

Cannabis and PTSD: Holistic Healing For Survivors Of Sexual Violence

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Guest Writer

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Cannabis shows promise of truly holistic healing for survivors of sexual trauma as a tool for physical, emotional and spiritual recovery from PTSD.

TW: mentions of sexual assault, PTSD

By Ashley Keenan

We are failing survivors of sexual assault and sex-based violence with a lack of holistic treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD disproportionately affects women and BIPOC; female survivors are 50% more likely to experience PTSD immediately after their assault and are 94% more likely to have those symptoms over the course of their entire lives.

Recovery from sex-based violence is highly individualized as symptoms can manifest biologically, psychologically, and sociologically. Survivors of sexual assault are more likely to develop PTSD than veterans from war-based combat. Yet despite the prevalence of the disorder, conventional treatments are not always effective and often come with negative side effects.

Enter sweet lady Jane. Cannabis shows promise of truly holistic healing for survivors of sexual trauma as a tool for physical, emotional and spiritual recovery from PTSD. Scientific and anecdotal evidence is mounting that medical marijuana, or its preferred name cannabis, may help treat the various symptoms of PTSD. What makes this discovery so interesting, though not fully proven, is that it *might* be possible for cannabis to treat both the physical and psychological symptoms of PTSD.

The Endocannabinoid System and PTSD

Studies show that PTSD causes dysregulation on all major systems in the body including the neural, endocrine, and immune systems. Not so coincidentally, these happen to be the same systems that medical cannabis has shown preliminary evidence of regulating. Cannabis contains hundreds of therapeutic compounds called cannabinoids, commonly known examples being CBD and THC, which interact with the human endocannabinoid system. Our bodies utilize cannabinoids through CB1 and CB2 receptors clustered throughout the body to regulate pain, memory, appetite, sensory perception, reproduction, inflammation, autoimmune response, and hormone regulation.

Scientifically speaking, data is still in the preliminary stages and the evidence simply isn't there to make any conclusions about cannabis as a medical treatment for PTSD just yet. One promising analysis showed that survivors who used cannabis were less likely to experience suicidal thoughts. However, most other evidence thus far has limitations like bias, sample size, and long term analysis. Aside from data collected from surveys or anecdotal evidence, most of the clinical research available has been conducted on mice, not humans. The legal framework is still changing around the world, in many places, cannabis remains illegal causing significant barriers to clinical research. As more research is approved and conducted there will be a more clear analysis of what cannabis can and can't do.

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A Tool for Empowerment and Healing

"Healing isn't just about the initial assault or abuse, trauma creates ramifications in all aspects of your life," shares Danielle Jackson, CEO and Founder of Cannatherapy. "Sexual assault affects everything; self-worth, interpersonal relationships, and how you perceive the world." Jackson, affectionately known as Miz D, has seen firsthand how cannabis can aid in the healing of sexual assault and rape. In 2004 she started Cannatherapy, holding seminars, events, and retreats to educate people on the healing effects of cannabis.

"I see cannabis as a major tool in my toolbox, it is so powerful because it's so versatile. Even when I didn't realize it yet, cannabis has always been therapeutic for me," shares Jackson. She explains that as a tool, like meditation or yoga, cannabis can help survivors navigate the internal aspects of treating sexual trauma. In her work with cannabis and healing, Jackson encourages individuals to look within, noting that the plant can provide an emotional buffer between self and the trauma. At Cannatherapy, the plant is used as a catalyst for self-healing. Jackson shares that cannabis helps alleviate symptoms of PTSD, resolve feelings of shame, ease intrusive thoughts, and help build a safe space for survivors to reclaim their power.

In her interview, Jackson emphasized how important conversations about cannabis and healing are in particular for BIPOC communities. "Disenfranchised and marginalized groups bore the brunt of prohibition and it has left our community fractured. There is a lot of shame and misinformation about the plant, as a result sometimes community leaders are afraid to advocate for consumption," she says. Jackson shares that her experience with cannabis always held heavy stigma and shame for her, which led her to believe that there were two different kinds of cannabis; the "fun" kind and the "serious" kind. She shares that when communities are stigmatized and criminalized for so long, it's difficult to wrap their head around using cannabis as a medical treatment.

Navigating Impairment, Consent, and Safe Space

The key to using cannabis as a therapeutic tool is creating a safe environment in which to consume. Cannabis consumption for self-healing, especially regarding issues of sexual assault, should be approached as a personal and private affair. Jackson recommends consumers first understand their personal relationship with cannabis before even thinking about introducing it into a sexual relationship, and even then, should only be done with a trusted partner.

If someone is new to cannabis, they first need to understand what the feeling of “high” is, as every experience is different and what works for some might not for others. Jackson shares that while “start low and go slow” is vague advice the core lesson of pacing oneself is important. She suggests trying different methods of consumption, such as vaping, edibles, smoking, lubricants, topicals, etc., to see what works best.

There are multiple ways to use cannabis to facilitate healing, according to Jackson, including reclaiming power through orgasms. “I always tell people ‘take a hot bath and get to know yourself.’ Sexual trauma disassociates us from ourselves and one of the most profound ways to reclaim our power is to dictate our own terms of pleasure,” explains Jackson. Using cannabis and masturbating can be an act of healing, helping survivors reconnect with their bodies and sexual autonomy. Rediscovering pleasure isn’t just about orgasms either, it’s also about joy – sometimes that means surrendering to a fit of hysterical laughter. “Don’t underestimate the power of finding that bliss factor,” Jackson says explaining that cannabis has the potential to help make healing fun. “Those deep, full-belly laughs are just as healing as any orgasm.”