AUGUST 2, 2024 / Ecstasy Therapy: How MDMA became medicine

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN — Molly, percocet (AK original)

SEAN: On yesterday's show, *Today, Explained* reporter Haleema Shah wanted to talk about ecstasy.

HALEEMA: That's right, because the FDA is currently considering making ecstasy, or MDMA, something that you can use in psychotherapy for PTSD. A very old idea that was floated as early as the '80s.

SEAN: But then the DEA got involved and they were like, "No."

HALEEMA: Yeah, and now in 2024 it seems like there's a sea change happening, because conservatives in Congress as well as Fox News hosts are throwing their support behind MDMA-assisted therapy.

*<CLIP> FOX BUSINESS: LISA KENNEDY MONTGOMERY, HOST: I will scream it from the mountaintops. People should have access to this treatment.*

HALEEMA: And a lot of it is because of the testimony of veterans who say that this helped heal their PTSD.

SEAN: And you spoke to some veterans.

HALEEMA: I did. And that's coming up on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

SEAN: OK Haleema, let’s get to it. You spoke to some veterans who want the government to legalize MDMA assisted therapy.

HALEEMA: I did, and one of those veterans is Jonathan Lubecky. He's a retired Army sergeant who was deployed to Iraq in 2005.

JONATHAN: There's a lot of people that were on my base that never stepped foot outside the base that have severe PTSD, simply because of all the raining bombs.

SEAN: Hm.

HALEEMA: And Jonathan notices his mental health deteriorating while he's still deployed.

JONATHAN: There's a thing called Patriot Clinic where you can go talk to anybody at any time. What they told me is actually true for a lot of people, like you're in a combat zone and you're going to freak out a little bit. They're like, when you get home, things should get better.

SCORING IN — Rusted Robot

HALEEMA: But when he gets home in 2006 things don't get better. And a heads up to our listeners, we’re going to discuss suicide in this episode.

JONATHAN: My wife of eight years was gone, moved in with someone else. My dog was gone. My house was empty. I took a taxi back to my house. And within two months of getting back, actually, in the early hours of Christmas 2006, after going to a church, after going to Womack Army Medical Center, was the first time I tried to take my life.

SEAN: Oh no.

HALEEMA: Yeah. So Jonathan said that was the first of five suicide attempts. There was so much day to day agony of just living with PTSD.

JONATHAN: It's very bizarre when your brain betrays you. There were certain things that that would be very triggering for me whether I wanted them to be or not. One of them was if I saw people dressed in traditional Muslim garb in the United States, especially if they had a backpack. Because people dressed like that in Iraq were a threat. I cognitively knew, like, this is a perfectly fine person. This is wrong. But it didn't mean it didn't trigger me.

HALEEMA: He even said like fireworks would send him into a closet with body armor and his service dog. Crowds were off limits. It was even hard for him to be at family events.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Hm. What does he do other than, you know, taking shelter in a closet?

HALEEMA: Yeah, he tried a lot of things through the VA. He tries cognitive behavioral therapy. He tries exposure therapy. He gets the maximum dosage of Zoloft, which is a first line SSRI for this. And for some people, this treatment regimen really helps. For Jonathan, it help some, but not enough.

JONATHAN: I don't fault the VA. I mean, I've had some bad doctors at the VA, but I've had some fantastic ones. The problem is VA doctors can only do what they’re allowed.

HALEEMA: Jonathan said he was the type of patient his doctors feared getting a call about. They weren’t sure he’d make it. And he tells me that one day, when he was hospitalized after his fifth suicide attempt, an intern slides him a piece of paper and tells him to put it in his pocket.

JONATHAN: And so I walked out and I opened it and it said Google “MDMA, PTSD.” So I did.

SCORING IN — Strictly Minimal

HALEEMA: It was 2014. Millennials were taking Molly at music festivals, but the psychedelic renaissance was not what it is today. Jonathan learns about a clinical trial for MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD. The trial is organized by a group called the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies. MAPS was founded in the 1980s by a guy named Rick Doblin, and he has a very utopian way of speaking about psychedelics. This is from his *TED Talk*.

