
[Companies](#)

[Healthcare & Fitness](#)

Why microdosing is gaining momentum in Australia

Microdosing psychedelic drugs has been a trend in Silicon Valley that's taking off here. But does a micro trip help you make better decisions at work?



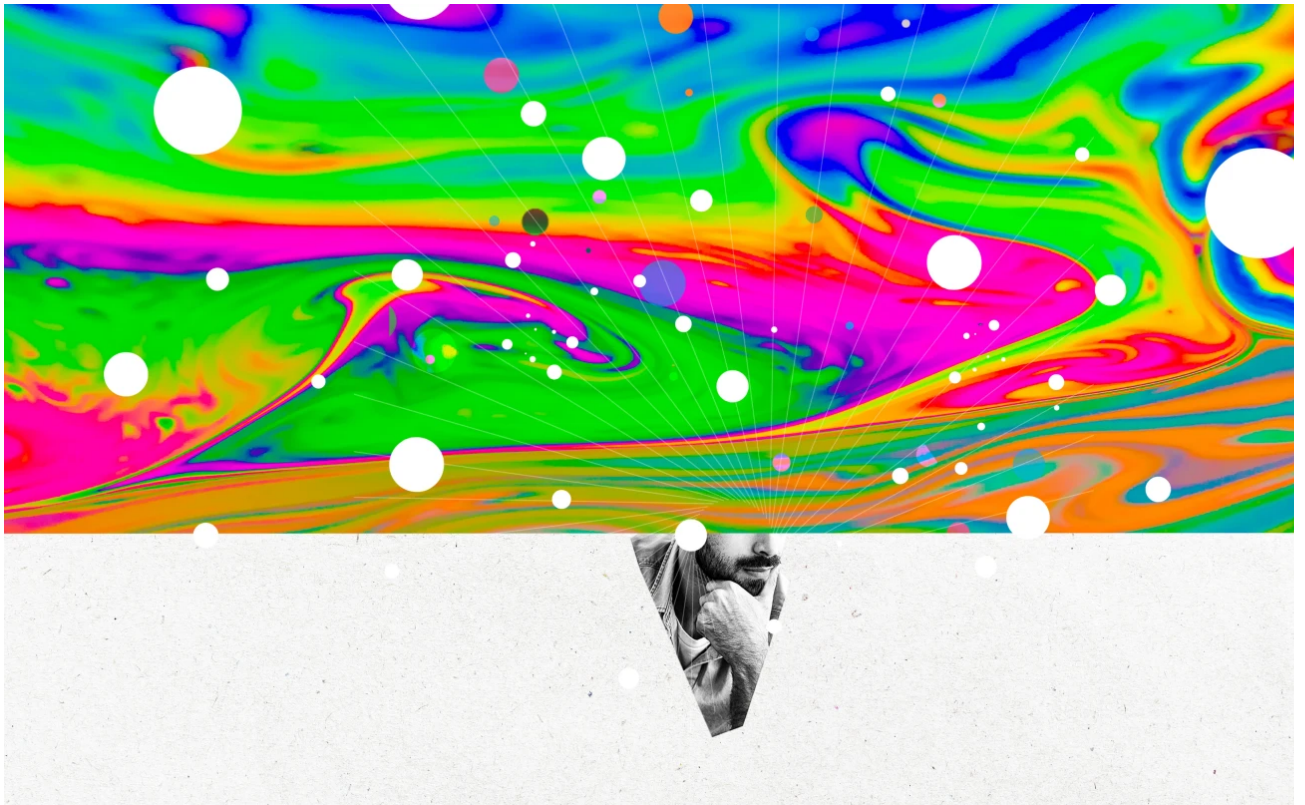
Psilocybin is the active ingredient in “magic” mushrooms. **Getty**

Updated Mar 24, 2022 – 11.36am,
first published at 9.54am

The first time Amanda* took a microdose of LSD, she hoped colours would seem brighter and the world a little more sparkly. The 40-something had never taken the substance before, not even recreationally in her youth.

Melbourne-based but American-born, Amanda has had numerous stints living and working in Silicon Valley where she was first exposed to the phenomenon of taking micro amounts of psychedelics to enhance creativity and improve mental acuity.

Her interest was piqued in 2018 when her friend Ayelet Waldman [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/how-ld-microdosing-helped-save-ayelet-waldman-and-michael-chabons-marriage-20170109-gtnz2t>] was writing her now renowned book, *A Really Good Day*, about how the practice improved her once-debilitating depression.



