



# THE LIGHT SIDE OF *THE MOON*

EXPLORING THE THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL OF DECRIMINALIZING PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS.



After Matthew Kahl returned from his second deployment to Afghanistan in 2011, he was taking between 8-20 prescription medications a day. Like many US veterans, Kahl suffered from severe PTSD as a consequence of his service. But the pharmaceutical treatments weren't helping. His neurological cocktail of mood stabilizers, anti-psychotics, opiates, and more, were radically depleting his quality of life. He swung between states of blind rage and fell asleep behind the wheel. He wasn't getting better.

"I was dying before everyone's eyes," Kahl says. "I realized I had to change something, or I really was going to die." Motivated by his family, by not wanting to leave his children without a father, he started looking for other alternatives.

At first, Kahl found momentary relief in cannabis, moving from North Carolina to Colorado so he could use it medicinally. By 2014, he was an advocate for its decriminalization, testifying before lawmakers about the therapeutic benefits it posed to veterans and others. Though cannabis helped wean him off his prescriptions, he was still heavily reliant, smoking it all day every day, even rubbing it into his skin. "Dependence on a substance was chasing me," Kahl said. "...It was a bit of a prison, and I wanted to be free and independent of anything."

Then in 2016, he found what he'd been searching for. After years of turmoil—witnessing friends die in a foreign war, a post-service identity crisis, a suicide attempt on Christmas Eve—Kahl finally discovered a treatment for his PTSD that restored his true self. A treatment that made him feel mentally healthier than even before he was deployed. A treatment that, incidentally, is highly illegal in the country he fought for. Psychedelics.

### AN INTRO TO PSYCHADELICS

To put it simply, psychedelics are drugs that cause hallucinations. They come in various forms: some are naturally occurring, such as psilocybin in "magic" wild mushrooms, while others are made synthetically, such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD, aka "acid"). Though chemical reactions in the brain vary between forms, the trademark effects include enhanced sensory perceptions and hallucinations, which may in turn facilitate spiritual experiences and feelings of euphoria.

Psychedelics are classified as a Schedule 1 drug by the US Drug Enforcement

Administration, who consider them to have high abuse potential and no therapeutic value. This categorization ranks them as a greater threat than methamphetamine and cocaine, which are classified as Schedule 2 substances. Psychedelics then—which are not chemically addictive and have no known lethal dosage—are classified among the most dangerous drugs in existence.

What's the source of this disconnect? Why is it that psychedelic drugs, the only effective treatment for Kahl's PTSD, are thought to be therapeutically worthless and radically dangerous?

### THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL

Just as different forms of psychedelics vary in their effects, so do their therapeutic applications. Psilocybin is a rising star in psychiatric treatments across the globe, notably used in Amsterdam for treating depression. In August 2020, Canada also legalized the use of psychedelic mushrooms (which contain psilocybin) in psychotherapy treatments for end-of-life patients, aiming to give spiritual solace to dying men and women as they make peace with their impending death.

But psychedelics have been used globally long before western countries opened up to their therapeutic properties. Naturally occurring psychedelics have been used in spiritual ceremonies across the world. One example is here in the United States. Some Native American reservations consider peyote, a substance derived from cactuses, a sacred part of their spiritual ceremonies. Consuming peyote on reservations is thus a legally protected religious freedom, with certain states even allowing visitors to the land to use it regardless of religious affiliation. Another example is in South America, where ayahuasca, a brew made from psychoactive shrubs, is used by indigenous tribes in the Peruvian Amazon and elsewhere today.

Incidentally, Kahl's first experience with psychedelics was also in a spiritual ceremony in Peru. An experience he now insists saved his life.

### HAVE A NICE TRIP

His opportunity came in April 2016 when a producer for the documentary *From Shock to Awe* approached him about traveling to Peru to drink ayahuasca on camera.

