

# THE WORK TRIP

*(Or, The Eclectic Workplace Acid Test)*

In hep San Francisco, innovative office workers have found a new way to boost productivity: microdosing psychedelic performance enhancers during their 9-5. But can taking LSD really make you a better employee? To test the theory, one MH writer decided to trial his own weekday trip from the (relative) safety of his desk. This is what happened

WORDS BY TOM WARD – PHOTOGRAPHY BY AGATA PEC



COULD LSD ADD COLOUR  
TO THE MONOTONE  
OF YOUR DAILY GRIND?

# IT'S 10AM FRIDAY MORNING

and as the MH editorial team sits down for its daily meeting, every one of my thoughts is focused on the tab of LSD I've just ingested. None of my colleagues know I've taken it and I am as yet unsure what its impact on my day – my career – will be. This isn't a ploy to lose my job, nor have I simply started the weekend early. If pioneering researchers across the pond are to be believed, lysergic acid diethylamide – LSD to you and me – is simply the latest in a string of unusual products claimed as workplace aids. According to one Harvard researcher, by taking a miniscule amount at my desk I'm opening my brain up to receive ideas, improve focus and sharpen creativity. But this is no mere nootropic. Get the dose wrong, or approach it in the wrong frame of mind, and I may well be freaking out not just at my workload, but at the elephants carrying my P45 in their trunks as they float through my editor's office.

To find out what this means for my – for *our* – workplace prospects, I set out to microdose LSD once every four days, over the course of two working weeks, and record the results. Would I unlock the hitherto untapped potential of my brain, entering a swirling mental vortex in which words fly past my eyes as my fingers spark against the keyboard? Would the Pulitzer board be lining up to canonise my next weightloss feature? And would I finally understand the ending of *Mad Men*? To paraphrase the late psychedelic pioneer Timothy Leary, I decided to turn on, tune in and find out.

## THE MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

LSD has a storied history both in and out of the laboratory. It was discovered by Swiss scientist Albert Hofmann who, after isolating the chemical from the ergot fungus in 1938, accidentally sent himself on the world's first acid trip. "I sank into a... extremely stimulated condition... I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colours," Hofmann wrote at the time.

Hofmann's discovery sparked a flurry of experimentation and by 1947 LSD

was being sold in the US as a psychiatric medication under the trade name Delysid. From the mid-'50s to 1973, the CIA got in on the act, exploring the drug's potential use for mind control, while it was also being used by the American Psychiatric Association to treat alcoholism.

But concerns about the mind-altering properties of LSD and its counter-culture following were growing. In a 1965 edition of *The Harvard Crimson*, Dr Max Rinkel – the first American doctor to work with LSD – was reported as having expressed concern over the long-term effects of the drug: "Rinkel said that the danger of taking LSD outside a hospital was that the size of the dosage and the purity of the drug are uncertain, and the reaction of any individual is somewhat uncertain. He cited the case of a woman who, after taking the drug, tore off her clothes and knelt before a thermostat, which she believed was a crucifix. The experiment was then terminated."

LSD's inevitable ban came five years later, in 1970, when US president Richard Nixon signed the Controlled Substances Act.

The UK's Misuse of Drugs Act followed in 1971. In the UK, LSD is now, along with ecstasy and cannabis, a Schedule 1 drug – defined as one with no therapeutic value and a high potential for abuse. It is highly illegal, along with nearly all research into it.

Yet in the states – specifically the tech seats of Silicon Valley and San Francisco – bored of Bulletproof coffees, biohacking implants and efficiency-boosting fasting, a horde of young technologists are dosing their way to the top. Circuit board whizz Bill Gates is reported to have dabbled, but the lynchpin behind the move toward creative dosing is Dr James Fadiman, a psychedelic researcher and Stanford graduate who advocates taking 10mg – a tenth of a conventional dose – once every four days. According to Fadiman's 2011 microdosing handbook *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide*, the first and second days see a boost in focus, with the third

allowing the mind to settle before the cycle begins again on the fourth. Taken at this dose, LSD's effect is 'psychoactive' as opposed to psychedelic – mind-blowing in a way that won't have you picturing bats swooping overhead. As Fadiman wrote, "The rocks don't glisten, not even a little."