*<CLIP> RICK DOBLIN: Psychedelics gave me this feeling of our shared humanity, of our unity with all life. And I felt that these experiences had the potential to help be an antidote to tribalism, to fundamentalism, to genocide and environmental destruction.*

HALEEMA: Doblin is a political scientist by training. And his political strategy to make psychedelics like MDMA acceptable is to prove to the FDA that it’s medicinal and a specific population needs it.

*<CLIP> RICK DOBLIN, MAPS FOUNDER: To bring psychedelics back from the underground, it was necessary to first off, have a patient population that general public is sympathetic with and for which Big pharma's drugs are not really working.*

HALEEMA: His team said was not available for an interview. But on Marianne Williamson’s podcast he told her why veterans are the target population, even though other groups face PTSD too, like women:

*<CLIP> RICK DOBLIN, MAPS FOUNDER: Women who’ve been sexually abused or raped or domestic violence, and they’re sympathetic as well. Not quite as much as the veterans. But that’s how I chose MDMA for PTSD.*

HALEEMA: So Jonathan enrolls in a clinical trial and becomes part of a cohort of veterans who receive this novel PTSD therapy amid really alarming rates of veteran suicide and at a time when Doblin and MAPS are trying to make their case to the FDA.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: OK so what is this clinical trial experience like?

HALEEMA: It starts with screenings and an intake process with trial therapists. There’s always a male and a female one – which is an old protocol put in place after a psychiatrist was sued for sexual assault in an MDMA session back in the 80s. So there’s always two trial therapists today, and Jonathan reported to the first session at the trial site with them.

JONATHAN: It was a tiny house on Scott Street in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. That was converted over into an office space.

HALEEMA: MAPS has a certain way of doing psychedelic assisted therapy trials: you do one session with the pill, then three sessions called “integration” where you unpack that experience with your two therapists. One session with the pill, then three sessions of integration. And then for a third time, one session with the pill, three sessions of integration. So at his first session with the pill, Jonathan first gets his vitals checked and is hooked up to a bunch of monitors. Because MDMA comes with some risk – rapid heart rate, blood pressure increase, teeth grinding, chills, sweating, things like that. And once all of those monitors are set up, the pills come out.

SCORING IN — Feeling Fine

JONATHAN: I was so hoping this would be like The Matrix: blue pill, red pill. And I get to pick one. But no, it's a little green pill. It takes like 40 minutes to kick in. Just sitting there with my eyes closed and I start seeing wavy graph paper and I’m like “Well, I guess this is kicking in now!” And then there’s a bit of “this is awesome, I totally get why people do this now.”

SEAN: <laughs>

JONATHAN: I have described it as doing therapy while being hugged by everyone who loves you in a bathtub full of puppies licking your face.

SEAN: <laughs>

HALEEMA: And throughout the experience, Jonathan says he feels this sense of safety with his therapists that he hasn’t felt before.

JONATHAN: Being in the military, you don't go talk to the shrink.

HALEEMA: Yeah.

JONATHAN: So I had tons of trust issues with mental health professionals—that didn't exist.

HALEEMA: Scientists think that sense of safety comes from decreased activity in the amygdala—the part of the brain that controls the fight or flight response. And what Jonathan describes the rest of the experience as “getting to work.” Processing the trauma. The things that made it hard to move through day to day life.

SCORING OUT

HALEEMA: And after this one-time trial, Jonathan told me he has never again attempted suicide. He still goes to therapy and life still tests him…but he tells me he feels so healthy, he’s gone back to a warzone.

JONATHAN: That's part of a blown up Russian tank from the front lines. That's an artillery shell fired by the Russians.

HALEEMA: So what he's showing me are things that he got on the frontlines of Ukraine. After he completes the trial, he begins volunteering in Ukraine in a combat zone to basically show that his mental health is not fragile, that he's not afraid of relapsing.

JONATHAN: And so I decided to go down to the front lines and get a shot at just to prove it.

