It seems the rest of the world has now caught up. Documenting recent scientific trials and his own experiments, US journalist Michael Pollan took the idea of psychedelics mainstream last year, with his bestselling How to Change Your Mind. Australian author Liene Mairiety of Big Little Lies fame, also touched on the subject in her latest novel Little Voices, set at a cutting-edge (and slightly creepy) wellness retreat. Closer to home, Australians are going to extreme lengths to access these drugs, whether for therapeutic or healing processes, or just to find their way back to a better version of themselves.

Grace (who asked not to be identified by her actual name) has suffered from constant negative thoughts about herself, and was through these circles she began to learn more about the ancient Ayahuasca brew, a tea made from the leaves of the Banisteriopsis caapi vine and the Psychotria viridis leaf.

Two years ago, she decided to come off the medication and try a more natural antidepressant. Immediately, 64 per cent saw improved symptoms after taking the psychedelic, compared to only 27 per cent who took a placebo.

Psychedelics come with relatively few physical side-effects compared to traditional antidepressants, taken by many Australian Dr Stephen McEntyre, a lecturer at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia and a founding member of non-profit psychedelic research group Psychedelic Research in Science & Medicine (PRISM). Most of the drugs used to treat depression, including MDMA, the active ingredient in ecstasy, can be neurotoxic, but generally only in very high doses. And LSD is known for being difficult to overdose on, something that’s hard to say about other drugs we use regularly today, including alcohol. As many of Australia’s traditional non-psychoactive medicinal plants come with their own list of potential side-effects, from low libido and erythromelalgia to nausea and insomnia.

“Most negative side-effects from psychedelics aren’t because of the drug, but due to its use in an illicit environment,” says Dr Bright. “If these drugs are taken in a clinical setting with pure products, most of those harms are controlled.”

It’s an important distinction to make, particularly given Dr Bright stresses, it’s still therapy that does the hard work.

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Until these treatments are available in controlled settings with trained practitioners, they’re not something Dr Bright recommends. “If people are doing it in an unregulated environment, it could be dangerous,” he says. “With these drugs, the environment does more than reflecting their mental health.”

This is something that 29-year-old Melissa Warner knows well. She’s the education and communications officer at Mind Medicine Australia, a charity that helps people work through mental health issues, including the St Vincent’s trial. Warner is studying neurocognitive processes at the University of Melbourne when she became interested in...
psilocybin can offer a new kind of paradigm shift to how we approach and treat mental illnesses but also wellbeing – and that's something that we as a society desperately need.”

“Psychedelics suggest it can alter people's neuroticism, one of the five key personality traits scientists have traditionally thought were fixed throughout a lifetime.

One advocate of microdosing is Amanda Feilding, Countess of Wemyss and March, and founder of the Beckley Foundation in the UK. She's widely known as the driving force behind the psychedelic renaissance: it was her foundation that helped fund the first brain scans of research subjects under the influence of LSD.

Now aged 76 and running the institute out of her family manor in Oxfordshire, she's made no secret of regularly experimenting with psychedelics and being blown away by their incredible potential to improve cognition and creativity.

“I've always used myself as a test subject,” says Feilding. “Psychedelics can offer a new kind of paradigm shift to how we approach and treat mental illnesses but also wellbeing – and that's something that we as a society desperately need.”

She says microdosing is one of her favourite ways to take the drug. It's something she did often in her 20s, and found that it gave her a much greater edge in creative pursuits and also mental tasks. She's now funding several controlled trials aiming to properly test and understand exactly how the process works, and how it can be optimised.

“My current hypothesis is that it basically changes your brain in the same way as a full dose but to a much reduced extent. So instead of really shaking your brain's control system you're just slightly nudging it. It's like a psycho-vitamin,” she says.

But Feilding also warns against self-experimentation, especially with the amount of rogue substances out there. “What we need now is much more quality research to work out what these drugs can do and how we can best harness them,” she says.

While the current research is already offering hope to many with mental health issues, it's still only the beginning. There are dozens more studies in the works on psychedelics, involving addiction, anxiety and mental sharpness.

Feilding would also like to test whether the drugs could benefit the ageing population and alleviate some of the symptoms of dementia and Parkinson's disease.

It's been almost 50 years since the war on drugs shut down research on these curious substances. That's long enough for most of us to forget they were ever more than the backdrop to the free love and good vibes of the 60s. But perhaps now scientists finally have the tools to study what the drugs can do and explore their possibilities for good.

“I compare taking LSD to being a good rider of a powerful horse,” says Feilding. “In the right, carefully controlled, setting and with the right intention, you could use the psychedelic to achieve whatever you want.

“In my case back in the 60s, it was enhancing cognitive function and wellbeing and vitality, but we don't yet know what the real potential is. I thought then and I still think now that's an amazing ability for humanity.”

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