Microdosing psychedelic drugs has been a hip trend in Silicon Valley that's taking off here. But does a micro trip help you make better decisions at work? **Sam Bennett**

“I was thinking I needed a boost. I was feeling low, but didn’t want to turn to pharmaceuticals. I also felt like I had extremely high thinking abilities, but it was hard to break through the shit to get to that clarity thinking stage,” she says.

“I had a lot of friends in the [San Francisco] Bay Area using it safely who found it efficacious, and it was happenstance that I was talking to a friend in Sydney [who, like Amanda, works in tech], and he mentioned that he’d started microdosing. He provided me with two tabs of acid.”

Unsurprisingly, given the “sub-perceptible” size of the dose she self-administered, the grass was still a standard shade of green and the clouds didn’t become elephants. What did happen, however, was her anxiety abated, along with the physiological signs of stress. Her fuse lengthened; she felt she could solve problems quicker and with more clarity.

“[Beforehand] I would snap at the kids, or have big reactions to something challenging happening at work. Now, before I have an emotional reaction, I go into a problem-solving intellectual space. It was really powerful. I get to be more me without being clouded by emotional reactions,” she reflects.

“When you have clarity on your tasks, you’re able to cut right through to the heart of the problem and be more decisive.”

A member of the start-up community [<https://www.afr.com/topic/start-ups-629>] in Australia, Amanda is part of a growing subculture who regularly microdose with psychedelics.

Since swallowing her first dose, she has met founders, fund managers and executives who engage in the practice. She puts a single tab of acid into a mini-bar sized bottle of alcohol, creating 50 doses of one millilitre each. She takes two doses a week.

The two tabs supplied by her friend were enough to last her an entire year. She says she’s not worried about getting caught with an illegal substance, although the illegality bothers her because she can’t speak openly about

the practice (hence why she and others in the article have asked to speak anonymously).

“Doing something illegal – or what I jokingly call pre-legal – for my health and wellbeing feels like a reasonable trade off for me. [But] I’m getting down to the end [of my supply]. In the US there are safe sources where you can buy it and over-the-counter ways to test your source and make sure it’s safe. But I don’t know if those things exist here.”

Tech types are tripping

Experimentation with hallucinogenics in daily life still remains underground in Australia, but in Silicon Valley the practice is far more widely accepted.

San Francisco was the epicentre of the acid-using hippy movement in the 1960s [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/hippies-inc-how-the-counterculture-went-corporate-20191211-p53iuj>] and successful tech founders have been open about their use of the drug. Steve Jobs said that taking LSD in the 1970s, when he was aged in his early 20s, had been one of the “two or three most important things” he did in his life. Tesla’s Elon Musk [<https://www.afr.com/person/elon-musk-2w0>] told a tech conference in October that he thought “people should be open to psychedelics”.

In 2011 the practice of taking small doses of psychedelics was explored in James Fadiman’s book *The Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide*. While not the core focus of the book, it was enough to spark curiosity among its readers. By 2015, microdosing started receiving mainstream media attention, and articles appeared labelling microdosing the “hot new business trip” and “Silicon Valley’s best-kept productivity secret”.

Tech types spoke of how they used microdosing to tap into deeper levels of thinking. In 2018, Michael Pollan’s book *How to Change Your Mind* on the science of psychedelics became a bestseller. The headlines were so common you’d be excused for thinking you couldn’t be competitive in the world’s tech capital without doing it.

Speak to someone based in Silicon Valley who admits to microdosing, and you'll probably hear stories of people sipping on LSD at executive leadership retreats and companies where people keep their vials in the office fridge next to the almond milk and cans of La Croix.

But in Australia, much of the coverage to date has centred on the use of psychedelics to treat mental illness, rather than the practice of microdosing to get an edge in business. However, to think it's not routinely practised by a growing group of Australians would be a mistake.

"I take the point that microdosing was very much adopted by Silicon Valley and the tech bros, and it took off there," says Dr Prash Puspanathan, a psychedelic researcher and co-founder of Enosis Therapeutics, a start-up which creates virtual reality technology for use in psychedelic therapy sessions for patients struggling with mental health conditions.

"But ... psychedelic use is far more prevalent than we give it credit for. This country is awash with psychedelic substances. We have some of the strongest psilocybin-containing mushrooms in Victoria, found in people's front lawns on the way to their letterbox ... and the bark of the wattle trees has some of the highest concentrations of DMT [N, N-Dimethyltryptamine, a hallucinogen]. We're drowning in DMT in this country."