SEAN: That's bananas. But how do we know if it was the MDMA or all the therapy he had once the MDMA like opened them up to, you know, sharing all of his ish with these doctors.

HALEEMA: So according to MAPS literature, you do need both and one without the other is not enough. In a later stage study after the one Jonathan was in, there was a placebo group, and they didn’t show the same results. Which brings me to the other veteran I talked to.

ARI: My name is Ari Polivy. And people call me Ari.

HALEEMA: Ari was a Marine Corps pilot. And one night, towards the end of his deployment—he was trying to land a plane during the Battle of Mosul while avoiding rocket fire. And then literally weeks later, he finds himself at home in a completely different world.

ARI: So I came home, that February 2017. <voice breaks> I came home to a newborn son. He was four months old, so I was flying all those missions with my wife at home, and then all of a sudden, I'm, I'm coming home from this and I'm injected into a four month old son that, I-I didn't know how to be a dad.

HALEEMA: So Ari's focused on bonding with his son, his new role as a parent.

ARI: You’ve seen the movie The Hangover?

HALEEMA: I haven’t.

ARI: You haven’t. okay.

ARI: Well Zach Galifianakis, he wears a baby in a baby carrier.

HALEEMA: Okay.

ARI: And I watched that movie a number of years prior. So when I thought about being a dad, that was like my…I can't wait to carry my kid in one of those baby carriers. I thought they were funny looking. I thought they were cool.

SEAN: I get all of my life lessons from *The Hangover* trilogy.

HALEEMA: Well, one day, Ari is, you know, channeling his inner Zach Galifianakis, and he's on a walk with the baby in the carrier, and he starts experiencing this incredible discomfort in his chest.

HALEEMA: Well, one day, Ari is out on a walk with his baby and he starts experiencing this incredible discomfort in his chest.

SEAN: Oh, no.

ARI: It felt like fire ants kind of biting at my chest. It was really, really uncomfortable.

HALEEMA: He finds out he has nerve damage. But his wife is also notices something else.

ARI: She describes some of the moments of like, you know, sitting and playing with my son and not having any emotion on my face whatsoever, not laughing at the funny moments.

HALEEMA: Ari starts to do research on PTSD and pretty much self diagnoses himself. And like Jonathan, he first seeks out VA help. It doesn’t work for him. Then he tries talk therapy on his own—he tries yoga, experimental therapy that uses a magnetic field to stimulate brain function. That doesn’t work for him either. It’s 2020 and MAPS is doing late stage clinical trials. Ari gets in. And he reports to the basement of an apartment in Brookline, Massachusetts. It's a similar deal to what Jonathan had: a cozy space, a pair of therapists, and a pill.

ARI: We’re talking, some of the emotions started coming out. I started crying, and I started having this kind of out-of-body experience. Feeling sensations and becoming aware of sensations that I arguably had never felt before.

SEAN: Didn't Jonathan describe this experience as like, puppies and rainbows or something? Like, what is going on with Ari?

HALEEMA: Yeah, he, he's having an incredibly different experience. And people do cry and get emotional and have cathartic experiences on MDMA. But the reason Ari is experiencing what he is is because he's not getting MDMA.

SEAN: Oh.

HALEEMA: He's getting placebo.

SEAN: Okay.

HALEEMA: But the placebo effect doesn’t last.

ARI: At the second session, there was nothing. Like there was no crying. There was no out of body experience, there was nothing.

HALEEMA: And he's just like, something's off.

ARI: So I actually kind of accused them. I said, hey, I got the medicine at the first session and you guys messed something up. I didn't get it at the second session.

HALEEMA: He knows that he's not getting the MDMA. I mean, he's just like kind of sitting there. And that's a very big deal because about 75% of placebo participants in that study were able to correctly guess what they got.

SEAN: Hm.

HALEEMA: And that's an issue because when a participant knows whether or not they got the drug, you can't be sure if it was their expectations or the pill that kind of dictated the experience.

