

Psilocybin

Continued from A1

"You don't realize how bad your vision is until you put those glasses on," he said.

PSILOCYBIN AND TRAUMA

Jarvis is not alone in his struggle. Thousands of military veterans struggle with a host of mental health issues. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Depression. Anxiety. Suicide. According to the VA's 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, there were 6,146 veteran suicides in 2020 — an average of 16.8 each day.

Inundated with thousands of patients, Jarvis said the VA often relies on prescription medication, even when it might not be the best choice.

"I know what I need for my mental health. Antidepressants are just not a part of the equation," he said. "I know my needs better than anyone."

Jeff, a firefighter for a city in Deschutes County, said that while therapists can help people recognize patterns in how they operate, psilocybin lets people make those connections for themselves.

Jeff asked that the *Redmond Spokesman* withhold his last name because he was concerned his use of psilocybin could affect his job as a city employee.

After using psilocybin to deal with trauma from combat and his job as a first responder, he said it's like putting aloe vera on a burn and getting instant relief. The benefits, he said, continued for months after taking a dose.

"It's totally a relief to have access to medicine and treatment without being dependent upon it for the rest of your life," he said.

He said psilocybin opens a layer of self-healing and makes it easier to accept your experiences. When exposed to trauma, people often push those memories away and wall them off in their minds to protect themselves from pain and hurt. Psilocybin, he said, lets you go to those places and process the trauma.

"It makes you completely aware not only of what's going on inside of you but what's going on around you," said Jeff.

TREATMENT

Psilocybin treatment is typically an internal experience, said Dr. Vicki Kalira, who lives in Bend and is the acting medical director for Addiction Recovery Treatment Services at the VA Northern California Health Care System.

For veterans like Jarvis and Jeff, psilocybin can put them in a contemplative state and



James Jarvis in the forest with his converted school bus that he lives in near Bend.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

let them interact with their thoughts, feelings and experiences — rather than relying on the assistance of a therapist.

"They're having their own epiphanies or insights in that experience," she said. "They are just going through the process and most of the time no one is saying anything."

Usually, treatment involves multiple preparatory meetings with a medical provider and facilitator to determine dosage and to go over what experiences participants may have. In the majority of treatment sessions, Kalira said that participants lie on a couch in comfortable clothing. They might be under a blanket with an eye mask on and listen to music that can aid in the experience.

She said that preparation is critical to the experience. Much of the treatment is tied to what a patient brings to the session and the environment where the session takes place.

"Both are important to psychedelic work," she said.

Kalira said most participants do one to two preparatory sessions before consuming orally psilocybin at a treatment center, but that the number of sessions depends on the facilitator's recommendations and the participant's history.

Once preparation is over and treatment is underway, the participant will start to experience effects in roughly 20-30 minutes. While participants are not functionally impaired by psilocybin, there can be laughing, crying or feelings of joy. Some may feel anxious or paranoid, but these symptoms are discussed beforehand.

While everyone can have a different experience, participants might see visual or auditory hallucinations — things that aren't real. Colors can look more vibrant, solid objects may look distorted or participants might see geometric shapes and patterns.

If participants feel uncom-

fortable during the 4-6 hour experience, a facilitator will help them with calming techniques like deep breathing. Sometimes, all it can take to make someone more comfortable is a glass of water or getting up to use the bathroom.

After the session, facilitators, therapists, peers and coaches can help participants integrate their experiences and help solidify insights. This may look like journaling or engaging in physical activity such as hiking. How long the integration stage lasts depends on the individual, she said.

Kalira said psilocybin is not for everyone and it is currently not recommended for those with a personal or family history of psychosis or those who have bipolar disorder.

Kalira said there is limited data about strong adverse events. Most bad experiences, she said, is due to taking large doses, consuming psilocybin with other substances, not taking it in the correct setting or not following up afterward.

