

STATE & NATION

PSILOCYBIN

More states consider legalizing psychedelic mushrooms

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Stateline.org

Alex Jones says a trip in Jamaica saved her life. Not a trip to Jamaica: a hallucinogenic trip in Jamaica.

Severe depression had descended on her at age 10, and stayed there, relentlessly, for the next two decades. She couldn't work, couldn't bear the sight of herself in the mirror, and for days on end could barely lift herself off her couch. The temptation to end it all was always at the periphery.

"I felt like I was the walking dead," said Jones, who is now 34.

She endured hours of talk therapy and rotated through 30 different drug regimens. She underwent light therapy and then dark therapy. She tried an experimental ketamine nasal spray and then a ketamine infusion. She underwent rounds of electroconvulsive therapy and sleep deprivation. She submitted to transcranial magnetic stimulation, where she wore a big helmet equipped with magnets.

None of it worked, or at least not for long, and some brought severe side effects. Doctors told her she was "treatment resistant," meaning seemingly beyond help.

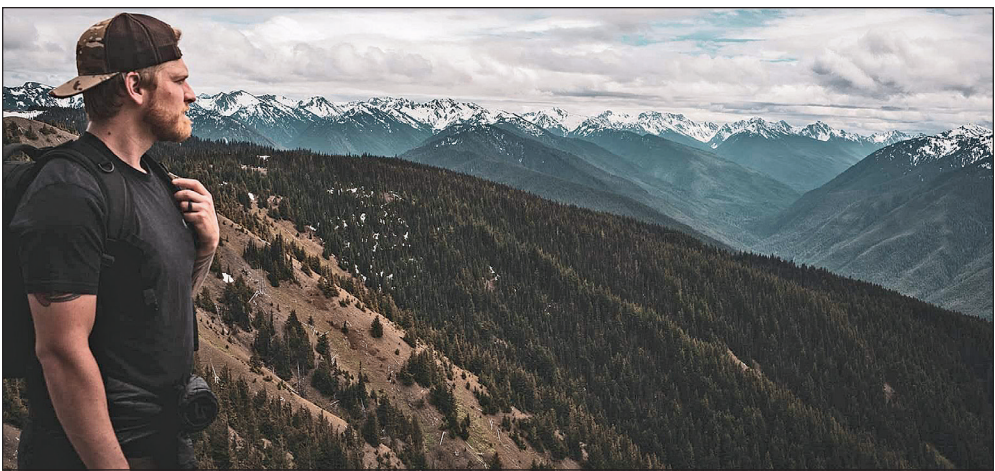
But in 2019, she happened upon a "60 Minutes" report on clinical studies showing strongly encouraging results in using psilocybin, a psychedelic agent derived from mushrooms, to treat patients with depression, anxiety and addiction. Outside of the trials, the treatment was not available in the United States, where psilocybin remains illegal under federal law.

Jones booked a one-week stay at a Jamaican retreat. There, under supervision, she underwent three psychedelic mushroom sessions, followed by sessions with "facilitators" on the island and on her own for months back home in Tacoma, Washington, unraveling the psychedelic trips she had experienced.

What she discovered was that she felt better. Much better.

"It woke me up," she said. "I was alive. I was me again. I could see the beauty in the world. Even the physical changes were surprising. The next day after my first dose, I was charging up sand dunes. Before that, I had a hard time going up the stairs."

With research showing promising results for patients, lawmakers in other states and cities also are considering loosening psilocybin restrictions. Oregon became the first state to le-



Corey Champagne, a Marine Corps veteran from Washington, stands in Olympic National Park last year. Champagne traveled to Peru in 2021 to take psychedelics, which he said helped relieve his anxiety and depression. Several states might legalize psychedelic mushrooms to help treat medical conditions.

galize therapeutic use of psilocybin after voters approved it in 2020. A few other states want to legalize psilocybin treatment for all adult patients, while others want to limit it to veterans or others with PTSD. Other states have formed task forces to study the issue.

Studies in recent years have found that psilocybin and other psychedelics can have beneficial effects for a variety of mental health and other conditions such as PTSD, anorexia, chronic pain, fibromyalgia and addiction.

In 2018, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration named psilocybin a "breakthrough therapy" in treatment for severe depression, a designation the agency applies to drugs that in early trials demonstrate substantial improvement over existing treatments.

Not everyone is ready to give mushrooms the go-ahead. In written testimony in February to the Maine joint legislative committee overseeing health and human services, which was considering a psilocybin legalization measure, Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, cautioned that there are not yet enough recognized medical standards to ensure the safe use of psilocybin.

"While there may be early evidence for the use of psilocybin to assist in treatment of refractory depression and PTSD, this research is ongoing and there are not currently clinical practice guidelines or FDA-approved treatments to ensure safe and appropriate use of the therapy," he said.

Oregon created a department under the state health authority, Oregon Psilocybin Services, to license and regulate the manufacturing, transportation, delivery, sale and purchase of psilocybin products. Psilocybin will not be sold retail directly to the public like recreational marijuana.

In its budget bill this year, the Connecticut legislature started the process toward legalizing centers in which veterans and first responders could be administered psilocybin and MDMA, a synthetic psychedelic. Some veterans groups have long pushed for making psychedelic treatments available for veterans, particularly those with PTSD.

Texas, Utah and Washington state have set up task forces or funded research into the medical use of psilocybin. Maryland has created a \$1 million fund to study alternative treatments, including psychedelics, for PTSD or traumatic brain injury, and to pay for such treatments for veterans.

Ballot initiatives that would legalize psilocybin are underway in Colorado and California. Last month, the president of the New Jersey Senate introduced a bill that would legalize psilocybin to treat certain disorders.

But even those states that might put a regulatory system in place would not do so in a medical setting, a concern raised by Maine's Shah. The Maine bill, which didn't pass, contemplated psilocybin centers, that, Shah testified, "would function like recreational use facilities rather than medical treatment facilities, puts limita-

tions on the department's ability to regulate safe use, and does not incorporate sufficient behavioral and public health input to the structure."

Proponents say they are comfortable with psilocybin use outside the medical system but with regulation and licensing in place.

Washington state Sen. Jesse Salomon, a Democrat, sponsored a bill this year that would have set up a regulatory system like Oregon's. It would have adopted standards for cultivating mushrooms and processing psilocybin as well as licensing centers and providers who would administer the drugs to patients.

The bill did not move out of committee, but lawmakers appropriated \$200,000 for a task force to study the issue. Salomon said the original bill generated keen interest, particularly during a two-hour hearing in February, during which several veterans testified.

"I got 50 times the interest in this bill than any bill I've ever done," Salomon said. "I had no idea that would happen. I just threw it out there."

The legislative efforts around the country have been propelled by positive clinical studies on the effects of psilocybin.

One influential 2020 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association Psychiatry found that 71% of the patients with severe, previously treatment-resistant depression, showed "clinically significant improvement" that lasted at least four weeks and with "low potential" for addiction. More than half were considered in remission at four weeks.

"I would say at this stage the research is showing that in safe settings, this provides relief from debilitating mental health problems for some people," said Alan Davis, one of the study's co-authors, a neuroscience researcher at Ohio State University and adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research.

Davis said imaging conducted on patients shows that the psilocybin causes changes in the brain, although it will take further study to determine the meaning of those changes. What's clear is that patients felt they had a mystical or spiritual experience during their trips, one that profoundly altered their perspective.

And it's apparent, he said, that psilocybin works on the brain differently than other medicines used to treat psychiatric conditions.

"Regular (psychiatric) medicines don't cure anything," he said. "But with psilocybin, with two or three doses, some people are in complete remission."

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