At first, Kahl wasn't sure the drink was working. He drank cup after cup under the watch of a spiritual guide and surveillance of a camera crew. Then, he became ill. Violently ill. He purged his stomach,

vomiting dark black sludge into a bucket. Then, as the ayahuasca's psychoactive properties lassoed his mind, he stared at his waste and saw the face of a demon—a manifestation of all his anger, hurt, and hatred. He spoke to his pain, and it spoke back:

"It told me that it was hate that I had captured from the world around me, and I had taken it and I had swallowed it. That hate had been burning in the center of my being, in the center of my soul, for years. It didn't want to be inside of me. Every time it tried to get out, I pushed it back down because I wanted to control it. I realized that I had wronged myself, then I realized that I had actually wronged this demon. I said out loud, 'I'm so sorry. I can't believe that I've done this to you. How can I ever make this up to you?' The only thing that it said to me was 'forgive yourself.' I responded, 'It's not that easy. You can't just forgive like that.' And it said to me, 'It is that easy. All you have to do is let go.'"

So Kahl let go. And from that moment, and every day afterward, it's been gone.

When he arrived in Peru, Kahl was heavily dependent on substances to cope with his PTSD. Then psychedelics freed him, allowing him to exist today without the burden of his trauma. Now, Kahl returns to psychedelics only when he needs recentering once more, with anywhere between six months to two years between trips. He compares using the drugs "as needed" to people who don't attend church regularly but go when they need spiritual guidance. Psychedelics aren't a crutch for Kahl like cannabis was—they're a resource. A resource he doesn't take for granted.

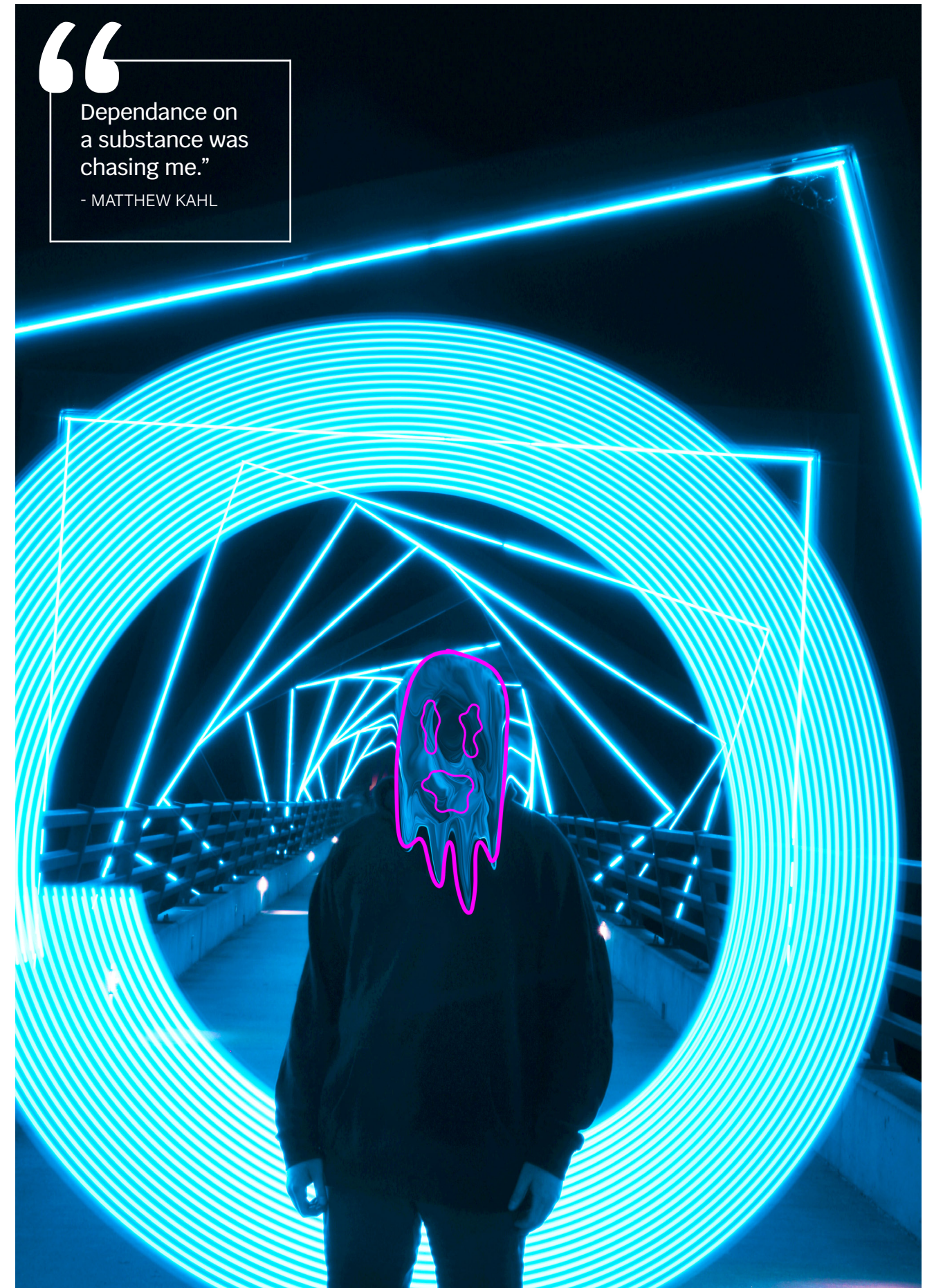
### THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

