

Santa Barbara Independent

Santa Barbara's Psychedelic Surge

Riding a Wave of Medical Promise,
Magic Mushrooms and Other
Hallucinogens
Have Gone Mainstream

By Ethan A. Stewart | November 17, 2022



MEDS: Microdose psilocybin capsules and a vial of microdose LSD. The LSD is mixed with niacin to modulate the bioavailability of the drugs and prevent the user from consuming any more than the prescribed 10 micrograms. | Credit: Courtesy

Labor Day weekend was hot this year throughout California. Historically hot. In the name of survival, many thousands of Golden Staters flocked to the beach. I was no exception and found myself on the shoreline with an extended group of

friends and acquaintances, all of us firmly in our middle age, coupled up, and raising young families. There, we had good food and good drinks, along with umbrellas, surf boards, an air of sunblock, and stoked kids galore.

It was a full-on beach blanket bingo vibe, save for one little wrinkle — there were no less than two different types of psychedelics involved. That's right; the Montecito mainstream has officially turned on and tuned in to the fast-growing psychedelics-as-medicine movement.

“I use small amounts of mushrooms a couple times a week,” said one mom. “I find that I am a happier, more energized person. And way more patient with my kids.”

Another offered, after swallowing a small, brown capsule of psilocybin, “I've been off SSRIs for almost a year now and have never felt more stable as an adult. Only once did I accidentally take too much and feel kinda messed up.”

A third chimed in, “My brother has dealt with depression ever since 9/11. It's not uncommon for a career firefighter like him. Since using mushrooms and working with a therapist, he is a new man. I mean, my whole family notices it.”

One of the dads walked over, helped himself to one of the psilocybin pills, and said, “I've used small amounts of LSD while at work. Micro-dose size, I guess, because I have never felt much more than a strong cup of coffee. It's great for my creativity and helping me blast through my to-do list.”

I sat back on my towel and marveled at the scene. These were all good, successful, educated, and generally sober, law-abiding people. Wholesome, if you will. The majority had avoided any real drug use in their youth save for drinking and occasional cannabis

consumption, and yet, here they were, using small amounts of illegal psychedelics while hanging out with family and friends on a holiday weekend. More to the point, they weren't dosing to alter reality and catch a buzz; they were doing it in pursuit of a happier, healthier life.

Set and Setting

The use of psychedelics as medicine is, of course, nothing new. Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) was discovered in a pharmaceutical company's lab some 80-plus years ago by the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann. In short order, that company, Sandoz (now known as Novartis), began shipping the substance to doctors all over the world for free in hopes of best figuring out how to use it in a clinical setting.

Long before this, native cultures from around the world employed naturally occurring entheogens (another term for consciousness-expanding drugs) such as magic mushrooms (psilocybin), peyote, and ayahuasca as part of their religious ceremonies, coming-of-age rituals, and medicinal modalities. So vast and varied is this practice of using psychedelics as more than a mere intoxicant that even our own federal government famously pursued them as both a medicine and a weapon in the middle part of the 20th century.

Some of the brightest minds from around the world in the field of psychology saw psychedelics as a potent and emerging therapeutic tool until widespread illegality was established in the early 1970s. In fact, the case for hallucinogens as medicine, albeit one with certain risks, has long been louder and more established than that of cannabis. Even the term "psychedelic" was coined by a clinical psychologist, Humphry Osmond, and presented with wholehearted support in front of the New York Academy of Sciences in 1957.

Despite all of this, most reading this article likely have many negative talking points at the ready about these types of drugs. Such was the potency of the anti-psychedelic campaigns during the last decades of the 20th century and the early years of the aughts. Who among us doesn't have a story about that kid from

high school who took too much acid and still thinks they are a glass of orange juice? They cause personality disorders. They make you go insane. They destroy your nervous system. They make you believe you can fly. These views, though largely unsupported by science, came to dominate the mainstream narrative. As a result, the concept of psychedelics as a tool for health was all but forgotten save for a few underground activist doctors, certain religious practitioners, and lifelong devotees who cut their teeth during the early years of the movement.

And so it went until 2000, when Johns Hopkins University, the famed East Coast hotbed of medical innovation and professionalism, quietly garnered regulatory approval from the federal government to once again begin researching with psychedelics. In 2006, led by Dr. Roland Griffiths, they published a now-famous paper about the safety and lasting benefits of a single dose of psilocybin. In the 15 years since, they have published more than 60 peer-reviewed papers on the topic, looking at everything from addiction and depression to PTSD and the often-crippling existential dread associated with a terminal diagnosis. Again and again they have found psychedelics, when administered in a professional setting with proper patient screening, to be a safe, non-addictive, and effective course of treatment for a wide range of afflictions and conditions. The university is currently in the process of using clinical trials to further investigate the use of psilocybin and other psychedelics for things like Lyme disease, Alzheimer's, opioid addiction, anorexia, obsessive compulsive disorders, and anxiety. And they aren't alone.



