

MDMA: A SOOTHING BALM FOR A SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Lisa (to contact author, email: info@maps.org)

“If we want meaning in our lives, we can find it in the depth of our questions, the depth of our answers and the necessity to care for one another.” – Carl Sagan

“One dose in the right setting improved the rest of my life in profound and subtle ways.”

MDMA can soothe the pain and terror that still gnaws at a person’s core for years...even decades...after sexual assault. One dose in the right setting improved the rest of my life in profound and subtle ways. I don’t sit with my arms and legs folded tightly as a signal to stay away nearly as much as I used to. I am in love with a man I trust. And my nightmares have finally changed.

For over twenty years, the dream scenario was almost always the same. I would frantically struggle with numb fingers to lock multiple locks on one side of a door as my attacker on the other side was unlocking them with superhuman speed. Since I took MDMA with the intention of receiving its therapeutic benefit, I no longer wake up feebly gasping the word, “help,” aloud even though it feels as if I’m screaming my brains out with no hope of anyone arriving in time to save me.

Although I had good results with conventional therapy and a short-course of prescription antidepressants, part of me was not fully restored. I’d read accounts of how LSD had been used in therapy before it became illegal, and I’d wondered at times if it might unlock the cogs in my soul that were jammed. The potential of hallucinating—without a firm grasp on reality—that I was again in the presence of the babysitter who molested me when I was seven or the guy who raped me when I was eighteen was too threatening. I just knew I was a bad acid trip waiting to happen, so I turned down a few opportunities to try it when I was younger.

Taking MDMA, commonly known as Ecstasy, was my way of securing the help that didn’t arrive when I was little or overpowered. And it worked. For me, Ecstasy was sanctuary—a few hours in the safest place I’d ever been.

I had heard a few anecdotal accounts from acquaintances about what the experience was like for them. Like most people probably do at first, I assumed it was a feel-good party drug—a less sinister cousin to cocaine. Something too risky and illegal for me to even consider. I was well into my

professional life before I learned that dozens of therapists used MDMA successfully as a supplement to therapy in the 70s and 80s for a wide range of clinical applications.

So, at the age of thirty-six, after not even being in the same room with any drugs since grad school, I set out to self-treat myself in the best situation available at the time.

I wanted so badly to turn the whole evening into an “all about me” therapy session. I had fantasies about the kind of experience I’ve since heard referred to as the “sacramental use of empathic substances.” Something very new-agey and ritualistic. But considering that others in the group had never tried it before and those who had didn’t want to spend the evening getting in touch with my feelings (even though they’re all very decent people and supportive friends), I decided it would be far too selfish and actually rude to demand special attention.

As unique as the evening seemed at the time, this next part will sound like a bit of a cliché. We took a cab to an underground club. It was my first and only rave. It wasn’t a huge gathering in the desert or in a derelict warehouse. It was just a big basement downtown packed with kids and an enormous sound system. I had only agreed to go after we made a plan to leave early enough to spend time just talking and listening to music back at home.

I knew I’d be half a generation older than most of the other people at the club. So, I wasted a ridiculous amount of time worrying about things like whether or not I’d stick out because I was wearing the wrong shoes. A friend who knew this scene assured me that no one there could care less about my footwear. I had no idea how right she was.

I was starting to feel really out of place and somewhat threatened when we descended the first set of stairs to a table where a young girl and a bouncer-type were selling tickets. It was the familiar feeling of losing access to all the exits—of being profoundly trapped. I paid my fifteen bucks, and as she reached out to

stamp my hand, the girl gazed up at me and airily sighed, “She’s beautiful.” Her comment was so welcoming. Of course, I suspected it was drug inspired, but nevertheless my self-consciousness began to diminish from that point on. I had a comforting feeling that the people here wouldn’t judge me harshly.

After watching the dance floor for a few minutes, we noticed about seven people huddled together in a conspicuous group hug. I turned to my friends and said smugly, “No way in hell that’s going to be us.” Little did I know.

I noticed that an organization dedicated to promoting safety in clubs was on duty here

“MDMA can create a safe way to confront deep fears with a lasting benefit that extends beyond the high.”

making sure water, cooled rooms, and educational literature was available. Feeling reasonably well-protected by my friends, I went ahead and swallowed one pill from a batch that we brought with us that checked out as okay on an Internet rating site and had passed a chemical screening test. And then I waited...

I’m not going to try to describe the sensations of the high. There are lots of other sources for first-hand accounts of what MDMA feels like—especially on the Internet. Some accounts focus on the physical experience while others try to convey the emotional or spiritual significance they discover.

Beyond the high, there are three ways in which the drug helped me cast off some of the lingering trauma I’d been suffering for years.

