



*Decriminalize
Nature DC*

**REFORM LAWS FOR PLANT AND FUNGI
MEDICINES IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

DECRIMNATUREDC.ORG

Terri D Stroud, Esq.
General Counsel DC Board of Elections
1015 Half Street SE, Suite 750
Washington DC 20003

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the “Entheogenic Plant and Fungus Policy Act of 2020.” I hope the testimony provided to you is educational, interesting, and enlightening.

Depression is living in a body that is fighting to survive with a mind that wants to die. I lived in that duality in a period of time that should have been the most joyful. I had achieved most major life goals I had set out for myself as a child.

I was born in Washington, DC to two Iranian immigrants seeking the American Dream. I grew up in an idyllic suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and while we did not quite fit into the Midwest culture, my parents raised me to be resilient. I graduated with a degree in Economics from Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where I was Captain and the Number One Singles and Doubles player on the women’s tennis team. I received a graduate degree in Management from the University of Denver, and I moved to Washington, DC in 2004.

No one really prepares you for adulthood, but I successfully navigated through the formative years of my 20s and early 30s, including bad apartments, bad boyfriends, the constant threat of being laid off during an economic downturn, losing a few friends and gaining new ones, multiple career shifts, and getting my second graduate degree in Public Policy from George Mason University. I was quickly checking accomplishments off my list.

By 2017, I was married to a man I consider my best friend whom I love deeply, and was pregnant with my second child. A couple months into my pregnancy I developed a severe case of sciatica, which is chronic pain running down your body from your spine. The pain was so overwhelming, at the end of the day I was resigned to crawling up the stairs to go to bed because I could not hold my body upright.

It became obvious with the inability to feel “normal,” joyful, or even move in my daily life; I developed what is called “ante-partum” depression, depression during pregnancy. A pivotal moment during my pregnancy occurred during a routine prenatal check up. My normal physician was on vacation and a newer physician to the practice walked into the exam room. She asked me one simple question, “How are you feeling today?” Like a wave crashing down on me, I could not hold in my emotions anymore. I hadn’t realized the numbness I was feeling up until that point was actually depression, and only then I realized I had a major problem. The tears would not stop coming down my face and I strangely kept apologizing. I felt so much shame that I was carrying a normal, healthy baby in the prime of my life, and that I did not feel happy. The aches and pains of a normal pregnancy are enough to make you lose your mind, but

when issues arise outside of what is classified as normal its almost unbearable. Before I could even lift my head out of my hands, the doctor was handing me a prescription to an antidepressant, at the same time assuring me it was safe for me and the baby, and I could get off the medication once I delivered him.

While antidepressants are effective and have saved many lives, decades of research have shown an incomplete understanding of the neural basis for depression. Only after extensive brain imaging, can a practitioner see where exactly the depression is located in their brain to identify which specific pharmaceutical antidepressant is best suited for their version of the disease.¹

Unfortunately, that is not how depression is treated. Hopefully coupled with talk therapy, a patient will be treated with pharmaceuticals by trial and error. This is a dangerous game to play with your brain, considering if incorrectly prescribed, some of these drugs can make a depressed, suicidal patient, more depressed and more suicidal, to the point that some actually take their own lives during their treatment.

Additionally, many of these drugs may take up to eight weeks to display effectiveness. Once this period of time has passed and the medication is deemed ineffective, patients must carefully taper off under medical supervision. Meanwhile, enduring the potential side effects of getting off these drugs are, dizziness, disorientation, headaches, fatigue, insomnia, increased depression, and increased suicidal tendencies. Another factor to consider is the staggering risk of relapse once off antidepressants. People who have had one episode of depression, have a 50% chance of having a second after getting off antidepressants. Those who have had two episodes have an 80% chance of having another.²

After extensively researching these drugs and experiencing the loss of friend a few years ago who took his own life through this struggle, I decided against taking them. A new family of four, a shifting dynamic between my family, my husband, and my career, the inevitable identity crisis a woman experiences when she becomes a mother, and endless amounts of laundry were enough to deal with. I did not want a short-term solution that caused me a negative long-term problem. I was desperate for a solution, but also apathetic about the options presented to me.

After that point, my life spiraled out of control. My mild antepartum depression turned into severe postpartum depression, anxiety, paranoia, recurrent panic attacks, delusions, insomnia, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. I would fantasize about how I could get to the roof of my building at work and what it would be like to jump. Every time I walked across the street I would envision a car turning the corner quickly and hitting me. I had panic attacks about once a week where I would punch my body. Toxic thought patterns of shame, self-hate, and worthlessness were deeply engrained in my brain. I was on a never-ending spiral of negativity and hopelessness. I sought out talk therapy but found any excuse not to go. Getting out of bed was challenging enough, making appointments, taking time away from my job I was doing poorly at, and spending A LOT of money out of pocket, as many therapists do not accept insurance, wore on me.

