

## Legalizing Illicit Substances to Combat the Opioid Crisis

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### What to do about the Opioid Crisis?

The opioid crisis, a familiar term to those occasionally watch the news but also a desensitized subject that robbed over 70,000 people of their lives in 2017 alone, without including the number of people whose livelihoods have been ruined due to horrific addiction (National Institute). As the United States, we have responded by cracking down even further on drug enforcement, even using the influx of illegal substances from Mexico as an argument for Trump's wall. However, the solution may be present in a completely different and drastically more radical proposal. The legalization and regulation of substances such as LSD, heroin, cocaine, marijuana, etc. could introduce a legal, taxable market in which current users could get pure substances, uncut with fentanyl or other impurities. The legalization of these substances would also clear regulatory obstacles allowing the resurgence of psychedelic research that occurred in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Medicinal Applications of Illicit Substances

The difficulty that arises with Schedule I substance research is not with dangerous substances or drastic, unpredictable experimentation, but with clearing the legal hurdles placed by the federal government, which inadvertently trip up researchers hoping to work with these medicines. The extreme scheduling of these substances is done to place a high-risk deterrent to their possession, distribution, or production, but the severity of their illegality harms not only the individual, but also researchers hoping to find positive and effective applications of these drugs. The immediate placement of substances such as LSD, Psilocybin, MDMA, and DMT under Schedule I restriction in the early 1970's crippled the emerging science of the 50's and 60's that had begun to show the vast potential for the non-addictive, medicinally applicable substances deemed to have no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.

Timothy Leary, before his removal from Harvard and his leadership role in the Psychedelic Revolution, was a leading researcher, along with his partner Richard Alpert, in the field of psychedelic related psychology and the resulting applied therapy. The pair are known infamously for the Harvard Psilocybin Experiment, in which they were fired for administering psilocybin to an undergraduate student, violating their research ethics contract. However, the Concord Prison Experiment, also performed under the leadership of Timothy Leary, is considered one of

the most notable studies of psychedelic literature.

This study established the potential of psilocybin and its application in the remodeling of established behavior patterns, especially in those with criminal records (Doblin). It showed remarkable results, demonstrating that "88% of their subjects in the preliminary study reported that they learned something of value about themselves and the world, while 62% claimed that the experience of psilocybin changed their lives for the better" (Doblin). The recognized potential of psilocybin to "change [someone's] life for the better" could carry over remarkably in the treatment of opioid addiction, allowing victims to enter a state of consciousness in which the breaking of habits and self-reflective mindsets have been achieved in previous research.

Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) was first synthesized by Dr. Albert Hoffman of Switzerland and was first utilized as a means of temporary and effective psychosis in order to allow therapists to understand the hallucinations and thought process of their schizophrenic clients (Williams). The therapeutic benefits of LSD were recorded years later through CIA funded research while searching for a "truth serum", but the unpredictable nature of an LSD trip rendered this project useless. However, LSD was effective at treating a host of other ailments, as well as providing a new field of research in relation to neuroscience and applied psychology. The application of LSD to treat addiction was also experimented with and documented before the prohibition of psychedelic drugs in the early 70's severed further promising insight. LSD induced psychotherapy performed by Charles Savage and Dr. O. Lee Macabe showed promising results in LSD's ability to treat opioid addiction. In their study, heroin addicted inmates underwent LSD psychotherapy in comparison to a control group undergoing weekly group therapy. The results were staggering, with 33% of the treatment group remaining abstinent at a twelve-month checkup, in comparison to merely 5% of the control group (Savage). LSD also proves incredibly effective in the treatment of alcoholism. Through a data analysis of six studies carried out in the early 1960's, performed by Teri Krebs and Pål-Ørjan Johanse of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology; it appears that LSD assisted therapy produced an almost 60% percent rate of abstinence while the control groups averaged only 38% (SAGE). The ability of LSD to combat addiction was recognized in the 1960's, but with the

advances in psychological and neurological understanding, its medicinal application could prove to be one of many revolutionary changes brought by the legalization of drugs.

