

These guides are based upon the experiences of people in psychiatric treatment.
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The Out of Your Head guides for people who use drugs and have experienced mental illness

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[>] **aims**
To provide up to date information and advice on drugs and mental illness.

[>] **audience**
people who use drugs and have experienced mental illness and the staff who work with them.

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Some swearing and graphic images of drug use.

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no. 2 **Mental illness and Ecstasy -the story of
'Raving Mad' Martha**



OUT of YOUR HEAD guides for people who use drugs and have experienced mental illness

Mental illness is a reaction to life

The journey between our birth and death is the story of our life. On this journey we will meet with desperation, delight, love and loneliness. Sometimes our minds respond to the events and the experiences in our lives in ways that can become extremely disturbing for us and those around us. Doctors call this reaction to life ‘mental illness’.

Drugs have an effect on mental illness

We use drink and drugs to give us pleasure, to stop us feeling pain or because we have nothing better to do. If drugs are part of our life they will have an effect on our mental illness. What this effect will be depends on the person, the drug and how the drug is used.

These stories are based on talking to people in psychiatric treatment.

This story is about Martha and the role that ecstasy plays in her life and her illness.



David

Martha

Jason

God

Brain chemistry



The brain works by using a sort of 'chemical e-mail' to communicate between its billions of cells. These chemicals are called neurotransmitters and play an important role in mental illness.

Ecstasy has both speedy and trippy effects. It raises the levels of three main neurotransmitters: serotonin; dopamine and noradrenaline.

Serotonin - (also known as 5HT) which controls mood and memory etc. and is responsible for ecstasy's 'trippy' effects

Dopamine - which is the brain's main reward or pleasure chemical.

Noradrenaline - which governs the brain's energy levels including alertness, movement and anxiety, and is mainly responsible for ecstasy's 'speedy' effects.

Ecstasy chemistry



Methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA for short) is the chemical name for ecstasy, but pills commonly contain a number of similar drugs that resemble MDMA.

We know that serotonin damage causes mood disorders (eg. depression) and memory problems, while dopamine damage causes movement disorders (eg. parkinsonism) and thought disorders (e.g psychosis/paranoia). But the brain's connecting fibres may recover from this damage (unlike brain cells).

Young heavy ecstasy users are at risk of developing slower thought processes and disturbances of mood and personality.

Claims about ecstasy causing long lasting brain damage are not proven - but neither are they unproven. Some experts believe that ecstasy-related brain damage may show up 20-30 years after a period of 'caning' the pills.

I was like a butterfly opening its wings for the very first time.



I never knew it was possible to feel this beautiful. . . I guess that's why they call it ecstasy.

Martha on a mission

Every ecstasy user remembers their first pill - that feeling of intense delight; the trippy rush of the ecstasy 'buzz' as serotonin suddenly floods the brain. Martha was feeling isolated and desperately alone when she came out of psychiatric hospital until she fell in with a group of hard core clubbers. When the pills start working her mental illness is no longer important - everybody's equal when they're off their head! Martha feels like she belongs.

But there are of course risks involved in using drugs. Stimulant drugs raise your heart rate and blood pressure so should be avoided by those with relevant health problems or older people (you are more at risk from heart attacks/strokes as you get older).

Taking too much can lead to overdosing (toxic poisoning). Double or treble doses of ecstasy can produce far more intense effects, but even higher doses mainly raise pulse-rate and temperature to uncomfortable levels, along with nausea (feeling or being sick), blurred vision, panting, muscular tension and headache.

Like speed, ecstasy produces 'stereotypy' - a preference for repetitive actions like dancing. Stimulant drugs like ecstasy, speed and coke raise your body temperature. Dancing for long periods in steaming hot clubs makes you even hotter which has led to people collapsing and in a number of cases has led to deaths.

Things you can do:

- **Take regular breaks from dancing and sip water at regular intervals** (about a pint an hour is recommended, don't over do it as drinking too much is dangerous)
- **If somebody collapses, call security (door staff/bouncers).**
Learn the Recovery Position (page 19)

You meet a guy, you're getting on great - but there's just that one little thing you haven't told him . . .



. . . you spend half your life in hospital, because you've got a serious mental illness!



I've had too many bad experiences to risk that. I just love 'em and leave 'em.



Looking after no 1

Ecstasy very rarely leads to hallucinations or bad 'trips' like LSD or ketamine can - instead, it intensifies your mood, opens up your feelings, and makes you more friendly and empathetic (more understanding of others' feelings). In rare cases, people may become anxious or emotionally disturbed - but this is usually to do with the 'releasing' of their feelings (ecstasy was used in therapy before it was banned in the USA). Some users say that it boosts feelings of love and/or sexual desire, though it's not really an aphrodisiac and can make it hard for men to get an erection (known as 'shrink dick').