"I'm conscious that there haven't been any long-term studies on the impacts on the brain and I don't want to mess with it too much," says Adam*. **Sam Bennett**

The stories told by Australians who microdose vary from people self-medicating their anxiety – as many do with alcohol – through to those who've acted upon profound realisations about their career.

Nathan* began microdosing with LSD last year after a planned trip to Northern California to take DMT with a friend was cancelled because of COVID-19 border closures. Having worked in software development, he was well aware the practice had taken off in Silicon Valley and that some thought it could lead people to "their next great breakthrough".

He was given the doses via his neighbour, who he doesn't see as a dealer, but as an educational guide. Taking 20 drops, he says, would have him laughing at a party, but on a microdose he has been able to think through complicated work projects.

“There may not be an obvious pathway through it, and sometimes you need to be open to thinking about something differently, in a way that’s less mundane and administrative,” he says. “I’m doing it less now, and it might be because there are less problems I’m involved with that require that assistance.” It also, he admits, makes him a little nauseous.

He hopes to take part in a study at Macquarie University that will study the brain activity of people while microdosing. The practice, he says, was not as “obviously impactful” as he’d expected, and he’s curious to learn what effect it has on the brain. “I can’t hand-on-my-heart say that it made me think through things differently. I was expecting the impact to be more apparent than it was.”

‘Like being a kid again’

Queensland-based entrepreneur and dad of two Adam* experiments with both microdosing and “macro” dosing, but sticks exclusively to psilocybin. He says his experimentation is not sparked by any mental health condition. Instead, it was driven by a desire to improve his concentration and do detailed tasks for hours at a time – something that comes in handy for his job.

During his first experience with magic mushrooms 2½ years ago, his wife took their kids out, leaving him with the afternoon and evening to himself. Knowing the importance of “set and setting”, he ensured he was in a good frame of mind and safe space. At 5pm one afternoon he took a four-gram dose, lay on the couch in his yard and watched the sun go down through the trees, and the moon emerge.

“I had peaceful creative thoughts. I was not full-on hallucinating, but had visual effects like colours being amplified in a beautiful way. I had an immediate understanding of what inspires people to do this. It was like being a kid again and looking up at the clouds and imagining all the shapes.”

Knowing the health effects of regular use are not well understood, Adam limits his trips to four times a year or fewer. Occasionally, he does it on his own, but often it will be with a close friend or colleague, considering it a bonding experience. Once, it was with a renowned chef.

His experimentation with microdosing started a few months after his first trip. He'll do it for a few weeks at a time, but then stop for a couple of months. "I'm conscious that there haven't been any long-term studies on the impacts on the brain and I don't want to mess with it too much," Adam says.

"There was one point where I thought the sky was really blue and the water was beautiful, but I may have had those thoughts anyway," Michelle* says.

Friend and fellow start-up founder Chris* has a deep love of mushrooms of all sorts. Having worked on a mushroom farm in the US before even experiencing magic mushrooms, he's well versed in the evolutionary history of fungi and its uses.

“I was very interested in microdosing from early on. You know macro doses will take you to a place where you can’t do anything, but with microdoses, the brain gets some influence, but it doesn’t affect you day-to-day,” he says. “All my addictive tendencies were brought under control when I was on a scheduled microdose. I started off doing it once a day, but I worked out that was too much and that once every three days was enough.”

Chris, who has a creative role solving scientific problems in the company he co-founded, says he gets the same kind of benefit from microdosing in his work as he does if he maintains a strict healthy lifestyle. “I notice that microdosing versus a regular healthy routine without microdosing is pretty similar, but one or the other is required for optimal performance,” he says.

When it comes to problem-solving, Chris says it’s hard to know if the microdosing assists him, but he does have more clarity. “I feel like words and thoughts come much easier, [but this is] easily explained by a placebo effect, though,” he reflects.

“I can definitely say with certainty that larger doses have helped me solve complex problems and given me great insights on potential pathways to better understanding of work, life, love, religion, my place in the universe, comfort in my own skin, peace with mortality and more.”

Others echo the sentiment, and can even point to life-changing decisions. Michelle*, a young manager in the media industry, became interested in microdosing after a friend in a similarly high-pressure job with long hours tried it and had a positive experience.

Having dabbled with most recreational drugs, she decided to walk to a creek after having taken her first microdose but, like Amanda, was surprised by how little she felt.

“There was one point where I thought the sky was really blue and the water was beautiful, but I may have had those thoughts anyway.