Whether microdosed or ingested at full strength, LSD works by stimulating the 5-HT2A receptors in the pre-frontal cortex, increasing the activity of glutamate – a substance vital to learning – with the resulting sensation mimicking the effect of the release of feel-good chemical serotonin. According to research in the *Journal of Analytical Toxicology*, LSD has a 'plasma half-life' of just over five hours, meaning an entire dose should be cleared from your system inside 10 hours. Contrary to the popular doom-leaden mythos of the '60s and '70s, traces of the drug won't be stored in your spinal column for the rest of your life. Nor can the effects of the drug be accidentally triggered at a later date, turning you into some kaleidoscopic Manchurian Candidate. On a normal, 100mg dose, a 12-hour trip will likely always be the very limit of what your brain endures.

Nor – contrary to popular belief – is LSD chemically addictive: "Before a second dose can have an impact, you need to leave your brain for a while to sort of reset," says Jonathan Liebling,

political director of drug law campaigners The United Patients Alliance and LSD specialist at The Loop. "Because your body can't build up a tolerance, it's almost impossible to become addicted." Add that to the findings of two US studies in 2015 that concluded there is no link between psychedelics and psychosis, and the historic and histrionic outcry about the drug's dangers appear oversold. "The acid is just the trigger that gives your brain a signal to turn up the volume," says Liebling. "Your brain would not respond how it does if it were going to be harmed."

## TICKET TO RIDE

Sourcing LSD in California is one thing. Sourcing it in London – where, according to statistics from the Home Office, LSD usage among 16-59-year-olds fell to 0.2%

**"By midday I'm yet to visualise tangerine trees or marmalade skies"**



## PROGRESS REPORT

*Will microdosing LSD at work have your supervisor readying your P45? MH's deputy editor, David Morton, charts our writer's progress*

Tom is more prone to studied diligence than outbursts of zany banter. So, even though I was aware of his dosing, charting any changes in his 9-5 demeanour was tricky. In fact, by the end of the first Monday, I had forgotten he was 'experimenting' entirely.

But on the second go the effects were more noticeable. Tom enjoyed distinct periods of down-time that split up his work, seemingly thanks to better focus on projects. In meetings, his ideas were less encumbered by overthinking. Which is a trip I'd like to take.

HALLUCINOGENS MAY ONE DAY USURP YOUR MORNING PICK-ME-UP



**33%**  
of subjects reported long-term creative benefits in a 1999 MAPS study into LSD

in 2016 – is an altogether different feat. I tentatively message a friend whose Facebook photos feature variations of him hanging about Indian temples arrayed in patterned sari pants as he gazes lustily at the sunset. He responds almost immediately promising to order my LSD from the 'Dark Web'. Fadiman recommends using liquid LSD, but the only source online is selling 25 250mg vials for £240, which equates to 6230 more doses than I require. There's also a risk that shelling out for that much will land me in trouble with the law, and a certainty it'll land me with some hefty overdraft charges. Instead we plump for 10 tabs for £45, a mere 980 doses more than I'll need. A week later an envelope arrives in the post. I open it to find a folded card labelled "BDSM Porn – Please find your login info and selected vouchers enclosed." Labelling orders in this way is a clever stratagem for avoiding detection, but makes for a possibly relationship-shattering package to open with your girlfriend standing beside you. Finding the brightly coloured tabs of LSD – a Class A drug – inside comes as strange relief.

Next, the tricky part. A single tab of LSD is about a quarter of the size of a postage stamp, and I need a tenth of that. I get the sharpest kitchen knife out and perform a surgical dissection. Never having taken LSD before, I'm apprehensive about getting this right. Even with this feature signed off by my editor (and the company's lawyers), I don't imagine he'll find me tripping balls in the office overly endearing. The next day I meet Liebling for a coffee, hoping he can allay my fears. "The effect of taking 10-12mg will be no different to the sugar in your tea," he says.