The setup at LoDo Studios | Credit: Ingrid Bostrom

There are now robust programs at Columbia University in New York, Imperial College London in the U.K., the Usona Institute in Wisconsin, Stanford, Yale, Washington State, the University of São Paulo, the University of Zurich, the University of Copenhagen, etc. In fact, here in the States, psychedelics are already slow-stepping toward medical legalization and wholesale decriminalization in places like Massachusetts, Michigan, and Washington, D.C., while Oregon, and, as of Election Day two weeks ago, Colorado have already given the okay to medical usage.

For our part, here in California, both Santa Cruz and Oakland have already decriminalized psilocybin in the name of medical benefit, and a decriminalization bill in the state senate, SB 519, was narrowly approved in 2021 before being shelved in the full

assembly this past August so that additional research could happen. The author of the bill, State Senator Scott Wiener of San Francisco, has promised to bring it back in 2023. All of this is to say that there is no doubt that a worldwide movement is underway.

But the real inflection point for the mainstream, when average people truly started to get interested and start their own psychonaut-styled health interventions, came in 2018 when author, journalist, and influential thinker Michael Pollan published a book in which he personally explores the benefits of several illegal, consciousness-expanding drugs. *How to Change Your Mind* was a New York Times number-one best-seller for months on end and has since become a wildly popular series on Netflix.

It was also about this time that the concept of “micro-dosing,” the practice of consuming a very small, sub-clinical amount of a substance like LSD or psilocybin, became trendy in the tech world and beyond as a tool for creative problem-solving, increased productivity, and a means for enhancing your neural plasticity. Stories soon followed in the Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, the New York Times, The Economist, and Wired magazine.

To anyone paying attention, it quickly became clear that psychedelics were no longer exclusive to the counter-culture. A population that was already obsessed with bio-hacking and improving human performance had merged with a much larger group that was suffering badly from pandemic-esque levels of poor mental health, stress, and wide-ranging traumas. Illegality be damned, a wellness revolution was at hand.

The S.B. Scene

Now, it needs to be said that I am no unknowing neophyte in the realm of psychedelics. Far from it. I explored with things like acid and mushrooms and MDMA during my college years. It seemed a

good complement to the educational expansion for which my liberal arts school was charging top dollar. In my experience, there was nothing particularly uncommon about this phase of my life.

But when some grave health problems landed in my lap in my mid-thirties, including an advanced-stage, incurable cancer diagnosis, I returned to the realm of psychedelics with full awareness of the work that was underway at Johns Hopkins. I sat with peyote in the wake of my cancer news to help me see a path toward survival.



Jacob Tell, District 216 founder | Credit: Ingrid Bostrom

And, when I was expecting my first child a few years later — a wild mind-fuck for a guy with a terminal disease who also happened to lose his own dad at a relatively young age — I used LSD to help confront my fears and rewire my thinking around the topic of parenthood.

I have since used micro-dosing practices to explore my boundaries of professional creativity, and just this past year, when I decided to enroll in a potentially life-changing clinical trial for my cancer at Stanford University, I once again returned to intentional LSD use in the lead-up to help create new neural pathways in my mind so that I might be able to better receive the experimental medicine and not focus on its undeniably toxic nature. I have zero doubt that all of these decisions have served me well and have gone a long way toward helping me stay alive and vital to this day.

Now, if you look around the greater Santa Barbara landscape these days, it soon becomes obvious that, once again, there is nothing particularly uncommon about my exploration of psychedelics, this time as a tool for better mental health and/or spiritual renewal. For years, there have been private ceremonies hosted throughout the South Coast for folks interested in working with a shaman or spirit guide or some such keeper of psychedelic wisdom. Substances like peyote, ayahuasca, 5-MeO-DMT (a compound derived from the Colorado River toad), and kambô (a psychedelic secretion from the Amazonian giant leaf frog) have all been pretty commonplace among certain social scenes and alternative medical communities. Phrases such as “plant medicine,” or simply, “the medicine” or “the toad” have crept into our collective vernacular.

This, however, has recently evolved to include a wide variety of decidedly less clandestine events. There was a well-attended psychedelic speaker series featuring all sorts of experts from the

field, including doctors and neuroscience researchers, held at the Unity Unitarian Church on Santa Barbara Street in the months before COVID. There have been regular, invite-only meetings among licensed therapists and psychologists and assorted other individuals who are interested in the topic. The group gathers at a private residence off the 154 on a bimonthly basis to discuss the latest research and share insights and experiences.