“But I tend to procrastinate a lot and I find it hard to be productive on my days off. I came back from my walk and I cleaned out my wardrobe, got it all done, and I had a few hours left in the day. It wasn’t even like I was more focused, that implies an intensity to it; I was just less distracted.”

Psilocybin should be legalised in a medical research setting, as it has been in some American states, says Fable Food co-founder and CEO Michael Fox. **Getty**

After her first experience, the biggest lasting change Michelle noticed was increased empathy and understanding. She was able to understand other people’s perspectives in a calmer, clearer way than ever before. As it turned out, when she returned to the office after a Christmas break, this sense of empathy extended to herself.

Far from applying her heightened focus to work tasks, she found herself completely unable to get anything done. Having already been thinking about quitting in a few months’ time to move overseas, she was hit with

the realisation that she couldn't wait a few months to quit the job that was making her unhappy.

"I noticed on the days I was microdosing that I was unproductive at work, but productive in other areas of my life, like doing job applications or cleaning the house," she says. "What I put it down to was something in my soul saying I couldn't do this job any more and the days I was microdosing turned that sense up through the roof. I had this clarity of mind. It was so clear this job was no longer for me. That was the moment I quit."

Now on a break from microdosing, Michelle, who still plans to move and get a new job overseas, remains happy it led her to the decision to quit her job early. "Much like taking traditional medicines, sometimes those things can become a crutch. I'm now in a place in my life where I'm better, I'm back on track ... but knowing it's there to come back to when I'm ready, or I need it, is exciting."

In December, the Therapeutic Goods Administration rejected an application to reclassify MDMA and psilocybin as controlled substances [<https://www.afr.com/companies/healthcare-and-fitness/tga-blocks-mdma-magic-mushrooms-trials-for-mental-health-20211216-p59i6u>], which would have enabled them to be used to treat mental health illnesses including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The TGA stated its ruling was due to the risk of "acute and long-term effects". Potential negative effects of the drugs include confusion, fear, hallucinations, headaches, high blood pressure, nausea, tremors, a dry mouth, loss of appetite, delusions, paranoia and panic attacks.

The TGA's decision was in contrast to a move by Health Canada this year; the regulator there introducing a special access scheme to allow physicians to request restricted psychedelic drugs for patients.

Michael Fox, the co-founder and CEO of plant-based meat company Fable Food, which uses mushrooms as its key ingredient, is a believer in the benefits of psilocybin. He says it should be legalised in a medical research setting, as it has been in some American states.

“I wouldn’t advocate for it to be legalised for mainstream use until more research is done, and it’s clearly shown the benefits outweigh any risks,” he says. “That research is happening, which is great, and if it’s proven to not be dangerous, and there’s education around the importance of set and setting,

“I don’t see why it shouldn’t be legalised. End-of-life psilocybin use is something I’d suggest could and probably should be legalised now. Research studies show that with the right set, setting and guide, there are clear mental health benefits in helping aged or terminally ill patients come to terms with their life coming to a close. These are cases where any potential downsides, of which there isn’t evidence of any, are minimal.”

But regardless of the legalities, there is demand from people willing to take the risks. For better and for worse, all sorts self-medicate with drugs – both legal and illicit. COVID-19 lockdowns have increased mental stress.

Whether microdosing truly does improve decision-making in business is still to be proved. But it seems more of us are willing to experiment on ourselves. And according to Vince Polito, Macquarie University senior research fellow from the School of Psychological Sciences, microdosing is happening far beyond the tech and creative communities. He’s had participants in his trials from all walks of life, and heard stories from friends and family to support as much.

“There are a surprising number of older people,” he says. “I saw a relative recently who I hadn’t seen in ages, and she told me about how the mums in her mothers’ group were experimenting with it.

“Sometimes I go to the Australian Psychedelic Society events and in the early days the crowd was the stereotypical hippy crowd, but now they’re like a shopping centre – a real mix of people.”

** Names have been changed*

The April Fashion issue of AFR Magazine [<http://www.afr.com/afr-magazine>] is out on Friday, March 25 inside The Australian Financial Review

[\[http://www.afr.com/\]](http://www.afr.com/). Follow AFR Mag on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/afrmag) [\[https://twitter.com/afrmag\]](https://twitter.com/afrmag) and [Instagram](https://instagram.com/afrmag/) [\[https://instagram.com/afrmag/\]](https://instagram.com/afrmag/).

Yolanda Redrup

Reporter

Yolanda Redrup is an award-winning journalist who writes on technology and healthcare from our Melbourne newsroom. *Connect with Yolanda on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/afrmag). Email Yolanda at yolanda.redrup@afr.com.au*