Magic Mushrooms' Psilocybin Boosts Mental Health for Years in People with Cancer

A single dose of the psychedelic compound combined with psychotherapy continues to help almost five years later.

January 29, 2020 By Benjamin Ryan

After a short, purposeful trip with psilocybin, a compound found in psychedelic magic mushrooms, people with cancer can experience a long, meaningful benefit to their psychological well-being. That's according to newly published long-term follow-up data from a 2016 study that showed that a one-time treatment with psilocybin combined with psychotherapy was associated with significant improvements in emotional and existential distress in this population.

An estimated one third of people diagnosed with cancer will develop anxiety, depression and other forms of psychological disorder as a result.

A research team led by Stephen Ross, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at New York University Langone Health, gave 29 people with cancer nine psychotherapy sessions and a single dose of either psilocybin or an active placebo. The placebo contained niacin, which can produce a physical flush sensation that mimics a psychedelic drug trip.

Seven weeks after the first round of treatment, the two groups switched so that those who had initially received the placebo received psilocybin and vice versa.

The original 2016 paper, published in the Journal of Psychopharmacology, found that psilocybin led to an immediate, substantial and sustained improvement in the participants' levels of anxiety and depression. Other benefits included a reduction in cancer-related demoralization and hopelessness, better spiritual well-being and improved quality of life.

The first paper reported on six and a half months of follow-up. By that point, psilocybin was still associated with lower anxiety and depression, with some 60% to 80% of the participants in the two study groups experiencing sustained reductions in these outcomes as well as less existential distress and ameliorated quality of life and attitudes toward death.

The new paper, published in the same journal, includes data from follow-up appointments that a

subset of the participants made about three years and again four and a half years after their treatment with psilocybin. Even at these points, the treatment was associated with lower anxiety, depression, hopelessness, demoralization and anxiety about death.

Again, 60% to 80% of the two groups of participants had clinically significant improvements in their depression and anxiety after four and a half years. Seventy-one percent to 100% of the study members said psilocybin led to positive life changes and characterized the treatment as one of the most personally meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

Researchers are still trying to understand how psychedelics can have such positive effects on human psychology. They theorize that psilocybin in particular can induce greater flexibility in the brain, leaving it more open to new ideas and ways of thinking.

The authors of the new paper caution that people should not expect psilocybin to have positive effects on their psychology if they use it on their own. Instead, the drug should be taken in a controlled and psychologically safe setting and ideally should be paired with mental health counseling from a trained professional.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read the study abstract, click here.

To learn more about magic mushrooms, click here.

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