Currently being considered for the treatment of opioid addiction is an African hallucinogen known as Ibogaine or Iboga. Ibogaine is a psychoactive indole alkaloid found within the root bark of the Iboga plant. The hallucinogen was used by indigenous populations for religious ceremonies and shamanic religion (Learn Everything). Although its anti-addictive properties were promoted in the 1960's, Ibogaine was prescribed as a stimulant in France for decades before its therapeutic discovery. However, ibogaine is currently is labeled Schedule I within the DEA's list of controlled substances, making any current research difficult and time consuming to pursue domestically (Learn Everything).

Recreational use of iboga(ine) is cautioned against and in most cases, unheard of. However, the often unpleasant and educational experience is frequently cited in the reduction or abatement of withdrawal symptoms associated with addiction. A Brazilian study conducted in 2016 demonstrated ibogaine's powerful ability to fight not only opioid addiction, but addictions of all kinds including alcohol, tobacco, and crack cocaine. In this study, 22 adults suffering from addiction, 20 of which had failed previous drug therapy, were given a treatment of ibogaine with accompanying psychotherapy and qualitatively assessed following their session. The results were overwhelmingly positive regarding the reduction of one's cravings, Ricardo, age 25, states: *"When I had [a] craving, something in my head quickly thought about the good part, the taste, the feeling, the high, right? But if I think of [the] drug now, when I think, I quickly think about the down side. It changed the perception I have regarding the drug."* (Schenberg et al.)

However, the positive results did not stop there. Following the treatment, multiple participants reported a drastic improvement with their familial relationships, the re-establishment of personal and professional goals, and an almost immediate improvement in their view of physical health (Schenberg et al.)

The reason that psychedelics were synthesized or utilized by humanity is because they physiologically affect your brain, resulting in the fabrication or "transportation" to a reality much different than our own, which carries with it a prominent importance and sense of ecstasy. Much like everything we experience in our current reality, there are positive and negative effects that come along with these interactions, and these risks and rewards must be evaluated before any valid opinion is formed. So far, we have allowed a stigmatized public opinion to illustrate a violent and criminal

lifestyle in adjacency with these drugs, rather than looking to scientific evaluation to determine whether these substances are "good" or "bad". As has been scientifically noted, several of the substances deemed medicinally inapplicable have effective and potentially revolutionary medicinal applications, mostly in the treatment of mental illnesses, of which we currently have few non-habit-forming long-term treatments. It is because of the Schedule I status given to these drugs that stigma has been allowed to man the helm, and it is through the rescheduling and legalization of these illicit substances that our opinions will be properly formed, and our society properly educated.

### The Benefit of Regulated Drugs

The illegalization of illicit and potentially dangerous substances is done with good intentions. The federal government most likely looks at the deaths and crimes associated with a particular substance and proposes illegalization to act as a deterrent to the consumption, production, and distribution of that substance. However, just like our use of DDT as a "wonder chemical" in treating a wide array of pest problems, we have enforced a drastic action without the evaluation of its negative effects (The DDT Story). Demonstrated by the prohibition of alcohol in the early 1900's, the banning of a desirable substance merely promotes the establishment of an illegal market and provides a method of funding for organized crime rings. Black market businesses, just like any capitalistic endeavor, continually search for ways to increase profit; one method of this is the "cutting" of illicit substances with other chemicals in order to increase their supply volume. This is common with substances such as cocaine, heroin, and illegally traded prescription pills because of their easily manipulated powder form. These substances are addictive and unhealthy in their pure forms, but when chemicals are added, unknown to the consumer, it results in the sale of impure substances which can be devastating in their lethality. The legalization of these substances, as radical as it may sound, would introduce a legal, taxable market that would provide consumers, who are using these substances despite its illegality, with a source for clean, federally regulated drugs.