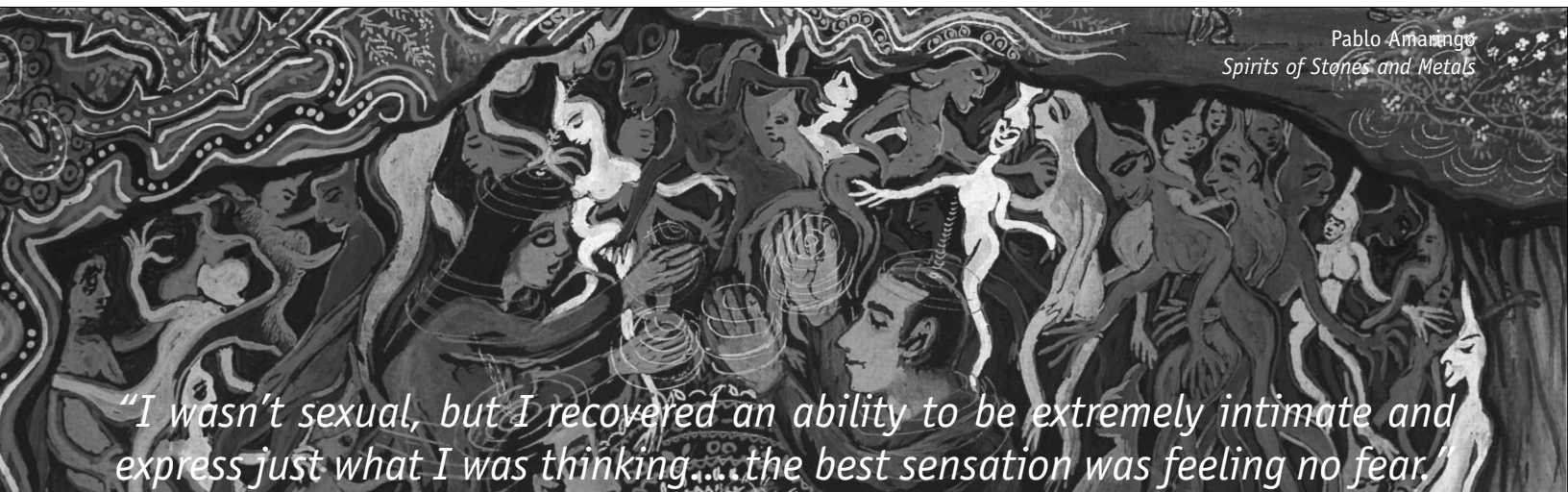
The first new awareness that came to me was social. I noticed a stark contrast between this club scene and the one I knew from my youth. When I went out dancing in high school and college, everyone dressed to

impress...usually all in black. We wore pouty scowls, acted coolly indifferent, and danced with self-conscious awareness about whether or not we were “doing it right.” And there was an ever-present “meat market” vibe.

With MDMA, the conquest mentality gets replaced with a desire to connect on a much more friendly and dignified level. It was indescribably healing to be in a male-dominated crowd and never once have the sensation that I was being ogled, stalked, chatted up, or hit on. And it wasn't because of my age, either. The male attention I received was gentle and appreciative. Periodically, I'd be treated to a fantastical light show when a young man with glow sticks

clined rapidly with the introduction of MDMA into the scene in England. For the same reasons that sworn enemies from rival soccer clubs became peaceful ravers together, I think the prevalence of male violence against women could diminish—at least in the short term—as an effect of experiencing the self-love and empathy MDMA can provide.

For this reason, I was greatly saddened when I did a Web search using the words “MDMA” and “Rape” and found only two articles related to the therapeutic benefits for rape victims. All the others either directly or indirectly lumped MDMA into the Date Rape Drug category, giving what I believe is a false impression that sexual



“I wasn't sexual, but I recovered an ability to be extremely intimate and express just what I was thinking... the best sensation was feeling no fear.”

would politely approach me and wait for an indication that I would enjoy such a treat. After about one minute of watching whizzing, glowing lights all around my field of vision with rapture, we'd exchange an appreciative smile, and then he'd move on to share the great sensation.

I believe that only a percentage, probably not even the majority, of people at the club that night were on MDMA. But I think that enough of them have experienced its effects in a meaningful way that propagates a lasting respect for others who are there to enjoy the music, the vibe, and each other...regardless of age, race, or gender. I've read about theories that suggest that soccer hooliganism in Britain de-

predators use it to subdue victims. For many, sexual function is not possible under its influence. In normal circumstances, the mind remains quite lucid and blackouts don't occur. There may be threats—especially to very young women—that I'm simply not aware of. However, I haven't come across any studies that take a serious look at whether MDMA contributes to increased violence against women or if this drug can actually help diminish it.

My second point underscores the validity of the view that MDMA does not impair rational thought. It is not a hallucinogenic drug. And further, it can create a safe way to confront deep fears with a lasting benefit that extends be-

yond the high. And here's how I know:

The other woman in our group had done Ecstasy before, so she was an effective guide who could gently enhance the experience for those of us who were new to it. At the beginning of the peak, she simply ran the tips of her fingers down the front of my forearm as an entirely non-erotic invitation to come out and play. It was her clever way of saying, "See what intense pleasure you're capable of feeling now?" After being locked away in my head, after floating somewhat disembodied without the sensation of feeling my feet on the ground, without ever really feeling sexy due to sexual assault, I was suddenly free.

