

**Hot Take: Psilocybin was the Biggest Mistake of My Life**

Despite having had a wonderful “trip”, the consequences of my first magic mushrooms experience continue to devastate my life a year later. I am “that guy” with the psychedelic horror story. If you don’t read this, you might be, too.

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This time last year, I was a rising star in the medical field. I had survived residency and my entire life was ahead of me. I was working harder than ever, but enjoying it, blissfully unaware of the devastation to come. A few months later, a seemingly benign decision to try “magic mushrooms” one weekend ruined my life.

You may be aware that we are in a psychedelic renaissance. These substances have once again entered the mainstream, this time co-signed by highly respected research institutions and lawmakers. Major medical schools are administering psilocybin and MDMA to human participants in well-funded studies; voters in Oregon just passed a ballot initiative making “magic mushrooms” legal for mental health purposes; and, if you’re under the age of 40 and live in California, Washington, Oregon or Colorado, chances are, at least 2 in 5 of your acquaintances either has a psilocybin chocolate bar in their freezer or knows how to acquire one rapidly.

Marketed as the least dangerous substance in the psychedelic category, psilocybin usage is widespread throughout young professionals, particularly in Oregon, where I live. After having read “How to Change Your Mind” by Michael Pollan, and the hundreds of articles exalting this topic across my timeline, I got the message: Psychedelics, and psilocybin in particular, have remarkable potential to improve quality of life with little to no side effects in a relatively short amount of time. As someone who had struggled with anxiety and depression in the past and has always been an existential thinker, I was especially interested in a non-pharmaceutical alternative to treatment.

On two occasions in the last year, I tried mushroom chocolates with friends to dip my toe in the water and make sure I had no adverse reactions. The experiences were of no consequence; a few chuckles and deeper appreciation for the trees around us. When the opportunity came to try the “real thing,” I felt I had done my due diligence (hint: I had not). Based on my limited knowledge and anecdotal evidence from more experienced friends, I knew “set and setting” mattered. I was in a peaceful state of mind, a safe space, and surrounded by people who loved me. Worst case scenario, I’d have a few scary hours, be looked after by my sober friends, and go to sleep.

I’ll speed through the experience itself, because it’s what comes next that matters. I dosed slowly, under a friend’s direction (he had consumed from the same batch the weekend prior and had a wonderful experience), taking small pieces and waiting an hour each time before increasing the dosage. Eventually I got there, with an overall dose well below the 3.5 grams recommended for someone with my body weight. The experience was incredible. I began to identify patterns in my life from an objective and loving perspective, I painted, journaled, and took numerous walks around the property barefoot to inspect and admire every single plant’s nuances. I felt newly aware of and attached to the Wisdom inherent in the world around me. I was coherent and in flow. I did not experience hallucinations. My intention going into the experience had been to understand what my next step should be career-wise. And the answer came. I realized precisely how my prior passions and current training could be combined into a career that would not only fulfill me, but systematically improve society. It felt as though the idea had been divinely gifted to me. I realized how every single person in my life fit into the plan. All I had to do was connect the dots so we could all work together to better the world.

I stayed up to watch the sunrise and took in a deep breath of fresh air, then facetimed my mother at 7 AM to tell her excitedly about my experience. As soon as we hung up I facetimed a friend to tell *her*about my adventure. Soon afterwards I called my grandfather to tell *him* all about my new idea, and, well…you get it. Once these “urgent” calls were complete (around 8:45 AM), I decided it was absolutely necessary to run loads of laundry, create lists of groceries we would need and make the house perfect for the remaining guests to enjoy while I slept. After about 5 hours, I was back up and ready to roll. It felt essential to continue calling people who I knew would be excited about the idea so we could brainstorm and get it off the ground immediately — mentors, colleagues, old professors, previous therapists, exes — sky’s the limit! I had never been more articulate, more precise, more convincing, or more alarming. Unbeknownst to me, my friends and family quickly noticed I was not acting like myself. I’ve always been an upbeat and fast talker, but the vigor with which I was pursuing this idea was unlike anything they had seen before. I started to engage in forced speech — cutting people off whenever they would try to get a word in — and refused to hear even one ounce of “negativity.” At the same time, I was getting results! Incredibly accomplished individuals were entertaining the idea and offering guidance. I was doing an amazing job at work and receiving praise from my supervisors. My therapist cried tears of joy when I told her about my psilocybin experience. My psychiatrist agreed I could begin to wean off of SSRIs because I was “cured”! I was finally stepping into my power.

