It’s a ‘psychedelic renaissance,’ as scientists identify medicinal qualities of hardcore drugs

The same drugs used in raves could be put to better use medically.

By Olivia Goodhill

When illegal drugs make the news, it’s usually for tragic tales of overdose, crime, and addiction. But substances typically found at nightclubs and music festivals have been cropping up in scientific journals recently, with several separate studies uncovering the medicinal benefits of these drugs. This month, it’s been reported that both ketamine and magic mushrooms seem to be strong treatment options for people with depression. Meanwhile there are clinical trials on how MDMA could help treat post-traumatic stress disorder, and studies showing LSD could help prevent alcoholism relapses.

These are just a handful of the studies on possible medicinal uses for illegal drugs and are part of a “psychedelic renaissance,” says Celia Morgan, psychopharmacology professor at the University of Exeter. After a hiatus of around 30 years where there was significant resistance to any such trials, she says they’re now slowly becoming more acceptable.

Morgan has just received approval for a trial on how ketamine can treat alcohol dependency. But, though she’s optimistic about growing scientific research in this area, she says “it’s very slow and very hard work” and there tends to be even more red tape than in standard clinical trials.

“I don’t know why that is because it’s not a scientifically rational,” she says. “It certainly makes it harder to do research, which is a shame because these drugs have the potential to be really powerful medicines.”

There’s no doubt that all illegal drugs (and some legal ones) can have serious negative consequences. But it’s hardly farfetched that the same drugs considered enjoyable but risky in clubs could be put to better use in hospitals—after all, such substances became popular for their strong effects. Morgan points out that many of the studies use such drugs alongside psychotherapy.

“That stems from the idea that these drugs give you a different perspective on your experience, which can be really helpful from a psychological perspective if you use that in the right context,” she adds.

John Halpern, psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School, believes that western cultures have adopted such a stringent attitude out of fear and that, “with the absence of facts, fear may reign.”

Research on how hallucinogens could be used to treat addiction was written about in the 1950s, but Halpern says that while the research was not invalidated, it was shut down during the social upheaval of the 1960s. “People wanted to blame the drugs and not the fact that our culture didn’t have much awareness about safe use of those drugs,” he says.
He points to other cultures that are more accepting of such substances and don’t seem to suffer ill effects. For example, Halpern found that peyote, which contains mescaline and is taken as part of a prayer service in the Native American church, caused no brain damage or psychological problems among tribe members.

“These are the most revered substances of the shamanic world, and somehow they translated into the most reviled of the modern world,” he says.

As a result of fear around drugs, some of the laws around which substances are illegal and which can be used medically make little sense, he says. For example, the active ingredient in marijuana is THC. This same THC can be prescribed in pill form as medicine.

“How is it that the pill substance, where the active ingredient is THC, is a medicine, but the active ingredient itself is not?,” he says. “In the pills, THC is suspended in sesame oil. Is sesame oil some kind of magic sesame sauce? It must be the sesame oil that makes it medicine. There’s really confusing messages, and that concerns me.”

Morgan says that the potential for recreational benefits varies hugely according to the drug. But she says it’s troubling if people regularly take highly addictive drugs such as ketamine outside of clinical settings.

That said, there are instances where people have discovered medical benefits that were later validated by scientific research. Halpern only discovered that LSD can be effective in treating cluster headaches (one of the most painful medical conditions, sometimes referred to as “suicide headaches”) after a group of patients made the discovery themselves. “Many take hallucinogens for non-recreational purposes outside of a research setting,” says Halpern. “There are risks, but that doesn’t preclude the possibility that they could realize some benefits.”

Halpern believes that education is key and that, if people understand what these substances can and should be used for, they would be less likely to take them recreationally.

For example, he believes it’s possible MDMA could be one day approved to help ease end-of-life anxiety. “I can imagine a lot of people saying, ‘I don’t want to take it at a rave because they say it works profoundly strongly the first few times and I’d rather save it for if I ever need it,’” he says.