

Letters From Andrew Weil

The Love Drug

San Francisco, California

Dear Friends:

MDA is known as the love drug in the American subculture because of its reputation for producing loving feelings in groups of people. The initials stand for 3,4-Methylene-dioxy-amphetamine, and the drug is a straightforward derivative of amphetamine, first synthesized in Germany in 1910. But its effects on human beings are much more interesting than simple stimulation. When I first encountered MDA over five years ago, I took it a number of times and since then have observed its effects on a great many people. Because the availability and popularity of the drug seem to be increasing I thought I would set down a few notes about it.

The usual dose of MDA is 90 to 150 milligrams, taken orally in a capsule. Its effects become apparent in 20 to 60 minutes and persist for about twelve hours. People perceive the onset of these effects differently. Some experience initial nausea. Some feel a warm glow spreading through their bodies. Most people become aware of a sense of physical and mental well-being that intensifies gradually and steadily. MDA commonly induces a state of profound relaxation and patience in which anxiety and defensiveness are left far behind. "It is impossible to imagine anything being a threat in that state," one user tells me.

Unlike most stimulants, MDA does not increase motor activity. In fact, it suppresses it in a remarkable way, so that people can remain comfortable and content in one position for long periods. This effect is most dramatic in persons who are heavily dependent on coffee and cigarettes, who are always in motion of one sort or another. Under the influence of MDA they, too, can be calm and motionless. Pharmacologists call this the "antikinetic" action of the drug, but that is a negative way of describing something very positive. I would prefer to call it a "centering" action.

The combined effects of relaxation and centering greatly facilitate certain kinds of physical activities such as yoga, martial arts, and any disciplines requiring balance and maintenance of posture. For example, I can maintain a headstand longer when I take MDA than normally. Although it is extremely pleasant simply to lie still and enjoy a respite from nervous activity in this state, I have also tried things like rock climbing and swimming after taking MDA and again find that my body works in a more coordinated, smoother fashion and that I can do things with it that I usually cannot. One of

the most novel experiences is the ability, conferred temporarily by the drug, to interact with kinds of external stimulation that would ordinarily be painful and not get hurt. It may become possible to walk barefoot over sharp stones, for instance, and experience no discomfort or injury, apparently because the muscles are so free from imposed tension that they can respond with precise counterpressure to the point of a stone. In this way, the skin experiences no net force.

Such experiences confirm in a powerful way the sense of well-being. It feels as if nothing is threatening, and, in fact, things in the external world behave differently. This theme carries through to interpersonal relations. When people feel well, centered, unthreatened, and aware of their own strength and loveliness, they are able to drop many of the usual barriers that develop in groups. It is common in group MDA experiences for people to explore mutual touching and the pleasures of physical closeness. Participants may feel very loving toward one another, but the feelings are not explicitly sexual because MDA tends to decrease the desire for orgasm. For many people the experience of enjoying physical contact and feeling love with others in the absence of a specific hunger for sex is unique and welcome.

Other hungers and desires may also disappear in the MDA state. Habitual users of tobacco feel no need to smoke. Chain smokers of marihuana do not need their weed. Nail biters leave their fingers alone. Compulsive talkers become quiet. Compulsive eaters do not think about food. Moreover, this desireless condition feels supremely natural and valuable. Because MDA affects the senses minimally, everything appears as it does usually. There are no hallucinations, illusions, or distortions, simply a great aura of peace and calm and well-being. It is not possible to pretend, as it often is with hallucinatory drugs, that the experience is coming from without. Clearly, all of the important effects, including the ability to be free of anxiety and desire, are part of the human repertory, often unexpressed, to be sure, but there nonetheless.

The trouble with obtaining that state through the use of a drug is that it does not last. After five or six or eight hours the old habits begin to creep back, and before long the experience of loving peace and desirelessness is in the past. The value of the drug is that it can show people that certain ways of being are possible and available; it gives no information about maintaining them.

I do not mean to paint a picture of MDA as a trouble-free panacea. Like all psychoactive drugs, its effects vary greatly with expectation and setting. People who take it in combination with alcohol and downers at wild parties with strangers are not likely to realize its potential. MDA also releases much energy stored in the nervous system; often those who take it feel tired and sluggish the next day (or "wiped out," to use the street term). It should not be used unless one is in good physical shape with adequate energy reserves. For unknown reasons it seems to be especially hard on women and will activate any latent infections or problems in the female genito-urinary tract. Women should take lower doses than men, (less than 100 milligrams), and should avoid the drug altogether if their pelvic organs are ailing. Many persons of both sexes report that the drug causes tension of the muscles of the jaw and face; in some individuals this effect becomes very annoying, progressing to involuntary grinding of the teeth. All of the adverse physical effects of the drug are dose-related. Whenever I have interviewed persons who have had bad experiences with MDA, I have determined that they have taken excessive doses, been in poor settings, or taken other drugs masquerading as MDA.

In the right hands MDA is quite safe. Out of hundreds of experiences with it that I have observed I have seen only two anxiety reactions. The medical potential of the drug is great and quite unexplored. I have noted repeatedly that persons under the influence of MDA, when feeling high, centered, and free of desire, are in a state of complete anergy — that is, they manifest no allergic responses, even to life-long allergens. Asthma disappears; hay-fever disappears; cat allergies go away; there are even no responses to mosquito bites. This effect is temporary and appears to be the physical analog in the body of the mental experience of complete relaxation and lack of anxiety. It might be reproducible without the drug if we could learn to spend more time in that state.

Unfortunately, the Federal government, having declared MDA to be a drug with high abuse potential and no therapeutic value, has placed it in a category ("Schedule I") that makes it unavailable to physicians and available to researchers only with great difficulty. I know of no ongoing research on the subjective effects of MDA in this country: a sad result of unenlightened policies on substances that could be enormously helpful to us.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Andrew T. Weil
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Botanical Museum, Harvard University