SEAN: What did it mean for Ari, though? I mean, he had this emotional experience, even on the placebo. Does that mean that this treatment helped or this lack of a treatment, this experiment?

HALEEMA: Even though he doesn't get the actual MDMA as part of the study, he gets a lot of time with two therapists who he really respects. And that, combined with some other changes in his life, bring him some relief. It also motivates him to figure out some way to try psychedelics for himself. So he goes on a really intense retreat in Mexico where he experiments with some other drugs, and then when he comes home he also gets another chance to participate on the MDMA side of the MAPS trial.

ARI: I went through psychedelic assisted therapy, and while the psychedelic itself is a hot topic, my opinion is that it's the full process, the therapists, the preparation, the integration, and what you do afterwards that has the power to heal.

SCORING IN — Swing Line (APM)

HALEEMA: So Ari comes out of this experience a believer just like the other veteran we heard from, Jonathan Lubecky. But for Jonathan, MDMA assisted therapy sets him on a completely different journey.

SEAN: Huh.

HALEEMA: If you Google the word veterans and psychedelics like his name will inevitably come up. He sort of becomes MDMA’s Republican whisperer.

SEAN: Oh!

JONATHAN: Because Republicans aren't going to buy it from the hippies.

SEAN: <laughs> Who are Republicans going to buy it from?

HALEEMA: They're going to buy it from a veteran. Who…

SEAN: Oh like, buy, buy the testimony. Not like buy the drug. <laughs>

HALEEMA: No, no. I’m really glad we cleared that up.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>

SEAN: *Today, Explained*!

SCORING OUT — Swing Line (APM)

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> Future’s “Mask Off”*

*FUTURE: Percocets (Ya), molly, Percocets (Percocets)*

*Percocets (Ya), molly, Percocets (Percocets)*

*Rep the set (Yee), gotta rep the set (Gang, gang)*

*Chase a check (Chase it), never chase a –*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Haleema Shah. Haleema, when we left off. Jonathan, the veteran, is like in the middle of advocating for MDMA as a treatment for PTSD. How is that going for Jonathan? That sounds like a, like a tough path.

HALEEMA: It is. But I mean, he's really made a career out of doing this. He's very dedicated to this because he even moved to Washington, D.C., so that he can do this work. I actually met him at his apartment in what's kind of known as the Republican corner of D.C. You know what we're talking about.

SEAN: <laughs>

JONATHAN: So I can, you know, end of a rough day, come up here and relax and smoke a cigarette. Until they built that building, you could sit and see the Pentagon. Crystal City, which is where all the defense contractors are, and the Capitol. So you could actually see the entire military industrial complex from the roof.

SEAN: Dreamy view. <laughs>

HALEEMA: I mean, he says his work now is really about changing hearts and minds, he tells me. And his goal is really to like cleanse psychedelics of their old reputation and association with hippies.

JONATHAN: And frankly, that's part of the problem and why we don't have access. The government is reactionary. They reacted because of the actions of the counterculture. And to be blunt, like when you drop acid and say, let's go blow up some ROTC buildings after this orgy, the government is going to do something about it.

SEAN: <laughs> Did that happen? Did anyone ever blow up a building after an orgy?

HALEEMA: <laughs> Look, I just have no way of fact checking that.

SEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

HALEEMA: But the point he's trying to make is that MDMA is in that lineage of countercultural psychedelics like LSD, which boomed and busted with the hippie counterculture. And he thinks that if that association sticks, it'll never become an FDA-approved medical intervention.

JONATHAN: Health insurance will never cover it. Medicaid will never cover it. Medicare will never cover it. The VA will never cover it.

HALEEMA: Jonathan wants increased access to MDMA, but he’s not down with policies we saw in the past decade that increased access to marijuana.

JONATHAN: I see decriminalization as horrible.

HALEEMA: Why is that? Because I know that's MAPS’ position.

JONATHAN: I know.

HALEEMA: And that's a lot of people's position in this community. Like, that does put you at odds with a lot of MDMA advocates.

