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## Mother's Loving Care For Dying Daughter Included Psychedelic Drugs



When her beloved 33-year-old daughter was dying of cancer in excruciating pain, Marilyn Howell did everything she could to help her. She nursed her; she explored every possible treatment option with her; and when all hope was gone, she crossed the line of legality and got her psychedelic drugs.

The drugs helped. As Marilyn describes in her new book, "Honor Thy Daughter," her daughter Mara's carefully supervised sessions with Ecstasy allowed her "one more experience without pain, one more chance to love life." Psychedelic therapy — Ecstasy, LSD, mushrooms, added to marijuana — also seemed to help Mara reach acceptance of her own impending death.

When Marilyn first went public with her story in *The Boston Globe* in 2006, the year after Mara died, in an article headlined "A Good Death," she was still teaching in the Brookline schools and decided to remain anonymous.

But now she has retired, and is open about her identity in order to help spread her message. Listen here to her recent appearance on WBUR's Radio Boston.



Author Marilyn Howell

"One of the things I want people to know is that you don't have to choose between being in pain or being asleep" near death, she said. And, "I want them to know that research is starting up again and the most difficult challenge for researchers is getting subjects. The study I tried to sign my daughter up for five years ago closed up. There's so much bias and prejudice among regular doctors — but it's beginning to shift."

Indeed, a trickle of research has gone on for years, including at Harvard's McLean Hospital in Belmont, which has been running a small study on MDMA — Ecstasy — in end-stage cancer patients.

The splashiest recent finding came out last year, when a South Carolina psychiatrist reported in *The Journal of Psychopharmacology* that in a

small but carefully run study of people with treatment-resistant Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, MDMA had brought dramatic improvement.

The research remains controversial. Federal drug-control authorities caution that findings of beneficial effects from drugs like Ecstasy — which is famous for its use during all-night raves and is known to be potentially addictive and bad for the brain — could encourage broader abuse.

And though psychedelic drugs have a long and fascinating history of experimental use by therapists, they also became somewhat tainted by association with the wild Timothy Leary "Tune in, turn on, drop out" gang of the 1960s.

These days, however, a new factor may help psychedelic research regain favor: In recent years, support for the medicinal use of marijuana has spread widely, to the point that it's now legal in 16 states. The stories that tended to circulate a few years ago, of loving relatives who scored pot to bake magic brownies for their otherwise straight-as-an-arrow elders with cancer-related nausea, now seem almost quaint.

Is it such a leap to Ecstasy? When I spoke to Marilyn Howell, I complained to her that she had raised the bar for people who love dying patients. Now that I've read her book and skimmed some research, if a dear one of mine were suffering in the terminal stages of cancer or some other illness, I don't think I'd feel able to stop at marijuana.

Of course, if there's no available psychedelic study under way, there is that little matter of legality. It does not escape Marilyn either. But she was encouraged, she said, by a big article in the March issue of *O* magazine about the use of MDMA for trauma victims. The journalist who wrote it described trying the drug herself, "so I figured if she feels safe and secure, the DEA certainly would arrest a journalist before they'd arrest a mother."

"I think the attitudes are changing with respect to responsible medical uses," she said, "even though they're still underground at this point."

Part of Marilyn's purpose in writing the book, she said, is also to encourage people to donate to support research on psychedelics: "No pharmaceutical companies are going to support research for drugs they can't patent or make money from," she said.

"Honor Thy Daughter" is published by MAPS, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, an advocacy group that has long pushed for more research on psychedelic drugs.

One cautionary note about it as a book: It made me cry. A lot. And it only gets to the psychedelic part toward the end. But that gives the reader time to get to know Marilyn's daughter, Mara, and witness her courage in the face of cancer — and thus to help the book achieve its deepest emotional goal: to honor the daughter.

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