
Demand for illegal drugs in therapy

EXCLUSIVEBy **MAX MADDISON**, JOURNALIST9:33PM FEBRUARY 21, 2021 •  15 COMMENTS

Underground mental health practitioners across Australia are defying governments, health regulators and police by illegally delivering psychedelic drugs to patients, claiming the moral imperatives outweigh the “terrifying” risks of being caught.

After an interim decision by the health regulator rejected an application to make psilocybin (magic mushrooms) and MDMA (ecstasy) more accessible for psychiatrists to treat mental illness, patients are increasingly turning to illicit treatments.

In Sydney’s east, “Felipe”, a practising psychotherapist who received his degree from a prestigious Australian university, said many of his patients sought him out after exhausting all other avenues.

His treatment is split into two sessions. The first involves 2.5g of magic mushrooms. While often the most difficult session for those confronting their fears, Felipe said patients remained “tethered to the ground”. The dosage is doubled in the second session, which “punches through any resistance”, enabling his clients to explore the depths of their subconscious.

“It requires courage ... You’re putting yourself out there and those experiences will be challenging,” Felipe, using a pseudonym to protect his identity, told The Australian, noting that patients who experienced childhood or sexual trauma often faced the “most difficult” journeys.

If caught, he faces up to 10 years in prison for supplying prohibited substances. Although some may perceive the drugs as recreational, he said all patients were screened to ensure they were taking part for the right reasons. As a layer of protection, the only way to find his clinic is through word of mouth.

Wollongong psychiatrist Al Griskaitis said two of his patients who suffered severe post traumatic stress disorder, one of whom he thought might commit suicide within a month, had shown remarkable improvements after seeking out underground psychedelic treatment.

“I’ve seen them after the sessions, and the improvements have been staggering,” Dr Griskaitis said.

Trained psychotherapist “Chris”, also a pseudonym, worked in counselling across Sydney for over a decade before his “conscience became burdened” after his research illustrated how beneficial the treatment could be.

While several psychedelics can be used, Chris predominantly uses psilocybin, with sessions costing up to \$1650. Despite the cost, he said demand had “quadrupled” since the COVID lockdown in March, and he is now fully booked.

Chris said surging demand had resulted in a parallel underground market emerging of untrained practitioners offering psychedelic therapies.

“There are very young people with very little or no experience that are actually filling the gap that’s been created between the evidence and the TGA’s (Therapeutic Goods Administration) position,” he said.

While the risks of his illegal activities weigh heavily on his mind, Chris said having witnessed the difference psychedelics made to his clients, there wasn’t another option available to him. “I’m terrified of being caught every day I go to work,” he said.

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