JONATHAN: Yeah, because this was never about medicine. Decrim, by its very nature, has nothing to do with medical or mental health or any of that. Decriminalization is a criminal justice reform movement. And personally, I can get someone out of jail tomorrow. I can't bring someone back to life after they kill themselves.

HALEEMA: So when we're talking about psychedelics, we are talking about a group of compounds associated with the antiwar movement, very critical of the military industrial complex.

JONATHAN: Mhm.

HALEEMA: And now it's come back into its second life. And the main defense for it is: veterans need it.

JONATHAN: Which is interesting because when you actually work in this community, the anti-military is very prevalent throughout the whole community. I'll be honest, I didn't understand what microaggressions and tokenism was until I was a veteran working in the counterculture.

HALEEMA: Say more.

JONATHAN: The snide comments, being told, “just say what we want.” Things like that. I don’t care about parties, I don’t care about festivals, I don’t care about Burning Man. I care about saving people’s lives.

SEAN: Hm. Is he talking about this group we've been talking about? MAPS? The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies. Are those the people he thinks what… like don't actually care about how he feels or what he thinks?

HALEEMA: So Jonathan did not say MAPS specifically is trying to Trojan-horse psychedelics to approval, but it has been criticized by some veterans, for kind of using veteran testimonies to sort of push forward this broader agenda of drug legalization, of recreational psychedelic use. And from my research, I can tell you this, none of which is a secret. MAPS is rooted in counterculture. It's been a fixture of Burning Man for years.

SEAN: Mmmm.

HALEEMA: Doblin speaks proudly of opposing the Vietnam War, his mission for mass mental health and spiritualized humanity. And for a lot of people, there's nothing wrong with that goal. I mean, drug decriminalization is a racial and criminal justice imperative for many, indigenous groups have used psychedelics for ritual and ceremonial purposes for centuries. But Jonathan says those things are not his goals. They're objectives that are sort of waiting in the wings, hoping to ride the coattails of a PTSD intervention that's very reliant on the testimonies of veterans.

SEAN: So, is it working? I mean, has Jonathan accomplished what he set out to do here, has he helped push this movement forward?

HALEEMA: Well if you look at attitudes towards psychedelics, it does seem like they are increasingly positive. More than half of Americans who have mental illness say they want more access to them. And psychiatrists increasingly favor legalizing these drugs for medical use. Which suggests that the medicinal narrative has support among patients and clinicians.

SEAN: Okay, so there's public support for psychedelics as medicine, as treatment. There are PTSD patients who need it, want it, who will travel to Mexico for alternatives. And there's some very convincing veterans, like the one we heard from making the case to Congress. Aside from the hippies and like the New Agey vibes. Is there a lot standing in the way of MDMA assisted therapy?

HALEEMA: At the beginning of 2024, if you asked me that question, I would say no. But I am not so sure anymore.

SCORING IN — Imaginary Landscapes

HALEEMA: Because last June, there was an FDA independent advisory panel that met and recommended that the agency does not let this treatment go public. There were lots of different reasons that came up, and it ranged from the double blinding problem we talked about to cardiovascular risks, to therapist misconduct and allegations that there is actually bias in the data of these studies.

SEAN: Hm.

HALEEMA: And the FDA doesn't have to listen to its advisory committee, but it usually does. And on top of that, there are trial participants who say they came out of the trial worse than when they started.

SARAH MCNAMEE: I think that there are really, really big problems with the way these trials are conducted, and so I asked the FDA to conduct an investigation.

SEAN: Uh-oh.

HALEEMA: And we'll hear from one of those participants next week.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Wow. Next week?! I guess this is like TV now.

SCORING IN – Watercolor sunrise

SEAN: Haleema Shah! She reports and produces at *Today, Explained*. She was edited by Lissa Soep and Matthew Collette; fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers.

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The rest of us are: Avishay Birthday, Hady Mawajdeh, Amanda Lewellyn, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Peter Balonon-Rosen, Denise Guerra Patrick Boyd, Amina Al-Sadi, Miranda Kennedy, and Noel King.

We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]