One of the few friends that I opened up to about my struggle suggested I listen to the Joe Rogan Experience Podcast. The comedian and cultural figure had on American Mycologist

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3619732/>

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2169519/>

and Fungi Advocate Paul Stamets, as a guest to discuss the amazing benefits of psilocybin mushrooms. For three hours during a road trip with my family, I was fascinated by story after story of healing and science. At this point in time I was failing at every level; as a mother, wife, friend, sister, daughter, colleague, and on. I constantly wavered from anger to desperation to hopelessness. I had isolated myself from everyone and I simply wanted to die. I hear Stamets discuss how psilocybin can be a breakthrough in depression treatment and I decided in desperation to begin microdosing psilocybin mushrooms.

After only two days of an imperceptible amount of psilocybin, I began to feel human again. After two weeks of logging my dose and tracking emotions with carefully timed days off, I can quite literally feel my brain rerouting thoughts through different patterns. The way I spoke changed, the way I carried my body, my sense of smell, sense of taste, interactions with people improved, and I was almost completely symptom relief. I was amazed at how quickly I saw results; however, I was taking probably the biggest risk of my life. I was in possession of a Schedule I drug. I was breaking the law. The entire experience was conflicting. I was healing myself however; I was terrified of getting caught and losing everything I just got back into my life. I quit microdosing a bit too early in the process of my rehabilitation, and a friend suggested I see an ayahuasca shaman. Again, in desperation for continued healing, I participated in a few ceremonies.

Since this time, my life has transformed. I not only feel like myself again, I feel a hyperawareness of myself. I am calmer and more compassionate, and I feel empowered to take on whatever challenge is in front of me. I feel empowered to sit here today and tell my story in public. I am completely engaged in my life again and I am connected to my family again. My son Ramsey is now two years old, my daughter Lola is five, and my healing has been so profound and in such short period of time, it's hard to believe there was a time I did not want to see this day. Entheogenic plants and fungi empowered me take control and to make the necessary changes to save my life.

Our current system for treating disease is not working. Depression's elusiveness is both unfortunate and worrisome as it ranks as the **leading cause of disability worldwide** and ranks **third in the ten leading causes of the global burden of disease** according to the World Health Organization. Invisible illnesses like PTSD, depression, anxiety, and addiction are difficult to treat, and the breakthrough of psychotropic pharmaceuticals in the 90s, like Prozac, was paradigm shifting for our society, however they are clearly not a panacea as we are all still suffering. Entheogenic plants and fungi offer us a new solution to very troubling problems and the research surrounding these naturally occurring substances is extremely promising.

In cancer patients, psilocybin has been extremely effective in aiding with depression and anxiety patients have experienced during and after their treatments. Eighty percent of the patients reported their symptoms of anxiety and depression faded with only one dose of psilocybin with its effects lasting as long as five years.³

Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic & Consciousness Research has published over 60 studies in scientific journals about this topic. Their research has shown groundbreaking results in addiction, smoking cessation, depression, and existential distress caused by terminal illness. The effort has been so successful they are expanding their studies to determine the effectiveness of

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/mental-health/single-dose-psychedelic-drug-eased-cancer-patients-anxiety-depression-years-n1123451>

psilocybin as a therapy for opioid addiction, Alzheimer's disease, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Lyme disease, and anorexia.

The senseless War on Drugs has perpetuated myths about these substances and triggered the end of all scientific research involving entheogenic plants and fungi for nearly 50 years. Medicines like naturally occurring dimethyltryptamin (DMT) found in ayahuasca are nontoxic, non-addictive, and are the only substances, natural or lab-produced that actually cause neurogenesis, regrowth and repair of neuronal damage that can be caused by many mental illnesses, including depression and PTSD.⁴

Washington, DC as a city needs to support people who are seeking to heal themselves when no other solution presents itself. If entheogenic plants and fungus become the lowest level law enforcement priority, people can ritualistically and therapeutically heal themselves without fear of legal repercussions. This is a healthcare issue. This is a social justice issue. This is a trauma-interrupting issue. This is life changing and society shifting.

Our modern society has drifted us further from our humanity. We no longer connect with each other in real ways anymore. In the insta-like, endless breaking news cycle world, we find ourselves mentally and physically sick despite amazing medical advancements, and only NOW have we realized we are not just bodies walking around on the planet, we have a mind, a soul, a spirit that plays a major factor in our overall health. We are asking you to allow people the personal freedom to explore their own consciousness and to push their minds past our mundane daily routines or negative thought patterns mental illness brings, without fear of enforcement of an archaic law intended to control society.

We need to evolve as a society because we are losing time, the one true commodity of the world that we can never get back. Time is what I lost the first year of my son's life due to a particularly cruel symptom of depression, memory loss. Precious moments from his first crawl, the first time he ate solid foods, the beautiful noises a newborn makes, beautiful moments with his older sister and his father, beautiful moments with me, I simply do not remember and I will NEVER get that time back with him.

I am reconciling time lost with my son with why I am here today. Kufikiri Imara, a member of the Decriminalize Nature Oakland campaign said recently, "One person's journey of healing helps a family heal, a family's healing helps a community heal, a community's healing helps a city heal." We have an opportunity to heal DC and we need to take it.

Thank you for your time and support of the Entheogenic Plant and Fungus Policy Act of 2020.

Sincerely,

Melissa Lavasani
Decriminalize Nature DC
Proposer of the "Entheogenic Plant and Fungus Policy Act of 2020"

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6082376/>