"Once you start going for 30-40mg there'll be a noticeable effect and, depending on the person, 75-200mg is enough for a proper trip."

I'm reminded of a Bill Hicks line about people on LSD jumping to their deaths from rooftops, believing they could fly. Birds, Hicks points out, can also fly, but often take off from the ground. In other words, there's no shame in starting slow. Having said that, the roughly 10mg sliver I'm left with is almost invisible. I'd been advised to dissolve the tab in water

overnight then drink the mixture the next morning. I do this, swallowing the tab for good measure. Liebling has told me it will kick in in about an hour, giving me time to navigate the Northern Line in peace. My editor and deputy editor are aware of my drug schemes for safety reasons, but other than that, I'm flying under the radar in an attempt to provoke the most honest reaction from my experience.

By mid-morning I long to write: "I was somewhere around the photocopier on the edge of the office when the drugs began to take hold," but not much seems to be happening. By midday I'm yet to visualise tangerine trees or marmalade skies. Neither am I feeling particularly more focused. I begin to wonder about the vivacity of my acid. Have I ingested a duff batch? Or was the dosage simply not high enough? Remembering Liebling's quantitative advice, I vow to up my intake come Monday.

### DAY TRIPPER

Fresh from the weekend, I swallow 15mg of dissolved LSD before leaving the house on Monday. Without the trepidation of my first trial, I feel happy and focused. My workload is a challenge to be completed, not a mountain threatening to tumble down on me. When writing, the words I'm looking for are at the tip of my fingers, rather than the tip of my tongue. Upping the dosage, it seems, is paying dividends. And this is no placebo effect, either.

In a study last summer, Dr Neiloufar Family, an expert in psycholinguistics at the University of Kaiserslautern, found consumption of LSD has a profound impact on semantics. Family asked 10 patients to name a series of pictures while under LSD. They frequently made mistakes, answering, for example, "train" or "bus" when shown a picture of a car. But while the answers were wrong, LSD had supercharged their semantic networks, allowing related subconscious concepts to come to the surface. "Inducing a hyper-associative state may have implications for enhancing creativity," Family said. The subjects had literally opened their minds.

These findings were echoed last year when the Beckley Foundation (a UK-based, UN-accredited group looking into the "scientific investigation of consciousness") worked alongside former government drug advisor Professor

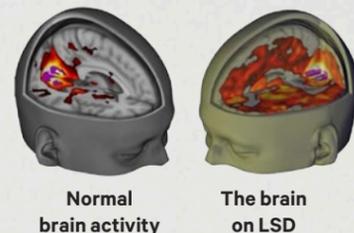
102

LSD discoverer Albert Hofmann lived to this age after taking trips throughout his life

OPENING A NEW TAB IS THE SHORTCUT TO ENHANCED FOCUS

### YOUR BRAIN ON DRUGS

Think that LSD's psychedelic effects are all in the mind? As this brain-imaging study from the Beckley Foundation proves\*, you'd be absolutely right. By stimulating the visual cortex, microdosing LSD allows for integrated communication between neural networks. Just show your boss this picture, OK?



David Nutt and Dr Robin Carhart-Harris of Imperial College London to record the brain activity of subjects under the influence of the drug. It was the first legal LSD trial in the UK in over 45 years and the results showed an inarguable increase in brain activity.

"Taking a psychedelic reduces the blood supply to a brain network called the 'Default Mode Network,'" Beckley Foundation founder Amanda Feilding explains via email. "The DMN controls what enters our consciousness, and by reducing its influence, psychedelics allow other brain areas to communicate with each other, resulting in a freer state in which new thoughts can arise." Carhart-Harris has dubbed this "a more primitive style of cognition" and hopes further research will allow us to bring the secrets of the unconscious mind "into an observable space."

As Monday draws to a close, I remain focused and invigorated. The first time

I look at my watch it is already past 5pm. Instead of feeling frantic, my thoughts are calm. At the weekend I'd felt a similar level of focus when running around my local park. Just as in the office my mind did not wander, while running I was able to focus on the task at hand without my mind convincing my body that it was time to head home after the first few miles.

