

Scientific history behind MDMA reveals potential benefits

MOLLY JABEN
Contributor
mjaben@unca.edu

The experience starts the same for most people. The jaw begins to tighten, the stomach becomes jittery, a wave of slight nausea hits, followed by intense, yet delightful, euphoria: all due to one of the fastest growing nightlife fads, MDMA.

Most have heard rappers brag about “popping molly” or are familiar with the elusive but tantalizing drug known as ecstasy. Yet, many people remain unaware the famous party drug has humble roots in psychiatry.

As of August, the FDA granted MDMA-assisted psychotherapy as a breakthrough therapy designation for treatment aimed at reducing the agonizing effects of post-traumatic stress disorder.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, about 7.5 percent of American adults suffer from the disorder.

They also estimate 11-20 percent of Iraqi war veterans suffer from the disorder while 30 percent of Vietnam veterans experience persistent PTSD throughout their lifetimes.

The Veterans Affairs hospital in Asheville knows this all too well. As one of the highest rated VA hospitals in the nation, they service over 38,000 veterans from 20 counties around Western North Carolina, according to official government rankings.

The annual budget briefing reports the U.S. government granted the VA \$7.4 billion worth of resources for mental health treatment in 2016. The VA currently requests an additional one billion dollars to cover the mounting costs of treatment throughout 2018. The budget

also predicts an increase of almost 1 million veterans seeking health care through the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2018.

Typically, patients suffering from PTSD receive psychotherapy along with a prescribed SSRI or antidepressant, like Zoloft, Paxil, Prozac and Effexor according to treatment guidelines published by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

However, even these therapies have relatively low success rates. According to data from the Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies, more than 80 percent of patients still qualify for a PTSD diagnosis after traditional treatment.

German company E. Merck received the patent for the drug MDMA in 1914 to aid in the development of other therapeutic agents, according to a report by the United States Sentencing Commission.

Alexander Shulgin, a medicinal biochemist hailed as the father of MDMA, introduced the drug to America after synthesizing the compound while working for Dow Chemical in the mid-'60s.

In the '70s Shulgin introduced MDMA to his friend Leo Zeff, a psychologist who went on to pioneer psychoactive drug assisted therapy. Zeff ingested the compound, recognized its potential and began administering the drug to patients.

“When it started getting really popular I actually went and talked with a bunch of therapists who used it in therapy and became convinced that they weren't crazy, that this really was a drug that had a future for psychiatry,” said David Nichols, a

MDMA is commonly labeled as molly or ecstasy and has garnered a reputation as being a club drug for decades.

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