It is sad (but true) that there are some men who look to exploit women coming out of clubs when they are still on drugs or have been drinking. If you go off with somebody, let a friend

know where you are going or at least send them a text. Trust your instincts: don't do anything you don't want to or let anybody take advantage of your drugged up state or mental illness.

There is a stigma associated with mental illness, which can make it difficult starting relationships because you fear the way people will react to you if you tell them about your illness. It is a good idea to talk this through with someone you trust, rather than let your feelings pour out when you are all 'luv'd up'.

Things you can do:

- 0 **Use condoms and practice safer sex**
to avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection.
- 0 **if you go off with strangers somewhere- let friends know where you are going**
- 0 **Trust your instincts - if it feels dodgy, it probably is!**

I started to live for a weekend of thrills and pills.



I prepared like I was an athlete. I got plenty of sleep, tried to eat properly and look after myself during the week.



Waiting for the weekend

The effects of an ecstasy pill can last up to 6 hours or longer if you are 'stacking' (taking them at regular intervals). Stimulant drugs like ecstasy stop you feeling hungry, which can last all of the next day as you physically recover from dancing and lack of sleep, so regular users tend to lose weight. Although many people welcome losing a bit of weight this can become a problem and has been known to trigger off eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia.

Some people discover the ecstasy and dance music scene and fall in love with it. This is known as the 'honeymoon period' when nothing in their life seems as important as a weekend of dancing on ecstasy. Involvement in ecstasy use and dance culture can become excessive for some people, leading to neglect of work, a

strain on relationships with family and friends and poor health and financial problems. The total cost of one night's clubbing can exceed £100.

If you are starting to become involved in a weekend dance scene, get plenty of sleep and eat properly during the week (eat at least 3 hours before you take any pills). It is simply not possible to 'Ave'it Large' with a full on clubbing and pills life style all the time without burning out or triggering another episode of your illness - A once a month treat is plenty.

Things you can do:

- **Look after yourself during the week**
Get plenty to eat and get plenty of sleep.
- **Try to avoid burning out**
A once a month treat is plenty.

I could never quite reach that first high...but that didn't stop me trying.



I don't like Wednesdays!

What goes up must come down

Ecstasy is unique in having a come-down two or three days after it was used (instead of the same or next day), depending on how long it takes the brain to recover. It is known as the 'mid-week ecstasy blues', because most users take pills at clubs/ parties at weekends - resulting in comedowns kicking in around Tuesday or Wednesday. The ecstasy blues involve similar symptoms to speed comedowns - sadness, tiredness, headache, hunger, and irritability - but can often involve emotional over-sensitivity (bursting into tears, startling, feeling panicky, afraid of going out etc.).

The ecstasy blues are the norm rather than the exception. About 90% of users in surveys report getting them - typically every time that ecstasy is used. Some people use cannabis or

alcohol to try and take the edge off the ecstasy comedown -but this can lead to you becoming reliant on drugs to control your mood, which means you become dependent on drugs.

The E comedown is rarely serious, and is usually over within a day, so if you can, 'take it neat', do so. Try to monitor the (good or bad) effects the ecstasy blues are having on your mental health. If the bad bits are outweighing the good bits, if you feel alone and paranoid, if you feel suicidal, it's time to think about changing.

Things you can do:

- 0 **Be aware of the mid-week blues**
Keep a record to monitor the effect it is having on your mental health
- 0 **Try to take the comedown neat**
Everybody comes down eventually

My weekends of ecstasy use started to become longer - they started on a Thursday and ended the following Tuesday.



Ecstasy made me feel better than my antidepressants. But then the GHOSTS came back to haunt me.



Martha gets mashed

Taking too much ecstasy in one go is dangerous (see page 7) and will just lead to more unwanted side effects. Using too often creates a different set of problems. The heaviest users tend to take ecstasy two or three days per week (i.e. all weekend) - daily or near-daily use is very rare. Though about half of ecstasy users report some signs of dependence - such as tolerance to the effects, craving and inability to stop using - most do not regard themselves as 'hooked', and there is no physical withdrawal syndrome as there would be for drugs like alcohol or heroin.

Ecstasy use can bring about what doctors call 'neurotic disorders' (anxiety, phobias, panic attacks) and 'mood disorders' (depression, mania). Nearly all such episodes are short-term and treatable by doctors.

Although such cases are rare, and usually involve heavy poly-drug use (using more than one drug), they are more likely to occur in people with a history of mental illness. It might be that people who have experienced mental illness are more vulnerable to the unwanted side effects of ecstasy.

