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FEATURED

'A transcendental experience': UNM studies death through a psychedelic trip

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Dr. Lawrence Leeman of the University of New Mexico is leading a clinical trial to assess the effects of psychedelics on patients with terminal illness.

Chancey Bush/Journal

Death is inevitable. It needn't be traumatic, say researchers at the University of New Mexico.

Next month, UNM will participate in a clinical trial testing how psychedelics could help patients come to terms with a terminal or life-changing diagnosis.

Researchers will dose patients with a synthetic form of psilocybin, commonly referred to as magic mushrooms. They'll spend about three hours in a room with a therapist and a social worker or doctor who will guide them through two sessions of mind-altering experiences, from which participants often emerge feeling a sense of acceptance about their illness, said Dr. Lawrence Leeman, the director of the study and a professor at the UNM School of Medicine.

Psilocin — the active ingredient in psilocybin — allows the brain to “relax” enough for people to shift their frame of mind and release some of their deeply held anxieties, Leeman said.

“Some people have more of a transcendental experience,” Leeman said.

Psychedelic therapies are becoming more commonly accepted in medical circles as treatment for ailments for which there is not necessarily a traditional cure, Leeman said. Two years ago, he led a UNM study on the effects of MDMA on postpartum mothers struggling with opioid addiction.

Research affirms psilocybin's efficacy for terminally ill patients. A 2023 study on the use of psilocybin to treat depression in patients with terminal cancer found 80% of the participants demonstrated a sustained positive response to the treatment, and 50% showed full remission of their depressive symptoms within one week.

The UNM trial comes several months after New Mexico approved psilocybin for medicinal use. The study is double-blind, meaning both patients and

researchers don't know if a participant is receiving the drug or a placebo. Participation in the study is open to patients with cancer, ALS, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease — conditions that may not necessarily be terminal, but will alter the rest of someone's life.

Deborah Thorne, CEO of Sol Tryp, a Las Cruces nonprofit promoting psychedelic medicine, said she's had several patients with a terminal illness who turn to psychedelics to treat their "profound" anxiety about approaching death.

"The fear of the unknown, I guess, is what most of them worry about," Thorne said. "And often, they'll come back from these journeys and just have this very grounded sense of knowing they're going to be OK."

UNM researchers chose a synthetic version to shorten the duration of the psychedelic effects for patients who may be in poor health and unable to tolerate a traditional psilocybin trip, which can last up to seven hours, Leeman said.

The drug is generally nonaddictive with few side effects, though participants in the study might occasionally face what Leeman calls "challenging experiences" in the midst of their psychedelic journeys. He prefers not to use the term "bad trip" because all sessions are closely monitored by professionals who guide patients through difficult emotions.

"I actually encourage people not to run away from it," Leeman said. "If you go towards it, and go into whatever the pain is, that's maybe the way that it's more healing. It also may just get you through it, because if you think about it, if you're running from whatever these thoughts are, you could be running for a long time."

In April, New Mexico became the third state in the country to authorize psilocybin for medicinal use, after Colorado and Oregon. The state's program likely won't be finalized until the end of 2027, according to the New Mexico Department of Health. But when it is, psilocybin will be regulated for use in patients with treatment-resistant depression, PTSD, substance use disorders, and for end-of-life care.

"The idea is for New Mexico to be a leader in supporting research and training for psychedelic chaplains and death doulas," said Jennifer Clemente, a hospice chaplain in Truth or Consequences. "They'll have the right people and assistance to deliver it once the science can really continue to validate that it works."

The UNM study will begin in September with 10 participants, Leeman said.

"We've had people say, this is like medically-assisted dying, or something," Leeman said. "No, this is more like medically-assisted living."

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MORE INFORMATION

NM begins work on medical psilocybin program, with new law set to take effect



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