

MENTAL HEALTH MIRACLE?

COULD CBD
HELP TREAT
ANXIETY,
INSOMNIA,
DEPRESSION
AND OTHER
CONDITIONS?

BY ERIN BRERETON

➔ By this point, a good chunk of the population understands that unlike THC, CBD isn't going to get you high. However, that doesn't mean cannabidiol doesn't impact you mentally.

"Although it is not considered psychoactive, because it does not create a sensation of being 'high,' that is not an entirely accurate characterization because [CBD] does have an effect on the brain," explains Norman Goody, MD, a Hawaii-based anesthesiologist specializing in pain and addiction. "While it does not create a feeling of intoxication, there are many people who report a lessening of anxiety or a generalized feeling of more 'energy' or well-being from CBD."

For anyone who's had a bad experience on marijuana, this may be surprising. "Where THC can make some users feel anxious or paranoid, CBD is generally felt to have a calming effect on many people, but it is much more subtle than the calming or relaxation someone might experience from taking a medication like Valium or Xanax," explains Goody.

This is no surprise for those already using cannabidiol. A recent survey of 2,000 CBD users done by singlecare.com found that 49% took the cannabinoid for anxiety and stress, while another 26% said they took it for depression.

But for many patients dealing with mental health conditions, CBD isn't even on the radar...or perhaps more importantly on their doctor's. While Goody's quest to find alternatives to opioid pain medications led him to start

Some new research suggests depression might actually be caused by inflammation, which could make calming, anti-inflammatory CBD a key tool.



Ask First

CBD might allow you to take fewer antidepressants, but never alter your dose without first talking to your doc.

exploring cannabinoids years ago, the vast majority of medical students aren't taught much about cannabis at all.

RESEARCH NEEDS TO BE DONE

Partly because of government restrictions on cannabis, research on the effects of CBD on mental health has been quite limited. But things are starting to change.

In testimony given in early 2020 to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Health, Energy and Commerce, Nora Volkow, MD, a psychiatrist and director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, described how CBD's therapeutic potential is being explored for anxiety and other mental health disorders.

And while efforts to confirm CBD's exact effects are ongoing, research has pointed to its positive applications. A 2015 review of preclinical, human experimental, clinical and epidemiological studies determined CBD presented considerable potential as a treatment for multiple anxiety disorders (though further research is necessary).

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) notes some individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) feel cannabis or products made from it have helped relieve their symptoms; and some research suggests cannabinoids may help reduce anxiety, including a study involving two dozen people with a social anxiety disorder who found they had less anxiety in a simulated public speaking test after taking CBD.

Other studies have found evidence of better sleep quality, fewer sleep disturbances or decreased time to fall asleep in people taking cannabis or cannabinoids, although it's uncertain if the treatments or individuals' improved illness symptoms were the reason, according to the NCCIH.

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE ABOUNDS

Denver-based psychotherapist Annette Nunez, PhD, has seen patients take CBD for a variety of reasons, including to help alleviate anxiety, sleep issues and depression. "[For some] of my patients who feel dramatic mood shifts, where they're highly anxious or irritable, [such as] being highly overactive, it's helped regulate their moods," she says. "People talk about how it calms them, how they're less anxious taking it and how they sleep better."

April Hatch, RN, MSN, was personally so impressed with how CBD helped her pain, she started the Cannabis Care Team in Kansas City, Missouri, which provides one-on-one consultations to educate patients who have received a medical marijuana card from their doctor about general health and wellness and cannabis use.

One patient Hatch worked with, a man in his 60s, told her he was hoping to find a secondary way of addressing the

depression he'd been treating for 20 years with an antidepressant. "He found just by taking CBD, he was able to reduce his antidepressant by half a dose, which was big for him because so often pharmaceuticals [can] stop working [the same way for people] over time, or you have to keep upping your dose," she says. "He was getting ready to go back to the doctor and was worried about having to increase his dose."

As Hatch's patient found, combining CBD with other treatments, in some cases, can be more effective in treating conditions like anxiety and depression, says Nunez. "When people are ready to take it, they're ready because they're at a point in life where nothing else is working; but CBD has to work in conjunction with therapy. If not, it's masking underlying problems. It's important to use it with other techniques." And while insurance most likely won't cover the cost of CBD use, patients like the fact it's a natural substance, Nunez adds.

Cannabidiol also has nearly no side effects, which is certainly not the case for certain prescription mental health medications, which can cause a host of ailments including weight gain, drowsiness and sexual dysfunction.

Another huge perk: "CBD is also not felt to be habit-forming or addictive from a behavioral perspective," says Goody. "This is in contrast to many pharmaceutical medications, such as benzodiazepines or opioids, which clearly have addictive properties."

While CBD might be beneficial, it's always important to discuss with your medical team before going off or altering the dosage of any prescription medication, and always let them know about any supplements you're taking, even if you think they might not approve.

MAXIMIZING IMPACT

CBD is available in a number of forms, ranging from capsules to tinctures you can ingest by placing the liquid directly under your tongue. "Oftentimes, people put it in drinks, such as teas or smoothies; you can use it in your favorite juice," Nunez says. "You can also take gummies, and there are sprays you can use—there's so many ways to take it now."

Dosages generally tend to be fairly individualized, according to Nunez; a person's weight can play a role, in addition to the severity of the condition they want to treat. Regardless, she recommends easing into CBD use. "It's really important to start off slowly in smaller amounts, and if you're not recognizing any benefits, to slowly start increasing the dosage," she says. "There's no set dosage like there is with aspirin."

Sometimes, Hatch says, it can take a few months on a steady dose of CBD to see significant change; people could, though, notice subtle effects before then. "Maybe anxiety

PTSD

A 2019 study of people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) found those who took CBD capsules in addition to traditional treatments—including counseling and medication—saw a reduction in symptoms.



While some feel paranoid after taking THC, CBD is known for its calming effects.

"If doctors just don't feel confident in their knowledge of cannabis, they can have patients call me. It's one plant; I could talk for hours about the medical benefits from it."

—APRIL HATCH, RN, MSN

and things don't bother them as much, or they're not reacting to things as they used to," she says. "Maybe they're able to get to sleep easier at night—just those little things you want to pay attention to. For some people, it may be two weeks. For some, it may be four months."

Hatch says patients might find keeping a journal throughout the experience helpful. "They can look back every couple of weeks and see how their condition has changed," she says. "That's something I encourage them to do."

It's also crucial, she stresses, to know what elements the CBD you're using contains. Hatch shows patients how to read certificates of analysis and the third-party lab tests that reputable CBD companies provide. These will show, for instance, which terpenes—elements found in plants that provide certain benefits—are present in a product.

"I really want patients to not ever buy CBD unless that certificate is readily available and they can review it," she says. "That's going to tell patients exactly how much CBD is in that product; are there more relaxing terpenes or stimulating ones; if it has heavy metals, pesticides, things you want to avoid. There are a ton of CBD stores and some have better products than others."