The Santa Barbara Ketamine Therapy clinic opened on North La Cumbre Road in 2021 and is already planning an expansion to a bigger space this winter so it can better accommodate customer demand. And then there is the aforementioned proliferation of DIY patients, many of them exploring the potential of micro-dosing psilocybin or LSD without any formal and/or professional support.

It is not uncommon for pills or dropper bottles of medicine to be available via places like Instagram or Reddit and for it to arrive at your house packaged like it was meant to be sold in a store. The majority, however, is still sourced from chemists and mushroom growers via real-life social networks, word of mouth, and friends of friends. This loose affiliation of drug providers, though still mostly illicit, is rapidly becoming less and less informal as more certified psychedelic guides, “Trip Sitters,” and professional therapists are being licensed by reputable institutions like UC Berkeley.

“It is impossible not to be enthused by the research that has come out. And it’s just as hard not to be excited for what is coming next,” says Lisa Benson, a board-certified psychologist with 25 years of experience in private practice here in Santa Barbara. “Whether it’s anxiety, depression, or PTSD or addiction, healing is often a slow process. As clinical practitioners, we have the tools to help but, unfortunately, it takes a lot of time, a lot of resources, and a lot of effort. Psilocybin really seems to speed things up.... It

is not unheard of for someone to have a major breakthrough after only one session.”



LoDo Studios | Credit: Ingrid Bostrom

In fact, so impressed is Benson by the potential of psychedelic medicine that she recently applied to the professional certification program at San Francisco’s California Institute of Integral Studies. The nine-month course would give Benson the tools to better prepare her patients for using psychedelics and, most importantly, to support them during the experience and help them integrate it afterward. “This is really powerful stuff that we are seeing happen,” she explains. “It is exactly what I’ve always wanted for my patients, but it is able to happen with so much more efficiency.”

Modern science breakthroughs have made it possible to image the brain and measure neural activity in remarkable ways. This has opened the door for doctors and researchers to better understand the mechanisms by which psychedelics are working. Benson and others in the field point specifically to the circuitry in the brain known as the “default-mode network” as the hard evidence of psilocybin’s efficacy.

“The default-mode network is over-active when someone is experiencing anxiety or depression or the ill effects of trauma,” Benson says. “[Psychedelics] quiet that overactivity and brings a person into the here and now.... It drops beneath the filters we use on a regular basis to survive, and connects you to a deeper sense of being, to compassion and gratitude, and love.”

The latter sounds exactly like the way my friends at the beach were talking about their experiences. “Psychedelics are giving me hope,” sums up Benson. “Hope that we will be able to better deal with this really sick world we are living in.”

A Psychedelic Social Club



Jacob Tell | Credit: Ingrid Bostrom

Jacob Tell knows about the intersection of art and culture and business. The S.B.-based creative agency and business strategy company, Oniracom, which he cofounded in 2001, is a formidable force, working with clients like Jack Johnson, the Santa Barbara Bowl, and Proyo Ice Cream. “I learned long ago that life isn’t a straight line,” says Tell. “Things often come back around and can offer profound experiences and benefits if you keep your mind open.” It was this mindset that led Tell and his team to be early

allies for the legal marijuana industry and, now, psychedelics. “My goal with District 216 is to help this new culture that is emerging,” he explains. “We can’t think about the future in creative and hopeful ways if we are stuck in a default mode of thinking.”

To be clear, District 216 isn’t a new client of Oniracom’s. It’s Tell’s big, new idea for growing community and helping facilitate creative innovation, two things that have always been at the heart of what he does best. Specifically, District 216 is a membership-driven, private social club aiming to connect people around the four pillars of art, music, cannabis, and psychedelics. The goal is to create a multi-faceted “edu-tainment” network for creatives, business leaders, venture capitalists, and Web 3.0 developers. Think panel discussions, curated speakers, art and music shows, fun-focused social mixers, and genre-bending incubation for ideas. It is both a physical and virtual town square, a place for free thinkers to come together and exchange insights and information.

“We aren’t handing out mushroom chocolates. Far from it,” says Tell. “We are creating a safe space where we use the psychedelic values of intention and integration to explore ideas.” It is like a counter-culture version of the internationally known Soho House Members’ Clubs but with the ability for members to co-create events and use Oniracom’s extensive production facilities as a sort of co-working space. “We are just getting started, but already it feels like we have something special on our hands,” Tell says. “I am excited to see where it goes.”

See District216.com.

Ketamine as a Cure

Medically legal since the middle part of the 20th century, ketamine is an affordable prescription drug that has historically been used as a form of anesthesia. However, thanks to the drug's dissociative powers and exceedingly safe user profile, it has become a popular — and legal — psychedelic therapy for a broad range of afflictions, helping with everything from chronic pain and depression to anger disorders and PTSD.



