



Greer and Tolbert administering MDMA: Exploring feelings, not altering perceptions

## Getting High on 'Ecstasy'

This is the drug that LSD was supposed to be, coming 20 years too late to change the world. It is called MDMA—or "Ecstasy"—and users say it has the incredible power to make people trust one another, to banish jealousy and to break down the barriers that separate lover from lover, parent from child, therapist from patient. Yet unlike LSD, it does not also break down one's ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, so that it appears free of many of that drug's unfortunate side effects. A New York writer who tried it compares it to "a year of therapy in two hours." A Benedictine monk from Big Sur, Brother David Steindl-Rast, says "a monk spends his whole life cultivating the same awakened attitude it gives you." Of course, not everyone is taking it for the insights it provides. It has become popular over the last two years on college campuses, where it is considered an aphrodisiac. Drug-abuse clinics have begun to see kids who take a dozen or more doses a day to achieve an amphetamine-like high. Apparently the nation is on the verge either of a tremendous breakthrough in consciousness or a lot more kids too strung out to come in from the rain.

**Thinking:** Ecstasy is another drug that has escaped from the laboratory into the streets. It began in the 1970s as a therapy (like LSD did in the 1950s) and was picked up by healthy people because it felt so good. Although the drug has never received FDA approval, a handful of psychiatrists—about 30, according to one authority—either make it themselves or have it custom-manufactured within their own states. A larger number of therapists are believed to obtain it clandestinely, and these same underground sources, rumored to be in Berkeley, Calif., Cambridge, Mass., or Colorado, sup-

ply the pills and powder that people take in their living rooms. Ecstasy is not a hallucinogen, and it doesn't interfere with thinking. It is not a "party drug," or one to help you get through your 47th rerun of "Casablanca." Most recreational users take it with friends. They say it relaxes inhibitions and enhances communication—and sex, though they insist that is not the point of it.

Chemically, MDMA—methylenedioxy-methamphetamine—is related to both the amphetamines and mescaline, and especially to a potent stimulant known as MDA. Until recently it was of no particular interest to the Drug Enforcement Administration, but with the recent upsurge in street use, the agency has proposed listing MDMA as a "Schedule I" controlled substance—the category for drugs with no accepted medical use and a high abuse potential, including heroin, LSD and MDA. Therapists fear this would make it virtually impossible to continue using it, even experimentally, and they protested the proposal—catching the agency by surprise. The doctors working with MDMA have been, if not secretive, at least discreet. Says DEA pharmacologist Frank Sapienza: "We had no idea psychiatrists were using it." The therapists will have their say at hearings in three cities this summer.

**Logjams:** The therapists familiar with MDMA are a little vague about its precise benefits. "It helps people to get in touch with feelings which are ordinarily not available to them," says Dr. Lester Grinspoon, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "It appears to help people [recall] things from their past... If this is an accurate picture, you might just be able to break up some logjams in therapy with it." Dr. Rick Ingrasci of Cambridge, who has given

the drug to more than 500 patients, says he finds it most useful in "healing fear," citing one woman with a phobic dread of infections who was cured in one two-hour session with MDMA. A Santa Fe psychiatrist, Dr. George Greer, says the drug "makes it easier to look at the issues in your life and it brings about a quality of acceptance." Greer and his wife, Requa Tolbert, a psychiatric nurse, use it mostly for couples, and "more for people who want to learn about themselves for personal growth" than for treatment. Greer has done one of the few published studies on the drug, involving 29 patients. He reported numerous benefits including euphoria, increased energy, greater self-esteem and less use of alcohol and other drugs. Impressionistic results like that only emphasize how untested MDMA really is.

**Abuse:** The therapists report almost no negative side effects when MDMA is taken under supervision; although, like all amphetamines, Ecstasy is probably bad for people with circulatory or heart disease. Most also seem to agree with Grinspoon's Harvard colleague Dr. Norman Zinberg, who says he has never seen "a single bad reaction" to MDMA; "it has quite a low potential for abuse." Nevertheless, the street kids of San Francisco have figured out how to abuse it, according to Dr. David Smith, director of the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic. It is available on the street, in gelatin capsules or as a loose powder that is sometimes mixed with juice, for between \$10 and \$30 a 100-milligram dose. Says Smith: "I'm seeing people in detox who are taking 10 to 15 doses a day." The therapists agree that some controls are needed over MDMA—but they still want it available for clinical use.

There is, however, another school of thought, which holds that MDMA ought to be made available for everyone to use. It is the drug of choice of those who identify with the global consciousness and romantic ecology of the "New Age" movement. The Earth Metabolic Design Foundation, a New Age think tank in Berkeley, is backing several research projects on the drug and hopes to have results for the DEA hearings. "I guess," said Rick Doblin of the foundation, "you can say it's part of a social movement." Ecstasy promotes an emotional union with the world at large that users say stays with them long after the drug itself has worn off. This leads some of them to conclude that if everyone took it the world would be a better place. They are aware of the irony that many of the same claims were made for LSD, but they say MDMA is nothing like acid. Grinspoon believes that the alarm over LSD may have caused people to turn against psychedelic drugs before their value was established. "One of the things that strikes me about the psychedelic story," he says, "is that it is unfinished."

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