About a week later, I felt a deep intuition that I could now channel spirits. I was scared but also felt a duty to help them. Of course, over the next few days I shared my thoughts about this newfound skill with my contact list, including random acquaintances. At that point, my brother called my therapist. But it was too late for feedback. I had lost my ability to distinguish between my ideas and reality. Anyone doubting my perspective was being “negative” and needed to give me space. Synchronicities began popping up left and right and it felt like I was on an incredibly exciting scavenger hunt. People I met would direct me to fabulous locations or present me with a valuable piece of information that seemed to fit whatever I was grappling with at the moment. I would open books and land on a passage that precisely related to the conversation I was having. TV show plots contained messages that were clearly pertinent to me. Lyrics in the music playing in public places were specifically intended to guide me. I decided to “go with the flow” and follow the journey. Eventually, paranoia kicked in. I began to wonder if I was being followed and whether I was safe at home. This led to an extended stint of luxury hotel stays (racking up a $25,000 tab) for the next two months.

If you haven’t surmised by now, what I was experiencing meets the criteria for a full-blown manic episode. Despite being 31 years old and having a decade’s history of taking SSRIs with no remotely manic symptoms, it happened to me. While I maintained my ability to remain coherent and take care of myself, I was internally coming to conclusions that would certainly qualify as delusions (e.g. I can channel the ghost of someone who has previously lived in this house; someone is trying to communicate with me through this passage in this book) which, according to the DSM means I also experienced *psychosis*. The episode continued for 3 months (a manic episode only needs to last 1 *week* to qualify under DSM). I became selective over who in my circle I would speak to and what I would share. I caused the people who love me grave concern and heartache. This was not the self-aware, empathetic, responsible person they’ve always known me to be. I left wreckage in every area of my life that mattered, seriously damaged my professional reputation (as in, I called the President of my hospital who barely knows me to let him know I was being followed), hurt family and friends with words I did not mean, spent large sums of money, and as the grand finale moved to an exorbitant apartment in a town 2 hours away from everyone I know.

After the big move, the mania began to dissipate of its own accord. **In its place was pure nothingness.**No emotion, no motivation, severe reduction in intellectual capacity and executive functioning, and absolute, total loss of self. I went from exhibiting inordinate amounts of productivity, inspiration, socialization and deep gut-wrenching emotion to staring at a wall and barely feeding myself for weeks on end. 6 months and $50,000 of treatment later, I have barely improved.

These tools *undoubtedly* have great potential, but it is critical that we educate ourselves and each other on the downsides of these mind altering experiences. **It must become common knowledge that anyone (i) with a history of bipolar or schizophrenia, (ii) with a family member who has been diagnosed bipolar or schizophrenic, or (iii) who is currently on any kind of psychopharmacological medication, should NOT touch psychedelics**. I have a family member diagnosed with bipolar II (the highs are less high and the lows are less low), but no evidence in my own history pointed to bipolar tendencies. Yet here I am. Had I or a friend known about the prohibition on engaging with psychedelics if a *family member* meets such criteria, I would never have indulged and this crisis could have been avoided. I will also note that I was on an SNRI at the time of consumption, which may have contributed to the elevation I experienced from the psilocybin acting on my serotonin receptors. I take full responsibility for my failure to research these connections more deeply prior to engaging with psilocybin. However, the information is not as readily available or obvious as one would think. Google searches on the topic mainly turn up forum threads with completely contradictory anecdotal evidence. **As they become more integrated into mainstream society, psychedelics should come with a black box warning of these clear contraindications, as should any articles or books touting their magnificence.**

I am now back home with family and friends and have been blessed with the most understanding and incredible support system one could ask for. I am fortunate to have saved some resources (although they are dwindling) that I am using to vigorously pursue all treatment options — eastern, western, pharmaceutical, spiritual. I do not know whether the damage done to my brain from the intensity and length of this experience will ever be undone. I have contacted neurologists, psychologists, lead researchers at Johns Hopkins and UCLA working on psilocybin, as well as countless practitioners on the MAPS network for answers. No one I’ve spoken to has seen a case play out particularly like mine did and can only guess as to what I should do next. Where once existed a vibrant, intelligent, caring doctor, now lies a vacant, monotone, bewildered ghost who cannot feel connection to his family or patients. I am hopeful I can return to wholeness soon.

You may not think it will happen to you. But drug-induced mania and drug-induced psychosis are well-documented phenomena. They should not be dismissed or waved off as fear-mongering. This applies to cannabis, cocaine, alcohol, and even antidepressants. Sometimes, the psychosis never dissipates. In a sense, I was one of the lucky ones, although I still do not feel my current state is livable on a long term basis. It is my greatest hope that in publishing this story, at least one person will be spared from the trauma I’ve experienced.

If you, or anyone you know, had a similar experience and came out the other side, I would love to hear about it. Sending hope and wishing safe journeys upon those who choose to take these trips.

\*Certain identifying facts were modified or generalized to protect the identity of the author.