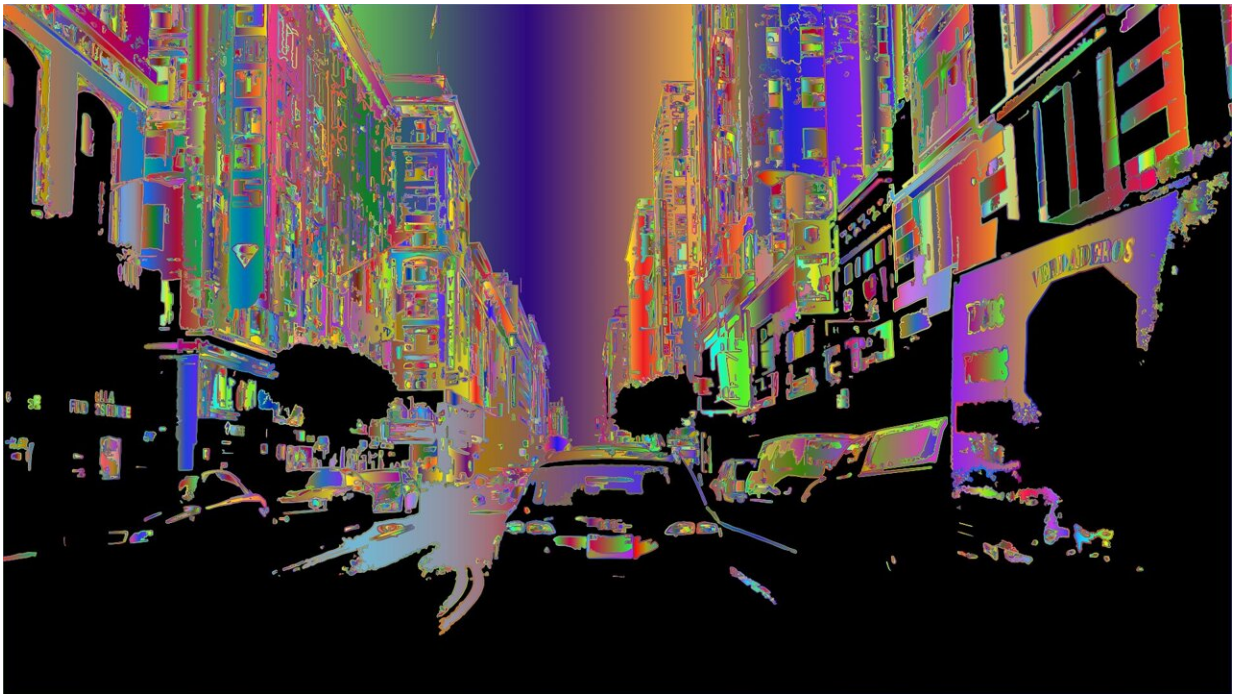


# Psychedelics may help people reinvent themselves

February 24 2023, by Michael Miller

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Researchers from the University of Cincinnati examined the post-treatment journals kept by participants in a 2014 smoking cessation study that found psychedelics were effective in helping some people quit smoking for years.

In a new paper published in the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*,

researchers analyzed the participants' own words and found that psychedelics combined with talk therapy often helped longtime smokers see themselves as nonsmokers. This new core identity might help explain why 80% of participants were able to stop [smoking](#) for six months and 60% remained smoking-free after five years.

The 2014 study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that participants who wanted to quit smoking and used psilocybin, the active hallucinogenic ingredient in [psychedelic](#) mushrooms, combined with [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) were far more likely to succeed than those who try other traditional quit-smoking methods.

Lead author and University of Cincinnati postdoctoral researcher Neşe Devenot said the results demonstrate the potential psychedelics have to reshape self-perceptions to help people break free of old habits or addictions in the face of life's daily triggers and temptations.

"We saw again and again that people had this feeling that they were done with smoking and that they were a nonsmoker now," Devenot said.

She studies the science, history and culture of psychedelics in UC's Institute for Research in Sensing.

## **New sense of self**

Devenot said this new sense of self might help arm people against temptation or old triggers.

"If you want to give up meat but you smell a delicious steak, it might be hard to resist," she said. "But if you identify as a vegetarian and your sense of who you are is someone who does not eat meat, that identity helps encourage a different choice."

During the smoking cessation study, therapists gave participants guided imagery exercises in which they were asked to envision smoking as a behavior external to their core identity. The participants documented their experience in writing.

One guided imagery exercise from the study framed nicotine addiction as an external force, manipulating behavior for its own ends like the zombie-creating fungus in HBO's popular series "The Last of Us."

"Like the Cordyceps fungi that functionally transforms insects into 'zombified' marionettes to serve the fungi's own reproductive purposes, smoking behavior is characterized as a form of parasitic manipulation," the study found.

Albert Garcia-Romeu, an assistant professor of psychiatry and [behavioral sciences](#) at Johns Hopkins University, said psilocybin could serve as a catalyst to help motivate and inspire people to make a change with the help of cognitive behavioral therapy.

"Cognitive behavioral therapy asks us to tune into the thoughts and feelings that we experience in our day-to-day lives and how those relate to our behaviors," Garcia-Romeu said. "In turn, people often tend to build a narrative or sense of self around those cognitions and behaviors."

"This sets the stage for actually having the psilocybin experience, which can both provide novel insights and perspectives as well as serve as a marker of that identity shift like a rite of passage, signifying the change for instance from smoker to nonsmoker."

Devenot said the experiment's sample size was relatively small at just 15 participants. But the results are encouraging.

"I feel that I am somehow fundamentally different to yesterday," one participant wrote. "I guess I feel like some sort of metamorphosis has taken place!"

Some participants said the treatment with psilocybin made quitting feel easy compared to past experiences. Another said the cravings for nicotine used to be unbearable. But during the dosing session, the participant was unable even to imagine craving a cigarette.

"The concept seems firmly cemented into my reality even today, that cravings are not something that are real," one said.

## **Breaking free**

How do psychedelics help with this transformation?

Devenot says people often get stuck in the same ruts of behavior, responding the same way to stressors or other triggers. She likens it to a downhill skier who uses the same grooved path down the mountain that they have used a thousand other times.

"It's not that simple, but it's a metaphor for how we talk about psychedelics," Devenot said.

"Psychedelics have been compared to skiing in fresh snow," she said. "The entrenched grooves of bad habits might not have as much pull on our skis, so we can lay down other paths."

"We're looking for ways to help people shift behaviors and overcome the inertia of their habits that are more in line with their goals and aspirations," Devenot said. "That's why psychedelics are of wider interest to researchers."

**More information:** Neşe Devenot et al, Psychedelic Identity Shift: A Critical Approach to Set And Setting, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1353/ken.2022.0022](https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2022.0022)

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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