I started to dance like a belly-dancer and a goddess, like a teenager and whole mature woman all at once. I had been dancing with my eyes closed, with pleasure and enough abandon to draw attention when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder and stopped. I opened my eyes to see a man's face inches from mine, and he was shouting at me to be heard above the loud music. He could have been the stranger in my nightmares.

He had thick furrowed eyebrows, squinty eyes, and a hard set to his jaw. He held one arm behind his back. "Does he have a weapon back there?" I thought. "Is he poised to flash his badge and haul me off to jail?" He continued shouting until I could hear him say, "What are you on?" It's very hard to lie under the influence of MDMA, and I've always been too polite for my own good, so I replied, "No, thank you." Again, he yelled, "What are you on? E? Acid? Alcohol?" I was afraid of being arrested, so again, I said, "No. Thank you." Finally, he revealed that he was holding water behind his back, and then I understood that he was probably a volunteer or someone affiliated with the club trying to prevent dehydration. But could I trust that his

bottle wasn't spiked with something dangerous? Knowing I could get water from my friends, I said, "No. Thank you. I'm fine," just as my friend approached.

She'd been accosted by him too and got the same creepy feeling I did. She comforted me and led me back to the rest of our group. This was the hallucination I had feared when I considered taking LSD, only this was real. I was alone in a situation that should have horrified me, but I stayed calm and when I returned to my group of friends, something very unexpected happened as a result of this encounter. By suddenly being put back into a threatening situation with overtones of the abuse I'd suffered in my youth, I got another chance to ask for heal-

ing, loving help. I felt vulnerable, but my rational mind was guiding me the entire time.

The third benefit was a sort of temporal cocoon that let me determine the personal gain I'd receive from this form of self-

therapy. MDMA gave me a second opportunity to metamorphosize in a way. When I got back to the group, we were all experiencing intense sensations, including the common urge to babble. I wanted everybody to stop, be still, and hug me. And I wanted to hug them too and express kind thoughts. I wanted them to listen to me and speak to me in soothing voices. But everyone had impressions and observations to share, and I didn't want to cause a scene. It felt somewhat similar to not being able to yell out in my nightmares, but without any fear present.

It was so loud in the club that we ended up breaking up in little groups of two or three. Even though we drew our faces near to each other in order to be heard over the music, we still had to shout a little. I gradually became aware that I was using a voice that was familiar

"My preference would have been to be with my therapist in a safe setting with loved ones who were committed to promoting healing."

and yet unlike my natural speaking voice. It was the voice of a little girl. The seven-

year-old me had showed up unexpectedly. The little girl's voice just came out without intention on my part. She was going to speak even if I wasn't. My friends didn't know it, but they were babysitting me for a while there.

For a couple of hours, I had a strong sensation of being little again. I was curious, sweet, precocious, and imaginative. It felt good to be in my body, and I assumed a child's posture and gestures. I wasn't self-conscious at all. I wasn't sexual, but I recovered an ability to be extremely intimate and express just what I was thinking. I was excited and impulsive and confident. I was open to making new friends just because they were people I liked...just like when I was seven. But the best sensation was feeling no fear.

The MDMA sensations wore off slowly and gently, and it had a lingering pleasant effect all weekend. But beyond that, my nightmares stopped and then changed. I had the first one a couple of weeks ago. This time, instead of cowering and screaming behind the unlocking door, I grabbed a tool...a hammer...to fight back. I woke up before I attacked my attacker, but with the sensation that I would bash his head in if I had to.

Why did I have to break the law to receive this healing? Why did I have to take such risks? My preference would have been to be with my therapist in a safe setting with loved ones who were committed to promoting healing. I would

“Why did I have to break the law to receive this healing? Why did I have to take such risks?”

know with the greatest degree of certainty that I was taking the dose appropriate for my physiology. I would want to extend the benefit by having follow-up sessions with my therapist to maximize the therapeutic effect.

I don't plan to take MDMA again, but I have continued to learn as much about it as I can since I made the hard decision to break the law in order to heal myself. Despite all my personal research, I still do not understand why there's been no responsible, FDA-approved clinical testing of MDMA in this country since 1985. The argument that it has no medical purpose is a falsehood. It simply isn't true. We haven't taken the steps we need to in order to secure its tremendous social and personal humanitarian and pharmacological benefits.

We can't know what relief or rehabilitation this drug could offer to schizophrenics, psychotics, rape victims, addicts, gang members, those in chronic pain from disease, grief, or other trauma if scientists and research institutions can not complete credible, unbiased investigations.

We will all find more meaning in our lives when we are finally brave enough to push beyond our timidity and ignorance...when we choose caring for one another as our highest priority. ■

“We can't know what relief or rehabilitation this drug could offer to schizophrenics, psychotics, rape victims, addicts, gang members, those in chronic pain from disease, grief, or other trauma if scientists and research institutions can not complete credible, unbiased investigations.”

want a medical doctor present if rare complications presented. I would want to