Can Magic Mushrooms Help Treat Mental Health Disorders?

Findings show that psychedelic psilocybin-containing mushrooms could effectively reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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Magic mushrooms may be most associated with the Woodstock music festival and hippie culture. But Indigenous people have consumed these psychedelic mushrooms for thousands of years, and the practice is now being assessed as a medically sound treatment for mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and addiction, according to a recent report released by the Oregon Psilocybin Advisory Board.

A panel of experts, including college professors, epidemiologists and public health officials, concluded that psilocybin, the active ingredient in such mushrooms, could help alleviate the debilitating symptoms of these disorders. What's more, by 2022 or shortly thereafter, Oregonians might have the option of taking psilocybin instead of or in addition to taking prescription medications, such as Prozac and Zoloft.

While depression affects a significant proportion of the world's population, the success rate of existing treatments is lackluster. Nearly 50% of people diagnosed with major depressive disorder may not respond adequately to medication, according to a study published in the journal BMC Psychiatry in 2018. The following year, the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) classified psilocybin as a breakthrough therapy for depression, meaning that the plant may be more effective at treating life-threatening illness than more mainstream therapies.

In November 2020, residents of the Beaver State voted to pass Measure 109, a ballot initiative that charges the Oregon Health Authority with developing a "state-licensed, psilocybin-assisted therapy program," according to Oregon Public Broadcasting. The new report comprises a review of much of the available scientific evidence published thus far. Based on the results of "high-quality" Phase I and II clinical trials, the authors wrote, evidence suggests "that psilocybin is efficacious in reducing depression and anxiety, including in life-threatening conditions." In addition, preliminary research indicates that the hallucinogen could assist with reducing "problematic alcohol and tobacco use."

Psilocybin's potential health benefits may stem from its ability to confer on users a sense of spiritual well-being. Multiple studies have found that participants describe their experiences with

psilocybin as “highly meaningful,” conclusions that are supported by historical accounts, the report explains. Many Indigenous cultures, including the Maya, considered psilocybin intake a key feature of religious and spiritual rituals. That said, psilocybin, like any drug, can cause negative side effects if administered incorrectly.

Short-term or mild side effects of psilocybin range from nausea to paranoia to preoccupation with death. Long-term or severe side effects include a “sustained worsening of depression and anxiety,” the authors said, noting that the nature of the relationship between psilocybin treatment and an exacerbation of these disorders is currently unclear.

Last winter, Oregon—one of the nation’s most substance-friendly states—became the first to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of all drugs, including heroin and methamphetamine. However, that decision was not without controversy. More than 20 district attorneys spoke out against the proposal, which was outlined in Measure 110—a separate piece of legislation related to Measure 109—in advance of the balloting, according to The Associated Press.

For more on psilocybin’s potential medical applications, read “New Legal Push Aims to Speed Magic Mushrooms to Dying Patients.”

In addition, the consumption of non-magic mushrooms also has health benefits. To learn more about these edibles, read “Can Mushrooms Lower Prostate Cancer Risk?”

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