Persistent anxiety disorders may be treated with a short course of benzodiazepines e.g. Valium (diazepam); while continuing depression is typically treated with anti-depressants e.g. Prozac (fluoxetine). Ecstasy use has also been linked to cases of 'elevated impulsivity' and chocolate craving, although the medical profession has yet to find a cure for the 'mad for it chocoholic'.

Things you can do:

- O** Learn to recognise your early signs of mental illness relapse.
- O** If you are frequently taking e's to lift a depressing feeling you could be suffering from a depression and need counselling or medication.
Talk to someone such as your G.P or nurse for advice.



Ecstasy Psychosis

Doctors are still a long way from understanding why some people develop serious mental illness and others don't. Martha had been admitted to psychiatric hospital on a number of occasions before she had ever used drugs. Her doctors have given her a different diagnosis every time she has been treated. They now think her psychosis is drug related, but it is difficult to be precise as the symptoms of general psychosis and drug related psychosis are almost identical.

Ecstasy psychosis is very rare among drug users, and nearly all cases recover (if they stop using) within a month or two - sometimes it may require a few weeks of in-patient treatment with antipsychotic medications. Common symptoms of a psychosis are paranoia (e.g.

the police are watching me, aliens abducted me), auditory hallucinations (hearing voices and noises that aren't there), 'ideas of reference' (wrongfully thinking that things are linked to you, e.g. the TV news reader is giving you a secret message) and thought disorders where you think your thoughts are tampered with, don't belong to you or have been read aloud. Like other drug psychoses, ecstasy psychosis tends to occur in people with a personal or family history of mental illness. Users who have experienced mental illness are more likely to develop ecstasy psychosis.

Martha will get better and get out of hospital, but she may well go back to using drugs. Even if she does it is still better for her to carry on taking her antipsychotic medicine, even though she is using ecstasy.

Things you can do:

- O Stop using street drugs (at least while you are being treated)**
- O Keep taking the antipsychotic medication even if you go back to using ecstasy.**
And be honest with the doctors and nurses about the role drugs play in your illness.

Safer Ecstasy use

The title above says safer ecstasy use - not **safe** ecstasy use. The only sure way to avoid any harm from ecstasy is not to take it. Although it is illegal for everyone, people who have heart or respiratory conditions, epilepsy, glaucoma, genito-urinary infections, asthma and diabetes - especially those with a mental illness - are advised not to use ecstasy. BUT for people determined to try it, or already using it, the following advice can help reduce the risks and problems identified above.

- 0 Find out from friends how strong a new E is before taking it - or else take a half-tab dose first
- 0 One standard tab of E per session is enough, but if using more, try to stick below 2 or 3 tabs. Avoid taking repeat doses during a session - but if you do 'stack', keep to half-tablet boosters
- 0 Use ecstasy no more than once a month - but if using more often, avoid using two days on run
- 0 Avoid over-heating. Drink up to a pint of water or non alcoholic drink per hour while on E, especially if dancing - although some people have over-heated on ecstasy without dancing
- 0 Avoid mixing other drugs with E especially alcohol, opiates, & prescription drugs (e.g. beta-blockers). But keep taking your antipsychotic medication.
- 0 Store E safely where children cannot reach it, and in a dark, dry, cool, air-tight container
- 0 While on E, never drive, use machinery, or do risky sports - or have children in your care
- 0 Make sure that you eat well and catch up on sleep

Getting caught

Ecstasy is a class A drug with the same penalties as heroin and cocaine. Never carry more than two or three pills on you at a time or you risk being accused of dealing. In a club it is far more likely that you will be caught by the bouncers/security staff. Most clubs will confiscate small amounts of drugs and will call the police only if they think you are dealing. Either way it's a bad idea to take in more than you need or to take drugs in for other people.

Dealing with emergencies

Learn how to deal with ecstasy-related emergencies in your friends:

- *if they get too hot, help them cool down (rest somewhere cool, sip water, etc.)
- *if they panic or have a 'bad trip', try to calm and reassure them
- *if they collapse and are unconscious, put them in the **recovery position**;
- *if they stop breathing, administer artificial resuscitation (if you know how) and get help

In any medical emergency, whatever else you do, call an ambulance or get them to hospital (if in a nightclub, contact security). If you or a friend does end up in hospital, always tell the staff or paramedics precisely what drugs were taken (the police are not automatically contacted).

The Recovery position



1. Put the right hand by the head (as if they were waving)



2. Put the left arm across the chest, so that the back of the hand rests against the cheek



3. Hold the hand in place and lift up the left knee



4. Turn them on their side by pushing down on the knee