

## The Rapidly Changing Societal Attitudes towards Psychedelics

Our collective interest in the field of Psychedelic assisted Therapy is growing tremendously. I have often stepped back and marveled at how much and how quickly our society is changing its thinking in regards to psychedelics. It truly feels like a tidal shift in our culture is well underway. Some may think that interest in psychedelics is a passing fad. I think the truth is that this is a deeply significant cultural shift that will have profound implications for many fields and areas of our lives for decades or even centuries to come. We may well just be witnessing the beginning. It would not surprise me in the slightest if in a decade or so, we see many universities offering advanced degrees and Ph.D.'s relating directly to psychedelics.

The following is a list of the top reasons for why people in our society (i.e. the United States, though given our current age of information and globalization, I believe many of these trends are occurring across the globe) are changing their attitudes and beliefs around psychedelics in particular and to drugs in general.

***Michael Pollen (and the plethora of other popular books on psychedelics that have come out in the last 5 years):*** Michael Pollen's book *How to Change Your Mind* is one reason among many that this conversation has moved from the fringes of society to the mainstream. His style of thorough investigative journalism is coupled with his own personal story, one that deeply resonates with millions of readers. He shares how, despite being a child of the (in)famous 1960s, he never personally had any experience with psychedelics until much later, when he began doing research for this book. That he approaches this subject with respect, much deliberation and sound reasoning, makes a deep impression on a reading public used to overly simplistic slogans like 'just say no' on the one hand, and the narcissistic antics of a psychedelic salesman like Timothy Leary on the other. In addition to his personal story, the book takes a deep dive into the incredible emerging research being done with

these compounds to treat a host of serious mental health issues such as addiction, depression, treatment resistant depression, anxiety, end of life care, chronic pain and others. He also touches on the philosophical and spiritual components as well as the possibility that micro-dosing and other ways of engaging with psychedelics could lead to not only improved quality of life mentally but physically as well. In a nutshell: almost all the ‘common sense’ and ‘received wisdom’ passed down to us from the administrations of Nixon and Regan are simply wrong.

***The Changing Media Landscape:*** In addition to Pollen’s book, the subject of psychedelics and the ‘war on drugs’ has been discussed on countless podcasts, YouTube videos, blogs and memes. These new forms of media, especially podcasts in which two or more people have truly in depth and meaningful conversations, are all happening outside of the traditional /legacy news media and are an important part of why our society is shifting in its attitudes around psychedelics in general. To continue with the example of Michael Pollen, he appeared twice on Joe Rogan’s popular podcast and they spoke for over 2 hours and 45 minutes each time, primarily on the subject of psychedelics. To put this in perspective, prior to signing an exclusive deal with Spotify, the Joe Rogan podcast was averaging 2 million views a day on YouTube alone, which isn’t counting all the listeners who were tuning in on the different podcast apps<sup>1</sup>. In 2021, it was estimated that each episode of the Joe Rogan podcast reached 11 million listeners.<sup>2</sup> This puts him in the same league of the mainstream cable news anchors, except the content he is delivering are long form, in depth conversations that delve deeply deeply into particular topics without commercial breaks. And Joe Rogan is just one long form podcast among many others that have delved into psychedelics and related topics.

Podcasts are in many ways the opposite of the ever shortened attention span that seems to afflict so many other forms of media and art. They are long, real and unscripted. And I am not alone in thinking that the complex, multi faceted and subtle

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<sup>1</sup> <https://socialblade.com/youtube/c/jreclips>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-rogan-dethroned-spotify-chart-new-gaming-podcast-sapnap-karl-jacobs-number-one-1634239>

subject of psychedelics is well suited to this sort of discussion. It is, in many ways, the opposite of the black and white, overly simplistic narrative of the ‘war on drugs.’

***The Total Failure of ‘the War on Drugs’:*** Another crucial reason that so many of us are opening to the healing potentials of psychedelics and re-evaluating our troubled history with these substances is the immense failure of the ‘War on Drugs.’ There is much more to be said here beyond the scope of this article. But let us consider a few salient points.