Though Kahl's ventures with psychedelics are largely positive, not everyone has the same productive experience.

Odds are you've heard of a "bad trip." "Tripping"—or the experience of intoxication under a psychedelic drug, refers to the drugs' effects on the user's perception of their worlds, as if they are in a whole new realm. A bad trip then, broadly speaking, is a negative experience one has while using psychedelic drugs. A negative episode can be mild to severe with effects ranging from upsetting thoughts to frightening delusions that may cause an accident. For example, a person may believe they can fly and hurt themselves. A bad trip can also induce paranoia and panic in the user, causing them to believe their surroundings are no longer safe.

“Dependence on a substance was chasing me.”

- MATTHEW KAHL







According to Dr. Elizabeth Hartney, the director of the Centre for Health Leadership and Research at Royal Roads University in Canada, an understanding of drugs is essential for recreational use. On the subject of bad trips, Hartney wrote, “Sadly, many people don’t know what a bad trip is until they have one, so it is helpful to know ahead of time what you could experience, and what you should do if you have a bad trip or one of your friends does.” If you or a friend begin to experience a bad trip, Hartney recommends finding a comfortable, calming space with trusted supervision to wait out the drug’s effects.

Studies have found that having a good or bad “trip” is largely dependent on one’s expectations as they ingest the drug, informed by their previous experiences and the setting where they take it. For example, if a person doesn’t anticipate their hallucinations, they could become understandably frightened by a drug’s effects. Moreover, if they’re tripping in a chaotic, unfamiliar environment like a busy public place rather than the comfort of their own home, they may become similarly distressed.

Beyond the influence of expectations, the dosage of the drug is paramount to the effect of the experience. Many therapeutic administrations of psychedelics are through “microdosing”—low, sub-hallucinogenic doses—allowing for a controlled, less intense trip. Inversely, the higher the dosage taken, the more intense the high will be, which can overwhelm the user and cause a bad trip. The logical conclusion then is that negative experiences with psychedelics could be circumvented through a proper, expert administration of the drugs. But to make that a reality, they first need to be decriminalized.

#### CRIMINALIZATION AND STIGMA

The Crossing Paths PAC in Missouri is one of many groups advocating for the decriminalization of psychedelics in the United States. Executive Director Bharani Kumar is well aware of the stigmas, both legal and social, surrounding drugs in general.

