

NEWSHUB NATION

## Exclusive: Inside New Zealand's black market for 'life-saving' psychedelic therapy

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Conor Whitten



**Warning: This article discusses mental health issues, including suicide.**

**Often classed as hard drugs, for decades psychedelics have been dismissed as dangerous - but mounting evidence suggests they have profound therapeutic benefits treating mental illness.**

Australia is considering legalising new therapies that use psychedelics ranging from magic mushrooms to MDMA. But it's already happening - illegally - both abroad and here in New Zealand.



We can't tell you where it is or who is offering it, but proponents say it's saving lives and giving hope to Kiwis who thought they were helpless.

Steve Ball, who now lives in Amsterdam, is one of those Kiwis. He's carried a burden most of his life, dealing with trauma from an abusive family situation. At one point, it became too much to bear.

"It was crippling... I'd reached such a terrible point in my 20s that when I was 24, I'd made a rational choice to end my own life. That suicide attempt failed. But it was tough, it was really tough."

Until last year - after decades of therapy - Steve decided to try psychedelic treatment.

"I read about the work that's been done in the US and the UK, with psilocybin and MDMA specifically for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And I thought, I'm ready for this. I'm tired, and I'm ready to try something new."

"Something new" was MDMA, or ecstasy, often used as a party drug but increasingly as a therapeutic. While it is technically illegal in Steve's home of Amsterdam, he says enforcement is lax.

After undergoing just two MDMA therapy sessions following a lifetime of suffering, Steve didn't just improve - he was cured.

"It was completely life-changing," he said. "A huge weight has been lifted off me that I have carried around for a very long time."

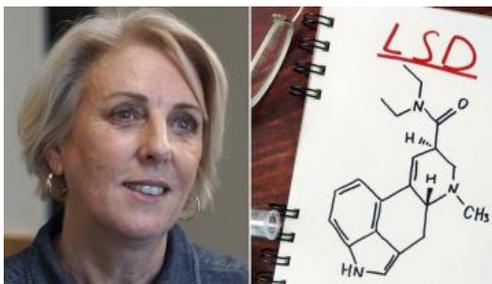
"Between those two sessions, every symptom of PTSD that I had left, and it's been more than 18 months now and I've had no symptoms of any kind."

And according to advocates like Australian psychiatrist Dr Stuart Saker, the evidence shows treatments like MDMA are not just effective - they're safe.

"The early evidence is fairly compelling that the medications are safe, with MDMA and PTSD getting cure rates around the level of 70 percent."

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It's been labeled a "breakthrough therapy" by the US Food and Drug Administration after a series of clinical trials, and has been recognised specifically for its potential to treat severe PTSD. And Dr Saker says the benefits many patients experience aren't just fleeting.

"The amazing thing about the treatment is that people can have a couple of treatments and the recovery afterwards is sustained."

Psilocybin - better known as magic mushrooms - is a powerful class-A psychedelic. It's also a promising medication for patients with treatment-resistant depression.

It's why here in New Zealand some patients - and the people who treat them - are now willing to break the law.

We'll call this man "Daniel" - he's a mental health professional. Newshub Nation altered his voice and his name to protect his identity. He doesn't offer clients illegal treatments. But for those who ask for them - he will, taking them through psychedelic therapy with LSD, psilocybin or MDMA. To him, the legal risk is worth it for the results.

"I know that these substances have saved people's lives," he told Newshub Nation.

"Sometimes they'll conclude that they have, as clients, they've kind of failed therapy but I think it's more accurate to say that therapy has failed them... suddenly a person can make therapeutic progress where maybe for years, they haven't been able to with different therapists."

Psychedelic therapy isn't taught in psychology courses or medical school. But there are guidelines to follow, developed by non-profit organisation MAPS over 35 years of research. The experience varies for every patient - beginning with making them comfortable.

Daniel says the therapist's job is part psychology and part moral support.

"For some people, it's really, it's an experience between them, and their own mind. For other people, it might be, say, for instance, working with MDMA, there may be a tremendous amount of trauma material coming up."

But it isn't suitable for everyone and the risks are much higher if you go it alone. Peter - which isn't his real name - tried his own psychedelic therapy, taking acid - or LSD. At first, it felt like a breakthrough.

"It was kind of a profound shift within me of like this sense of like I as a person, am lovable and, like, worthy of, of love and care," he told Newshub Nation.



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But one bad experience turned abusive and violent - directed at people he called friends.

"I pretty much haven't kind of touched psychedelics since... this dawning realisation of like, holy shit, have I done these things?"

Now he would only consider psychedelic therapy with a professional and he says the law makes that hard to find.

"Finding a therapeutically safe space, or, you know, someone who kind of has that knowledge is difficult, and it's illegal."

Illegal here, but in Australia it could be allowed in a matter of months. Regulators there are considering making MDMA and magic mushrooms legal, controlled therapeutic drugs.

Dr Saker already has approval to use them with a dozen of his patients. But he can't yet legally source them. A decision is due in December, and Dr Saker says many like him are ready to roll.

"We have facilities. We've got psychologists, we've got mental health nurses and we've got lots of patients and people have been waiting for these medications for many years."

But no such prospect exists in New Zealand, which is a roadblock some are trying to change. It's why researchers and campaigners gathered recently at an event in Christchurch. Campaigner Jacqui Fisher brought them together, who herself has struggled with mental illness for 30 years.

"Ultimately we would like these substances used in therapy to treat people who have severe mental illness," she told Newshub Nation.

Fisher was first inspired to fight for change by a previous psychedelic therapy conference - and heartbreak upon her return. Three days after returning from that conference, Fisher's niece was found dead by suicide.

"I'd come back so positive and just overwhelmed by these incredible opportunities and treatments that were available to people with severe depression. To come back and then have to bury my niece made me even more determined to get these substances across the line."

Earlier this year Newshub Nation asked Health Minister Andrew Little whether the Government would look at drug reform regarding psychedelics, but were told it was not currently on the agenda.

Experts like Dr Saker say the time is now.

"Sometimes the government has a chance to do something fantastic. And something revolutionary, and this would be one of those times."

We're on the cusp of a new psychedelic era, but is New Zealand bold enough to make the trip?

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