One: the ‘war on drugs’ has done basically nothing to reduce either the supply nor the use of illicit drugs in this country (or in the world, for that matter, since it is clearly a global issue). Two: it is increasingly difficult to stick our collective heads in the sand and ignore the real world consequences of this failure in a country like Mexico, where the almost unbelievable level of violence from the drug cartels is a direct result of the illicit drug trade and consequently the most gruesome of proofs of the failure of ‘the war on drugs.’ If these substances were not illegal, the black market would, of course, collapse. This reminds me of a debate class in high school debate class (this debate class directly led me to writing an award winning essay in the school paper, ironically called the Broughton High Times, often shortened to ‘the High Times’) arguing for the legalization of all drugs. Of course one can argue that the consequences of simple legalization of all drugs would be worse than what we have today. One simple rebuttal is the fact that illegal drugs are more widely available today than ever before.

And as feasible (although any intelligent 11th grader could see through it) as that argument may have seemed 25 years ago, today we have to face the reality that the real world consequences of our drug prohibition have been catastrophic. The violence of the drug cartels in Mexico alone is almost beyond belief and makes the Al Capone gangsters of the American prohibition era look like church mice. In 2016, Mexico was declared the second most deadliest war zone in the world with over 23,000 fatalities, far surpassing Iraq and Afghanistan, with the surprising caveat that it achieved this remarkable death toll with no tanks, artillery or traditional armies meeting in combat.<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that

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<sup>3</sup> <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/mexico-afghanistan-iraq-fatalities-2016/>

over 300,000 homicides have occurred from the cartel violence in Mexico since 2006, a staggering number that far surpassed the number of US troops killed in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> You may be wondering why I am harping on this point, and perhaps thinking that this problem is not solely the fault of the United States government. In fact, almost all of their income of these incredibly violent and destructive cartels in fact comes directly from selling illicit drugs to in the USA. Without the ‘war on drugs’ these Cartels could not exist, at least not in their current forms. So for us in this country to ignore this devastating and ongoing conflict is incredibly disingenuous. And many of us in fact are waking up to this continual reminder of the failure of our ‘war on drugs.’

**The very word and concept of “drugs” as a catch all phrase for any substance the government declares illegal, as well as any pharmaceutical, is an unhelpful conceptual category because of the fact that these substances are so different and distinct:** In terms of illegal drugs, the fact that meth, cocaine and heroin are considered in the same class as peyote, psilocybin (the active ingredient in psychedelic mushrooms) and cannabis speaks to the very real potential of abuse that is true of anything humans can ingest, but it creates an artificial category that does not do justice to how different all these substances in fact are. A more sophisticated understanding will be one that develops different conceptual categories to reflect these differences. It should include perfectly legal substances like refined sugar, which is incredibly addictive and has profound affects on our mental and physical states. We need to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated cultural understanding around mind altering substances, which will include broadening our language and concepts. This history of sugar is a fascinating example, as not only does it profoundly affect our minds and bodies, it’s history is directly related to the slave trade and to significant environmental and labor issues today and yet it’s public image remains one of relative innocence with connections to our childhoods and to every conceivable holiday. The

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/background/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>

point is not to demonize sugar but to point out the logical inconsistencies in our cultural understandings of such substances.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Public Opinion Turning Against Mass Incarceration and Police***

***Brutality:*** This is connected with broader political conversations about the role of our police forces in general. The protests around the murder of George Floyd are obviously about much more than the death of a single man, as tragic and unnecessary as his death was.

The United States, with the possible exception of China, leads the world in the number of incarcerated individuals.<sup>6</sup> The Sentencing Project reports that: “Sentencing policies of the War on Drugs era resulted in dramatic growth in incarceration for drug offenses. Since its official beginning in the 1980s, the number of Americans incarcerated for drug offenses has skyrocketed from 40,900 in 1980 to 430,926 in 2019...At the federal level, people incarcerated on a drug conviction make up nearly half the prison population. At the state level, the number of people in prison for drug offenses has increased nine-fold since 1980...”<sup>7</sup>

The Center for American Progress reports that “Every 25 seconds, someone in America is arrested for drug possession.<sup>1</sup> The number of Americans arrested for possession has tripled since 1980, reaching 1.3 million arrests per year in 2015—six times the number of arrests for drug sales”<sup>8</sup>

There is an obvious racial component to this as well and the fact that such mass incarceration disproportionately affects black people and other minorities is becoming increasingly unacceptable to many Americans.

