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Australians still wait for access to psychedelics-assisted therapies

Theo Chapman *Weekend Fin editor*



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Prince Harry's [openness about the psychological trauma](#) caused by his mother's death in 1997 is raising consciousness about the difficulty of treating people who continue to be affected decades after the event that triggered their distress.





Tania de Jong and Peter Hunt are co-founders of Mind Medicine. **Luis Enrique Ascui**

An estimated half to three-quarters of Australians will experience a traumatic event in their lives and about 12 per cent of adults will suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.

[People with PTSD](#) experience memories or nightmares of the event over and over. These are accompanied by feelings of terror that prevent them from being able to examine the event in a way that allows them to move on.

Treatment with psychedelic drugs reduces the overwhelming emotions that stop patients being able to think about the traumatic event.

But Australians only have access to psychedelics-assisted mental health therapies on a case-by-case basis.

Before a doctor can prescribe a drug such as MDMA (ecstasy) or psilocybin (magic mushrooms) they have to apply to the Therapeutic Goods Administration, the government's medicine and therapeutic regulatory agency, for permission to do so.

The reason for this is that psychedelics are not classed as medicines in most states, a legacy of the 1970s and 1980s war on drugs that classified them as schedule 9 prohibited substances.

If doctors are to be able to prescribe these substances freely, they need to be reclassified as controlled medicines (schedule 8).

Tania de Jong, co-founder and executive director of mental health charity Mind Medicine Australia, has spent the past two-and-a-half years lobbying for changes in how the TGA classifies these drugs.

“What needs to happen around Australia is a national standardisation so that medical exemptions can be granted for doctors to treat their patients legally in a clinical environment,” de Jong says.

A few weeks ago, the TGA agreed to conduct a review of the drugs that will include [consultations with overseas experts](#).

Psychedelics are [increasingly finding favour](#) with mental health professionals around the world who are treating patients with intractable conditions such as PTSD, which has a remission rate of just 5 per cent using currently available therapies.

[A phase III trial in the US](#), published recently by *Nature Medicine*, reported a remission rate of 67 per cent.

De Jong hopes that the growing body of evidence will persuade authorities to give patients access to psychedelics-assisted therapies.

She says Mind Medicine receives between 15 and 20 emails a day from people who want access to these treatments.

“You can see how many treatments they’ve had over how many years,” she says.

“It’s truly devastating. Some of them have tried more than 15 different types of medications. Some have had a whole lot of other therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy to EMDR [eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing], electric shock treatment, the whole kit and caboodle.

“Most of these patients want the chance to lead a meaningful life.”

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