A Possible New Role for A Banned Club Drug

Afghanistan. Critics are outraged, saying the trials could legitimize a dangerous substance. (The drug's reported possible side effects include paranoia, seizures and heart attacks.) But Rick Doblin, head of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a nonprofit in Sarasota, Fla., that is bankrolling both trials, says it's about time. "I think there's a cultural opening taking place," he says.

For abusers, ecstasy's lure is its mind-altering effect—the very quality that also interests scientists. At the PTSD trial in South Carolina, each patient gets 125 milligrams of MDMA, about the same as the average street dose. Antidepressants are the conventional treatment for PTSD, but they can take weeks to start working. Ecstasy takes effect within 30 minutes and lasts three to five hours. "Our hypothesis is that MDMA lowers fear and increases trust, a combination that allows patients to revisit trauma in a therapeutic way," says principal psychiatrist Michael Mithoefer.

Just ask Marcela Gomez and Sue Stevens, two women who used MDMA in underground therapy. Gomez, 47, a rape victim, spent years suffering from panic attacks. Ecstasy, she says, helped her express her fears more openly. "MDMA lets you open a door and not be traumatized," she says. In 1995, Stevens, now 36, and her dying husband, Shane, used MDMA to explore why they were wasting their last months fighting or not talking at all. The couple were lucky through the experience, occasionally telephoning a therapist for guidance and calmly planning Shane's funeral. "It wasn't like after drinking, when you can't remember what was said," recalls Stevens. "It was all still there."

The MDMA trials are designed carefully. The PTSD study, for example, includes a $1 million insurance policy and $40,000 for an emergency-room doctor and nurse during each session. Doblin says the DEA has visited McLean and checked out its drug safes to make sure that no MDMA can be stolen. A DEA spokesman would not comment on the safety, saying only that the agency's role is "largely record-keeping and safety."

For critics, however, safety isn't the only concern. "Kids will say, 'Hey, it's a medicine, they give it out at Harvard,'" says David.

Your Brain on Drugs
How ecstasy can help troubled patients:

Takes control. MDMA acts on two parts of the brain—the nucleus accumbens, which is involved with whether one feels good or bad, and the amygdala, which has to do with anxiety.

Frees feelings. The drug releases dopamine, the feel-good hormone in the brain, which partially explains the acute flush of happiness one gets after ingesting empathogens, drugs that put you in touch with your emotions.

Accentuates the positive. The part of the brain that makes patients anxious is obstructed, while the part that makes them happy gets free rein.