrooms to help with anosmia.” Morgan says they eventually “became brave enough” to take a **macrodose** of shrooms, preparing them as a **tea with lemon juice** and a ginger tea bag to reduce nausea and increase the effects. “At some point during the trip, I realized I could smell again,” they reflect. “When I picked up a gingersnap cookie, I could smell the ginger, sugar and spice. I was sniffing everything with a nice or appetizing scent in my house with a manic grin.”

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However, after the effects of the shrooms faded, so did Morgan’s sense of smell. “I was mildly distraught,” they say. But a few weeks later, when they tripped again, their smell returned “quite quickly once the shrooms kicked in.” This time, Morgan retained some semblance of it after the shrooms wore off. Then, after nearly a year of coming down with COVID – and a handful of magic mushroom trips later – their smell gradually returned to its “full former glory.”

Twenty-year-old Sebică (also a pseudonym) from Romania had a very similar experience. After coming down with COVID in October 2020, he lost his sense of taste and smell for two weeks, before suffering with parosmia for a year. Last October, though, Sebică took 0.8 grams of **liberty caps** once a week for two weeks. In November, he took 1.5 grams, and, as he **revealed on Reddit**, everything came back. As he tells me, his senses returned “more and more with every psilocybin session,” adding that while on shrooms, “everything tasted and smelled like heaven.”

When I ask if he ever considered consulting a doctor about his long-lasting COVID symptoms, Sebică responds, “It would have been useless. Nobody knows how to bring the smell and taste back. It’s neurological, that’s why the **neurogenesis from the psilocybin** helps with it.”

Unlike the others, Jaycee, 33, from Arkansas, had a much quicker recovery, as detailed by his 36-year-old brother John (both pseudonyms) **on Reddit** last month. Expanding on his post over email, John says that Jaycee’s COVID-related smell and taste loss was cured by shrooms after just four weeks, when he took a 1.25 gram dose over the Christmas holidays.

Of course, it's not completely unrealistic to think that shrooms might have an impact on a neurological issue. Psilocybin famously alters your senses, heightening the emerald color of grass or the sound of leaves rustling in the trees (and all the other clichés). It also triggers vivid hallucinations by **activating serotonin receptors in the brain**, specifically in the prefrontal cortex, which affects perception, mood and cognition. Shrooms can even allow people to encounter the effects of synesthesia, where one sense is experienced as another – e.g., you might hear colors and see sounds.

That said, **Barry Smith**, the director of the University of London's Institute of Philosophy and the founding director of the Center for the Study of the Senses, is a little more skeptical about the curative sorcery of shrooms. "There's not much evidence or reason to think that psilocybin would bring about recovery from COVID-related anosmia," he tells me, particularly refuting claims that it could work as quickly as it did for Jaycee (he says recovery is usually gradual). Smith does, however, appear to back up Sebică's doubts about seeking medical help, confirming that "it's still a mystery as to why some people may be more susceptible to long-term smell loss," suggesting that there **could be a genetic basis to it**.

"What we do know is that people's sense of smell seems to improve before, or ahead of, what they estimate to be their level of recovery," Smith continues. "Awareness lags behind. So, for all we know, the psychedelic effect may just have helped to restore awareness of what had happened anyway." (Though, he's careful to assert that this is "just a speculation.")

To really test the theory, Smith says there would need to be a study where participants' taste and smell was tested objectively before and after a dose of psilocybin. Even then, he adds, our own awareness of our senses isn't reliable. "What we've found with patients is that when their sense of smell returns, they say it's still not back to normal," Smith reveals. "Yet when we test them, it's much better than they think."

Interestingly, Smith links Morgan's use of psilocybin to help with her depression to its effect on her sense of taste and smell. "We know that depression and low arousal down-regulates olfaction," he explains, "and those who are severely depressed don't perceive smells well. Just as a loss of smell leads to depression because of the same connection between olfactory bulb and amygdala. So the relief of depression – for which we know psilocybin is effective – may improve one's access to smell." But, he concludes, "as a quick fix or hack for post-viral smell loss patients, I wouldn't bet on it."

So, there you have it: The jury might be out on the taste and smell-fixing power of shrooms, but at least I can take them to be less moody next time I inevitably catch COVID.

**Brit Dawson**

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