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MDMA (Ecstasy): Empathogen or Love Potion?

MDMA -- commonly known as ecstasy -- increases feelings of empathy and social connection. These 'empathogenic' effects suggest that MDMA might be useful to enhance the psychotherapy of people who struggle to feel connected to others, as may occur in association with autism, schizophrenia, or antisocial personality disorder.

However, these effects have been difficult to measure objectively, and there has been limited research in humans. Now, University of Chicago researchers, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, are reporting their new findings in healthy volunteers in the current issue of Biological Psychiatry.

Dr. Gillinder Bedi, author, explained: "We found that MDMA produced friendliness, playfulness, and loving feelings, even when it was administered to people in a laboratory with little social contact. We also found that MDMA reduced volunteers' capacity to recognize facial expressions of fear in other people, an effect that may be involved in the increased sociability said to be produced by MDMA."

These data suggest that MDMA produces effects that make others seem more attractive and friendly, which may serve as a significant motivator in its use as a recreational drug. Importantly, it also makes others appear less threatening, which could increase users' social risk-taking.

"Within the context of treatment, these effects may promote intimacy among people who have difficulty feeling close to others," observed Dr. John Krystal, Editor of Biological Psychiatry. "However, MDMA distorts one's perception of others rather than producing true empathy. Thus, MDMA may cause problems if it leads people to misinterpret the emotional state and perhaps intentions of others."

Certainly, further research in controlled settings is necessary before MDMA could be considered for use as a psychotherapy treatment. But, these findings also underscore the need to understand more about the ways in which different drugs affect social experiences, given that abused drugs are so commonly used in social settings.

Gillinder Bedi, David Hyman, Harriet de Wit. Is Ecstasy an 'Empathogen'? Effects of \pm 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine on Prosocial Feelings and Identification of Emotional States in Others. *Biological Psychiatry*, 2010; 68 (12): 1134 DOI: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2010.08.003