Dr. Remi Drozd | Credit: Courtesy

“It is so real, this mystical/medical space we are working in. There is no doubt that it is the future,” says Dr. Remi Drozd, the owner of the Santa Barbara Ketamine Clinic. A classically trained physician with more than 15 years of experience as an ER doctor, Drozd is a relatively new convert to the world of psychedelic medicine. Like so many in the space, he had a personal experience that changed

his views on the topic. “Working in the ER, I often would see patients that I could never really help. They were dealing with underlying issues, things like poor mental health stuff or addiction, problems that I just didn’t have the tools to effectively address. I could never get to the root cause,” says Drozd, who opened his clinic in downtown Santa Barbara last year. “I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t frustrating.”

However, after participating in a psilocybin trial at Johns Hopkins and later receiving ketamine-assisted therapy himself, Drozd saw a new way to think about helping his patients. And then, while on sabbatical and traveling in Yellowstone National Park with his family, he read *The Ketamine Papers* by Dr. Phil Wolfson, and the hook was set. “Honestly, I never thought about changing my career like this, but here I am. The evidence was too loud to ignore.”

Though dosing and sequencing varies on a case-by-case basis, the general practice of ketamine-assisted therapy looks like this: A patient comes to the clinic, either self-referring or at the suggestion of their therapist or psychologist or primary care doctor. Dr. Drozd meets with the patient and tries to get a more complete picture of what is motivating them, establishing their intentions for the therapy. There is a modest amount of somatic work done followed by breath work and, if necessary, an additional screening with a psychotherapist on the clinic’s team.

At the next appointment, the ketamine is administered via an intramuscular injection, and the experience lasts roughly 45 minutes with a doctor or nurse nearby the entire time. According to Drozd, the typical protocol calls for six sessions of ketamine and six corresponding “integration sessions” with one of the licensed therapists at the clinic, all of it spread out over an eight-week period. “Absolutely, we see long-lasting, cognitive changes in the majority of our patients,” explains the doctor. “It’s amazing

what an almost-apocalyptic shutdown of your ego can accomplish when you set an intention and pair it with a well-trained talk therapist.”

To learn more about ketamine therapy and Dr. Drozd’s practice, head to santabarbaraketamine.com.

The Accidental Queen of Psychedelic Support

“I am an advocate for psychedelics. I can’t help it,” explains Santa Barbara’s Jacqueline Lopez, a 57-year-old professional event organizer and business marketing whiz. “I mean, it wasn’t that long ago that I thought to myself, ‘What are you thinking, Jackie? These are Schedule I drugs. You can’t just go around talking about them.’ But the science behind it is superb and I had seen too many good things happen. It was time to speak up.” And, after watching her terminally ill husband, Michael, get transcendent benefit from a DMT trip as well as her own therapeutic experiences using psychedelics to help heal some deep traumas from her childhood in Paraguay, that is exactly what she did.



Jacqueline Lopez | Credit: Courtesy

Lopez founded the nonprofit organization EntheoMedicine, built out an impressively thorough and easy-to-use educational website on all things psychedelic, and started working to bring psychedelic luminaries, researchers, and practitioners to speak in Santa Barbara. The speaker series, which her company Spiritual Safari Media produced, ran in 2018 and 2019 at S.B.'s Unity Church and was the first of its kind on the South Coast, enjoying widespread popularity and offering many their first experience with serious conversation about the benefits of psychedelics. But COVID stopped the momentum of the in-person events and Lopez ultimately had to pivot. She doubled down on her website and almost immediately saw traffic grow exponentially.

The Michael Pollan effect, from both his book and his Netflix series, coupled with the dynamic mental health implications of COVID and the related periods of isolation that people had to endure, ramped up interest in psychedelics in a way that few saw coming. People, not just from the Santa Barbara area but from all over the country, were hungry for info and guidance on how best to proceed. "It's almost like people needed permission or something to explore. And they saw me, a normal woman who runs a successful company and the caregiver to a sick partner, and I was safe. I could provide that permission, even though that was never my intention," opines Lopez.

In June of this year, Lopez started the Psychedelic Hotline, a place where people can book free, 15-minute consultations with her to help begin their journey with psychedelic medicine. She counsels them on all the potential options and works to connect people with medical professionals and therapists working in the space. She says demand for her services has increased fourfold in recent months. "Look, I still have my day job. I don't do the psychedelic stuff as a business or for money. It's just something I

believe in and want to support and see grow.” Says Lopez, “We are just scratching the surface on what consciousness is all about and the potential [of psychedelics]. It is an exciting thing to be a part of.”

Learn more at entheomedicine.org.