Another aspect that would come with the legalization of drugs would be increased efforts to educate users on proper doses and safety measures. A similar approach has been taken with alcohol and tobacco, resulting in a nearly 35% reduction in drunk driving fatalities since the formation of Mothers Against Drunk Driving in 1980 (Hingson). D.A.R.E. and similar organizations have attempted to educate students and young adults about the dangers of drugs, but the "just say no" approach used throughout this long-fought drug war does very little

to deter young adults from drug use. In a 10-year follow up study included in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, data was taken from over a thousand subjects with an average age of twenty years old and found that participation in the D.A.R.E. program had miniscule, if any effect on later-in-life drug use, whether it be alcohol, marijuana, or other illicit substances (Lynam). Similar to *The Stall Street Journal*, an educational program posted around our Hampden-Sydney campus, educational programs centered around moderation rather than abstinence not only draw the attention of the reader but also provide a reliable point of reference when the inevitable question of "how much is too much?" arises. Humanity's fascination with intoxicating and psychoactive substances cannot merely be abated with an authoritative figure demanding we "just say no", so a more reasonable approach would be to provide well-researched, unbiased information on these substances and allow individuals to "pick their poison" of their own free and informed will.

Timothy Leary, following his removal from Harvard, became a public advocate for the legalization and recreational use of psychedelics. Leary presented one of his more practical ideas in front of the U.S. Senate while they debated the legal action needed to be taken in order to reduce the use of LSD. Upon asking Leary whether LSD posed any danger he stated "Sir, the motorcar is dangerous if used improperly" (Doyle). This is the stance needed to be taken regarding all illicit substances; guns are dangerous if used improperly, cars are dangerous if used improperly, this past year we have come to terms that laundry detergent is dangerous if used improperly, but regardless of their potential danger, they prove as great tools when used appropriately. Following this statement, Timothy Leary argued for a sort of "drug license" in which an individual would have to be educated and highly trained before they would be administered LSD recreationally, as these substances can be mentally punishing if used improperly (Doyle). This concept could be applied to all substances, creating generations of people who know how to use these substances responsibly, whether it be legally purchased marijuana, cocaine, or heroin. In the current state of drug affairs, uninformed individuals are buying impure substances from drug dealers barely more knowledgeable than themselves, and they are risking their lives with every dose they take. Legalization and the introduction of a licensing system would ensure that those able to buy from these theoretical drug dispensaries would do so with the qualifications and information to partake responsibly as well as the ability to inform those around them who may be unaware of things such as proper dosage or possible health effects.

The legalization of illicit substances such as cocaine, heroin, marijuana, or LSD is most likely the

last thing on any legislator's mind when combating the opioid crisis is involved. However, the current hypocrisy of the drug scheduling system cannot be understated. The placement of drugs such as psilocybin, LSD, and marijuana in Schedule I has drastically hampered medical and scientific research. They have been placed in such a restrictive position despite the conclusion that the classic psychedelics like LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, and peyote show no sign of physically addictive properties as well as a lack of withdrawal symptoms once chronic use is stopped (Krebs). Many are concerned that legalization would bring a feeling of normalization and increase the numbers of people using, but when looking at the legalization of recreational marijuana, being our only appropriate comparison, it appears that legalization brought less than a 2% percent population increase in comparison to those who were using it illegally before legislation (Kerr). The thought of legalizing drugs across the board also incarnates thoughts of lawless streets with a drug crazed society slowly wasting into damnation. However, no matter the legal status of drugs, any criminal act committed while under the influence of these substances would still be illegal, and in reference to the Concord prison experiment, maybe these crimes would be less likely following the reduced stigma towards psychedelic self-evaluation. It is clear that the opioid crisis is an epidemic inflicting millions of Americans, and with an increase in those afflicted every year, it is clear that current methods are not cutting it, so perhaps a radical proposal is exactly what we need.

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