***Spirituality and Religion:*** Another crucial reason causing many to open to the positive potentials of psychedelics is that more and more people are feeling called to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/sugar-slave-trade-slavery.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/reports/2018/06/27/452819/ending-war-drugs-numbers/>

the possibility of experiencing what can be called the spiritual or transcendent. These are loaded terms which are difficult to define. Psychedelics, when taken in the right set and setting, with the right support, and not too frequently, often lead to a discovery of what can only be called the sacred, and even more: to locating this within one's own being or consciousness.

In a time where traditional narratives are collapsing, where trust in institutions, including traditional churches, is declining, in an age of information in which we are constantly bombarded with examples of corruption and hypocrisy, psychedelics offer a direct, experiential access to healing and to the realm of the spirit - or if the language of 'spirit' does not sit right with you - we could speak instead of the experience of insight into truths about ourselves, our reality and consciousness itself.

These truths are so monumental i.e. fundamental, that they have often been considered the domain of religion, mysticism or philosophy. What psychedelics offer are an increased potential for insights into the actual lived subjective experiences that gave rise to these ideas so long ago, without all of the cultural and traditional trappings that tend to accompany them. The reason that so many others feel compelled to use a word like 'spirit' in referring to these experiences is simply a matter of weight: these are such powerful, transformative and undeniably transcendent states of being that afterwards it is only right to search for language that imparts a sense of deep respect and reverence. This reverence can be felt outside the confines of a church and ecclesiastical hierarchy. We need new language and new concepts to begin to communicate and respect the potential power and grace these substances may reveal.

***The Presence of Supportive Elders:*** In *How to Change Your Mind*, Michael Pollan makes the fascinating point that that the 1960s generation who first tried psychedelics had no elders around them who had themselves taken such consciousness altering substances. This is surely a big part of the extreme 'generation gap' that occurred in the 1960s. It is a part of why our culture was so fragmented and divided during this time. And I think it is a big part of why the psychedelic experience may have been so disorienting and even traumatic for many of that generation. This is not to say that those dangers are not present today. Pollan writes that "For young Americans in the

1960s, for whom the psychedelic experience was new in every way, the whole idea of involving elders was probably never going to fly. But this is, I think, the great lesson of the 1960s experiment with psychedelics: the importance of finding the proper context, or container, for these powerful chemicals and experiences.”<sup>9</sup>

Today, people of any age can find information, supportive groups and more experienced people who can help them to understand their psychedelic experiences and share information to give one a better chance at having a positive experience with these substances. Even if someone is geographically or socially isolated, the miracle of the internet makes this available to us all. Many aging boomers had profoundly transformative and positive experiences with psychedelics and have been quiet about it while the war on drugs has been raging. Now that the winds are shifting, they offer tacit support or want to engage again with these substances in a safe, legal and therapeutic way - and they are now in positions of power and influence to help make this happen.

**Scientific Research:** The War on Drugs effectively ended legitimate mainstream research into psychedelics. In the last 20 years, this has begun to change and today we are experiencing a tidal wave of exciting scientific research into these compounds. It is now reasonable to expect this tidal wave to lead to legalization and FDA approval for psychedelic medicines in the near future at the federal level. The truth is that science and legitimate research never supported the war on drugs and certainly never supported the suppression of all psychedelics. The organization MAPS (the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) has been a true leader on this front for decades now and is a wonderful source of the latest scientific discoveries on the subject: <http://maps.org>.

As with so many of the reasons listed in this article, a whole book or books could be written about this ground breaking research. Luckily there are many wonderful resources online for learning more. In addition to MAPS and *How to Change Your*

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<sup>9</sup> Pollan, Michael. *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (p. 246). Penguin Publishing Group.

*Mind*, the John Hopkins Center for Psychedelic & Consciousness Research is a good place to start diving into this research: <https://hopkinspsychedelic.org>

### **Growing Distrust of the Pharmaceutical Industry and the Over Medicalization of America:**

This is another hugely important topic. In terms of just mental health, something in the ballpark of 40 million Americans are taking psychiatric medications.<sup>10</sup> Many of these prescribed drugs are simply pharmaceutical corporations making their version of common street drugs. For example Adderall and the host of related stimulants, are chemically extremely similar to the 'street drug' often called 'meth' or methamphetamines. And there is a growing body of research showing that many, if not most, psychiatric medications have far reaching consequences that may well make the very problems they are meant to treat worse.<sup>11</sup>

To give just one example for the distrust of pharmaceutical companies and the over medicalization of our country: from 1987 to 2007, the number of children diagnosed as mentally disabled rose 35 fold.<sup>12</sup> These children are routinely prescribed psychiatric medications which evidently do not work, leading to a life time of disability or requiring decades or an entire lifetime of prescriptions. It is worth noting that almost none of the psychiatric medications routinely prescribed and taken for years and decades were studied or originally intended to be used for such lengths of time.

