

How to navigate Utah's 'wild West' of psychedelic-assisted therapy options

Legalization and diminishing stigma result in psychedelics becoming more mainstream — and Utahns have choices.

By PAIGHN HARKINS

The psychedelic medicine renaissance is alive in Utah: Ketamine clinics abound. Medical cannabis is available for delivery. Utah researchers continue to study how LSD and drugs like it can be used to treat depression and other conditions.

The state Legislature this year also legalized psilocybin and MDMA to be used as treatment for mental health issues in its two largest hospital systems and gave more protections to religious groups, like The Divine Assembly, whose members use such drugs as sacraments.

It all means Utahns have options — though some are better (and more legal) than others.

"There's a lot of trepidation. There's a lot of excitement. There's just a lot of emotions as we go into this kind of unknown," said Andrea Hanson, founder of the Psychedelic Society of Utah. "What is the future going to look like here?"

Hanson said the goal is a safe, patient-centered approach that also honors the drugs' historic, spiritual role in Indigenous communities. She acknowledged that some worry legalization will mean the drugs become synthesized, or that the psychedelic experience could become too sanitized in a clinical setting.

But ultimately, she said, all sides of the scene — "the researchers, the gurus, the shamans" — can learn from each other about the best way to help patients.

"It will be an ongoing conversation," Hanson said.

The organization's first formal conference to discuss these issues was held this spring. As the landscape evolves, here's what speakers wanted those interested in psychedelics to know.

INFORMED CONSENT

Whether pursuing these drugs in a research, clinical or spiritual setting, make sure you know what you're getting into before taking any drugs.

That includes understanding what the therapeutic process entails, how it could make you feel, what it could make you see and how it may interact with other

conditions, such as high blood pressure.

In traditional medical settings, informed consent could look like paperwork outlining how much a procedure is going to cost, said Autumn Kunz, founder and part-owner of Rabbit Hole Wellness. She said providers should expand on this, letting patients know that in addition to all the possible benefits, psychedelic medicine might not work for them and could "stir up problems you've buried away."

At Anew Therapy in Midvale, co-founder Ashlynn McCarter said informed consent is about patient education: letting them know what an out-of-body experience can be like and how they may feel afterwards — and letting a patient opt out if they don't feel ready for that.

"And we're talking every day about how we can improve it, because you can't do enough, right?" McCarter said. "Because if you don't have a baseline for what this experience is going to be like, you need to get to some type of baseline."

CONSIDER THE SETTING

Wherever you decide to go — make sure it feels safe.

Emily Bullock, a licensed clinical therapist who founded Great Salt Lake Medical, said many of her patients have experienced trauma that holds them in a state of distress, and having a psychedelic in a place that doesn't feel safe could do more harm than good.

"If people feel safe, and then they get into a psychedelic [state], that's one of the factors that will help them experience what they need to experience," Bullock said.

This could look like the soundproof, earth-toned, cozy rooms at McCarter's Anew Therapy, or a private space, like your own home. It often doesn't look like a music festival with hundreds of people you don't know, Bullock said.

It's also worth talking to others who have gone through their own experiences with the clinical and spiritual side of psychedelics who can make recommendations about what worked for them and which providers they liked, Hanson said.

"It's so hard to know what your options are, and to have the conversations you



Tia Johnson, left, a nurse practitioner, holds up a tablet showing the vitals of Andrea Swensen, a physician's assistant student, as they demonstrate how a client is continuously monitored during a session at Anew Therapy, a ketamine clinic, in Midvale on April 24.

need to be having around these experiences, unless you have some kind of community," she said.

These conversations are especially important in Utah, where Hanson said many have trauma from "leaving a high-demand religion" and can be particularly susceptible to being taken advantage of.

Drugs also aren't the only option to heal, Kunz said. Breathwork, yoga or Reiki energy practices can also be beneficial.

WHERE TO ACCESS PSYCHEDELICS

Ketamine therapy and medical cannabis are the most readily available psychedelic medicine options.

Utah ketamine clinics operate much like doctor's offices, accepting referrals or curious patients who call for more information.

There is also a state-sanctioned medical cannabis program, and the Department of Health and Human Services provides a step-by-step guide for applying for a cannabis card online at medicalcannabis.utah.gov/patients.

Those interested in being part of research trials can typically register on a provider's website or ask for more information from that provider. Numinus, for instance, keeps a list of ongoing research on its website at numinus.com/clinical-trials and allows would-be patients to apply there.

Joining a church is also an option. The Divine Assembly sells membership cards and grow-your-own-sacrament kits on its website at thedivineassembly.org.

While it could likely be a year or more before Intermountain Health and University of Utah Health begin offering MDMA and psilocybin treatments, Hanson recommended contacting those organizations for updates on the program and how to receive information once providers are closer to rolling out those services.

In the meantime, Hanson said she is working on building a directory of "fully vetted personnel who are offering legal, above-board psychedelics." Those interested in that list may sign up for the group's newsletter for more information on the group's website at psychsocietyutah.org.

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