### DOORS OF PERCEPTION

Despite my experiences, for many, getting slightly ahead at work may be insufficient recompense to mitigate the risks of obtaining and self-administering a Class A drug. According to political lobbyist Liebling, herein lies the problem. What recent evidence there is on LSD may be optimistic, but given the drug's illegal status, research – when it is permitted to take place at all – can be tied up in years' worth of red tape. The auspicious use of psychedelic agents in relation to problem solving, for instance, was first studied

as early as 1966. Some 50 years later, researchers are only marginally closer to understanding its postulated potential.

But cognitive enhancement is just the corner of the tab. LSD is thought to have other, substantial implications in the clinical sphere. Carhart-Harris believes that by "disrupting stereotyped patterns of thought" it could be used to combat conditions that adhere to rigid mental patterns, from addiction to obsessive-compulsive-disorder. Feilding believes that by encouraging communication between different areas of the brain, LSD could prove "extremely valuable" in combating age-related neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's. And a 1988-1993 study carried out by the Swiss Medical Society for Psychedelic Therapy found that cancer patients combining LSD with talk therapy felt anxiety about their illness improve by 20%.

Where LSD treatments are likely to have the most impact, though, is in the treatment of depression, as Ayelet

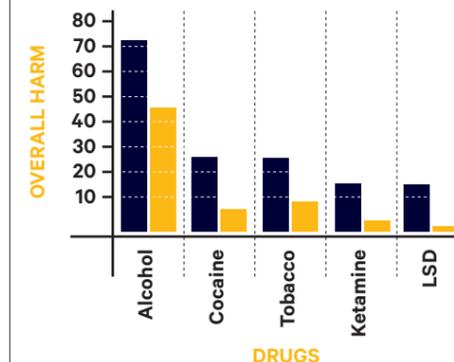
Waldman – an Israeli-American author and journalist – explores in her new book *A Really Good Day: How Microdosing Made A Mega Difference In My Mood, My Marriage And My Life*. Following Fadiman's 10mg principle, Waldman explains how microdosing saved her life at a time when she was regularly Googling "the effects of maternal suicide on children".

In her book, Walman quotes research in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, which found that among a cross-section of Americans, psychedelic use is correlated with a 36% reduction in suicide attempts over the course of a year. Speaking to MH via email, Waldman enthuses about the potential of LSD: "Its effects were immediate. It enhances neuroplasticity – the ability of your brain to grow and

"Were LSD made legal tomorrow, I would certainly lay in a supply"

### FEELGOOD HIT OF THE SUMMER

When it comes to potential harm to the user (black bar) and those around them (yellow), LSD ranks lower than most weekend indulgences, as studies from research body DrugScience demonstrate



change. And it increases one's ability to focus without the side effects of stimulants like Ritalin or Adderall."

Such was my experience of the drug. Throughout the course of my experiment I remained stimulated but without the need to constantly refill my coffee mug, or the somewhat manic mental tremors that overloading on caffeine can entail. Nor, as the drug wore off, did I experience an unpleasant comedown. The tide receded gently over a few days without any sudden decline in my abilities. Friends have previously self-administered Ritalin to help them work, but LSD, to me, equals a calmer and more natural stimulus.

Were it made legal tomorrow, I would certainly lay in a supply to be used in the face of any particularly daunting deadlines. It would save me money on coffee, too. For his part, Liebling believes that with a growing acceptance of the medical applications of marijuana, the argument against using illegal drugs as medicine will soon crumble, leaving the door open for LSD to be thoroughly analysed.

And if the idea that we may soon be microdosing at our desks seems fanciful, it's worth remembering that the practice isn't anything new: "Before LSD became illegal

I discovered that taking small amounts regularly can enhance cognitive abilities without interrupting your perception," says Feilding. "It seems to shake you at a deeper level; your thoughts become more exciting and the network of associations becomes wider, increasing enjoyment and wellbeing." And that, to me at least, sounds preferable to just another day in the office. ☺

\*IMAGE USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE BECKLEY FOUNDATION (BECKLEYFOUNDATION.ORG) ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAHAM WALSER AT HEARST STUDIOS