Psychedelic medicines, in contrast, are not habit forming or addictive in general and are not intended or generally used every day for decades, in the way that typical psychiatric medication is taken. Although they have profound effects on one's subjective conscious experience, they generally do not come with the host of long range negative side effects that we see in medications such as antidepressants.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.advisory.com/en/daily-briefing/2016/12/14/what-psychiatric-drugs-are-americans-taking>

<sup>11</sup> See *Anatomy of an Epidemic* by Robert Whitaker

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



Another key difference between psychedelics and pharmaceuticals, is that most psychedelic medicines are naturally occurring and have been safely used for millennia by indigenous peoples. LSD and MDMA are exceptions to this, but Psilocybin, Ayahuasca and others have completely natural sources.

To return to the corruption of our medical establishment and of the pharmaceutical industries which play such an outsized role in medicine in this country, the single greatest example perhaps is Purdue Pharma. Here is an example of a major corporation, legally making billions and billions of dollars in profit for legally manufacturing, promoting and advertising opioids.<sup>13</sup> It is beyond ironic that at the very same time that doctors were over prescribing opioids and creating the opioid epidemic, which continues to wreak havoc and destroy lives, the police were busy arresting and prosecuting small time drug dealers, many of whom were put behind bars for decades for illegally selling essentially the exact same thing: opioids.

When one considers the vast financial stakes and pressures, it is little wonder that most psychiatrists have abandoned their historical roots in psychoanalysis and have become mere prescribers, often seeing patients for 15 minutes at a time and writing prescriptions for whatever their issues are. This is not to say that such psychiatric drugs cannot help; they most certainly can and they should be options considered for treatment. The problem is in the over all structure of a for profit medical system that seeks the biggest return on its investment and an ever shrinking willingness to provide individualized, human centered care.

***Freedom to Choose What to Put into One's Body:*** The right for individuals to make their own clear and informed decisions about what to put into their body. This appeals directly to America's sense of freedom and of the founding principles upon which this country was founded. Given all of the reasons listed above, and the many more that were not included here, it is no wonder that a growing portion of people no longer want to trust the government or the medical establishment to be the arbiters of what we can and cannot put in our body.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/01/health/purdue-sacklers-opioids-settlement.html>

## **Conclusion:**

None of this in any way suggests that we should take the decision of what to put into our body lightly. In fact, it argues for the exact opposite. It suggests that a great deal of respect and care is needed; that we all deserve the right to freely available and accurate information and research; that we all deserve the right to know exactly what it is we are taking. In order for this to be possible, we need to *legalize and to regulate all drugs*. We need a good and functioning FDA who can verify what is in any supplement or substance that is for sale, so that people can make free and informed choices.

A case study here is the nation of Portugal. It does not fulfill all the needs and rights listed in the previous paragraph but it is a place that, in 2001, *decriminalized all drugs*. Since that time, the number of drug related deaths in Portugal has been well below the average of all the other EU nations, crime rates have dropped significantly and drug use rates among young people have consistently been one of the lowest of any nation in the EU during this time.<sup>14</sup>

Psychedelic medicines hold tremendous potential for healing mental health issues, including issues that may have been made worse by long term prescription pharmaceutical drug use and for helping over come addictions from things such as opioids and alcohol. In general, they are non addictive, do not require taking more than a handful of times, can often be derived from plants or fungi, and they can potentially offer a kind of antidote to the over corporatization of health and wellness that has lead to so many problems in this country and the world. Many who experience their effects speak of a *renewed sense of connection with the world, with other people, with spirit and overall sense of meaning and purpose*. They hold the potential to heal symptoms such as depression, anxiety, lack of focus, alienation, PTSD, OCD, to name just a few, on a much deeper level than current conventional psychiatry can realistically hope to do.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://transformdrugs.org/blog/drug-decriminalisation-in-portugal-setting-the-record-straight>