



TRIALLING TREATMENT: Simon has no regrets over his experience

# Could taking a trip cure depression?

I'M LYING on a mattress on the floor, watching the ceiling turn into a doorway made of thighbones. Outside, a row of trees is growing into monsters, but I'm not scared. How can I be? I don't even know who I am – I've just ripped up my name and thrown it into the fireplace.

I was at the end of a journey that began a few years ago when I decided I wasn't going to take antidepressants any more. I'd been taking pills from the same family as Prozac for 15 years to help with panic attacks, and they had worked but I no longer wanted to be a slave to the daily dose.

Yet each time I came off I was plunged into depression that forced me back on to them. Finally, two years ago, I made it through the awful side effects of withdrawal.

Meanwhile I had been noticing studies into the medical possibilities of psychedelic drugs – LSD, MDMA, ketamine, psilocybin (magic mushrooms) and so on.

One at Imperial College London had shown remarkable changes in the brains of people with depression; work at several US universities had produced very

encouraging results for people suffering anxiety. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University in the US last year called for psilocybin to be reclassified from dangerous narcotic to treatment for depression.

What's more, it seemed these results could come from even single doses taken in controlled, therapeutic conditions. And the great weight of evidence suggested that psilocybin was safe.

I'd never taken psychedelics, and it was easy to be scared by them being included in the common narrative of illegal drug-taking. But I asked myself could it really be worse than the prescription pills I'd relied upon and found excruciating to come off? No, I decided.

I wasn't depressed but I'd had spells of anxiety since kicking the pills, and the psychedelic research excited me so much that I wanted

to see what it might do. Which is how I came to meet 10 fellow participants and a Psychedelic Society therapist in an Amsterdam "smartshop".

We were, we discovered, regular people from all over the world who were all excited and anxious. We each bought two boxes of High Hawaiian truffles in plastic tubs like small-portion olives, costing 20 euros a pop. The label read: "Never consume more than one box".

Later, at a retreat centre 60 miles away in the Dutch countryside, we introduced ourselves as part of a programme of sharing and exercises designed to create a wonderfully safe-feeling environment.

We were told how the truffles were specially grown in controlled laboratory conditions. The therapeutic possibilities I had read about were discussed, although the

staff were careful not to make any specific promises. We were to have our own experiences.

The following day we pummelled the truffles to the consistency of peanut butter, then gathered in a room with mattresses and duvets on the floor, each with a name tag, eye mask and empty mug. We put the paste in our mugs and poured on

hot water to make a "tea" to drink. It tasted nutty. We drank and refilled twice more, although there wasn't much psilocybin left by the third infusion.

Soon most of the group had put on their eye masks and laid back, wearing looks of joyous wonder. Next to me my roommate began vomiting. Opposite, a Greek woman was upright, being comforted by the therapists.

I couldn't relax; was the anxiety syndrome that had, in part, brought me there, stopping me tripping? I asked for an extra half-sachet of truffle. It did the trick. Two cups later it appeared the wall opposite me wasn't actually there. I put on my mask and got lost in a blue fantasia of swirling, interlocking, expanding patterns.

Sections of the trip were like a sudden lift on a roller coaster. The first was alarming; the world elongated, moved

away from me. But after seeking reassurance from a therapist, I allowed myself to become joyously lost in the music being sequenced to trigger a variety of emotions.

Suddenly I wanted to move, so I got my phone and headphones and went outside to dance to loud rock 'n' roll. I was triumphant: I hadn't turned into a hippie!

I came back to my mattress, ripped up my name tag and threw it in the fireplace. "I ripped up my name! Who am I?" I write in my notebook. "I am my own child."

There were periods when I had profound feelings about people in my life; periods when I thought of painful episodes but knew that, like the monster trees, they had no power; periods when I chatted lucidly. But don't ask me how long each of these lasted, nor in what order.

Time was hard to pin down. At no stage did I feel out of control though: I knew I shouldn't risk jumping on the trampoline in the garden, for instance, however much fun it might have been.

After five hours people were coming down. But I was still



TOP SHOP: The meeting point

tripping and had stomach cramps. "I get it now. And I would like this to be over," I wrote in my notebook a little later, then I was sick again, felt better at last and my seven-hour trip came to an end.

Yet I was still feeling strange the next morning when we shared what had been a unique and profound encounter for us all. This day was invaluable to help process what we'd been through. Some had had

revelations – about how they wanted to live, or to change the way they treated their children, for instance. None of us, even those who'd had tough parts to their trip, emotionally or physically, regretted the experience.

The therapists say it can take many months to feel all the effects, but several weeks on I know already it was one of the most amazing experiences of my life, with profound insights.

I have since had extraordinary moments of total joy that have come out of nowhere. I've also had no problems with anxiety or low mood, but I know not to infer anything definitive from that. Only time will tell. But I'll say one thing: there has been no difficult come-down. And that certainly can't be said about my experience on those never-again prescription pills.

● The Psychedelic Society ([psycdelicsociety.org.uk](http://psycdelicsociety.org.uk)) offers retreats at a standard price of £850. There is also a low-income price. Truffles (£35) and taxi fares are extra. Eurostar ([eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com)) return tickets from London to Amsterdam start at £45.



HIGH TEA: The truffles had a profound effect

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