She said there is evidence psilocybin can help with a wide range of issues, including depression, migraines, alcohol use disorders and cluster headaches. According to a 2020 study from Johns Hopkins University and a 2022 study from the University of California, psilocybin can alleviate symptoms of major depressive disorder.

This may come, she said, from psilocybin's ability to help people look at things differently. "That is the crux of it," she said. "...It is an agent that is able to afford you a different perspective."

According to Kalira, psilocybin seems to target serotonin receptors in the brain and increase the brain's cognitive and psychological flexibility.

"A lot of the way we see the world is colored by our experiences," she said. "When people take psychedelics, those defenses are interrupted."

Kalira said indigenous cultures have used psychedelics like psilocybin for centuries and that psilocybin treatment is not a novel concept.

FINDING PEACE

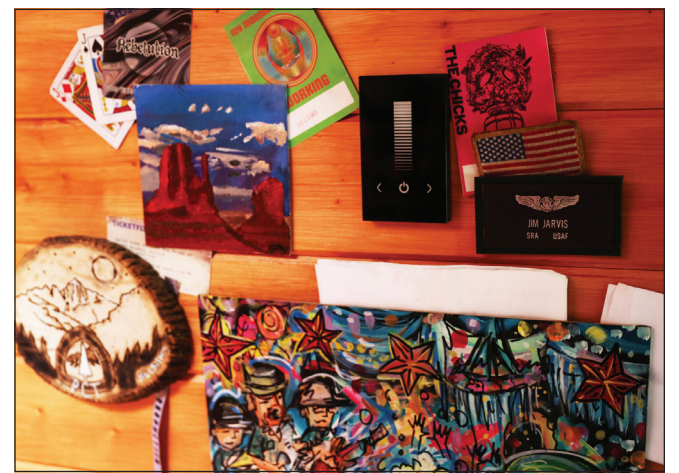
Adam Leary is an Army veteran from Redmond who served three tours and is currently an eighth-grade teacher at an online school. Leary said he has taken psilocybin a few times and that has been helpful. He said it created an introspective experience and let him reach parts of himself that he normally couldn't access.

"(Psilocybin) is something you can take and then can process trauma," Leary said. "It's therapy, but on steroids."

Leary, who was shot in his right leg during his service, said there needs to be an all-hands-on-deck approach to the mental health issues facing veterans. The opposition to the psilocybin measures in Redmond and Bend, he said, mostly comes from fear and not understanding the research behind the psychedelic.

"Even if it helps just a small percentage of the mentally ill people who take it," Leary said, "I think it'll be worth it."

Jeff, the firefighter, said combat and military service take their toll. But he said psi-



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Memorabilia on the wall of the converted school bus where James Jarvis lives near Bend.

locybin has helped everyone he knows who has used it in a therapeutic setting. He said it is a risk to go public with his experiences, but that he was willing to speak out due to its potential to help veterans and people who are hurting or suicidal.

"I never imagined that I'd know so many people who have succumbed to their own wounds to suicide," he said. "This is me crying out."

After trying psilocybin, James Jarvis began microdosing regularly by ingesting small amounts of the psychedelic every morning with his coffee. Although using psilocybin outside of therapeutic centers is not legal in Oregon, Jarvis said everything seemed a little more vibrant and he was able to think in a different way when he used them.

Now he hasn't taken any psilocybin for a few months but says he still sees the benefits.

"I feel better," he said. "Anxiety kind of dissipates, it goes

away, it helps you completely reframe your mind and see things from a different perspective than you would before."

Now living in a sky-blue renovated bus, Jarvis still has trauma behind his eyes. But he says he has found a way to cope.

At home, his military ID tags hang next to handmade ceramic mugs. On another wall, a military patch hangs next to a wood cutting to memorialize hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. There is also a painting he made, inspired by a road trip in Utah.

The painting was a turning point in his depression. It let him open up, be vulnerable and allowed him to be okay with making mistakes.

Now, he said it reminds him of how far he's come.

"It reminds me ... I am free to choose what I want to do with my life," he said.

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