In Kumar’s mind, social stigma is the driving force for misconceptions about drugs, marking them as taboo, and limiting productive conversations about them. He believes the dangers of drug use could be helped through education about the substances, not by making them illegal.

This topic hits close to home. While growing up, some of Kumar’s friends would take Xanax with alcohol, not understanding that it was potentially lethal—no one had ever told them. Their schools had condemned drug use without informing them of the real risks.

“At the end of the day, you can’t really control what people are going to do, but you should at least make sure that they know what they’re getting into,” Kumar says.

Kumar is also adamant that common knowledge about psychedelics could save lives. Potentially dangerous substances are easily marketed under false pretenses, such as 25I-NBOMe, a synthetic hallucinogen used in biochemistry research, which is being sold as LSD. The 25I could kill someone with a pre-existing heart condition, but if they knew that 25I is bitter whereas LSD is tasteless, they could avoid a fatal disaster. If the drugs were regulated, the false pretenses—i.e. thinking you’re buying one drug and getting something else entirely—wouldn’t happen in the first place. “[Decriminalization] is going to create better quality products that are going to be safer for people to use,” Kumar says.

While enrolled at the University of Missouri, Kumar joined a student advocacy group for educating the public about drugs rather than simply brandishing them. Today, his PAC advocates for research to help optimize psychedelics for productive, decriminalized use, rather than being an abstract enigma in the public eye.

“There’s just so much we haven’t learned about them yet – with how they can affect our minds and the way we think about stuff.”

Kahl is similarly frustrated by the stigmas American society attaches to psychedelics, which he largely attributes to the Reagan administration’s “Just Say No” culture, as well as the invention of the War on Drugs. “The prejudice against most Schedule 1 drugs is a cultural thing that’s been taught to us,” Kahl says. “All of these things have contributed to this massive cultural oppression of certain medicines.”

Because that’s what Kahl ultimately views psychedelics as: medicine. It saved his life, and he believes it could save others’ lives if only they were decriminalized.

“It’s a slap in the face to anyone who’s trying to overcome their trauma because [psychedelics are] one of the only tools that can really help us leave it in the past where it belongs instead of [it] dominating our present.”

#### THE FUTURE

As 2021 begins, matters of mental health are of dire importance. The circumstances of COVID-19 have snowballed into a demolition of public health, social interaction, and countless other sacred aspects of life. As a consequence, data is already suggesting a critical spike in mental health emergencies, with depression being four times as prevalent now than it was in the second quarter of 2019.

Studies are discovering that drugs like psilocybin, MDMA, and others may substantially decrease depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. While other countries like Canada and the Netherlands are making significant headway in harnessing these drugs’ therapeutic properties, it’s worth wondering if and when the United States will open up to the potential benefits, especially given our growing mental health crisis.\*

Some organizations are starting to push for a national reevaluation of psychedelics. Founders Pledge, a charitable initiative that guides entrepreneur donations, recently released a lengthy report on the importance of funding psychedelic-assisted mental health treatments. Their report pleads, “psychedelic drugs have the potential to revolutionise how we treat mental health conditions.” Donating to causes like the Usona Institute, a research organization highlighted by the Founders Pledge report, could help expedite psychedelics towards therapeutic administration in the United States.

And of course, advocacy on small and large scales is essential towards making a difference. Now that Kahl is a restored man no longer haunted by his trauma, he advocates for the decriminalization of the drugs that made all the difference in his life. He believes that once more people familiarize themselves with psychedelics, whether through safe experimentation or education, the more likely legal tides will rise in the cause’s favor.

“These things can heal you in ways that we don’t even comprehend prior to having a psychedelic experience,” Kahl says. “They can pull us out of the deepest depths and bring us up to the highest heights. This is the reason why I believe psychedelics, more so than any other substance, are the ideal psychiatric drugs, period.”

*\*Since the article was written and edited, Oregon became the first state in the U.S. to legalize psilocybin and authorize it for therapeutic use.*



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