



THE GODPARENTS OF MDMA

An Interview with Ann and Sasha Shulgin

Julie Holland, M.D.

JH: What do you two think about MDMA as a medicine, versus its use as Ecstasy in the rave culture?

AS: It should be pretty well known by now, by anyone who knows anything about the subject, that MDMA was first discovered as a psychotherapeutic agent. It didn't become a street drug until sometime after it had been used in therapy. It is an insight drug. That's its main use. The effect of MDMA, for most people, is that it allows insight without fear. There isn't the usual defense against feelings of self-rejection and guilt. You can explore your shadow self, your dark side. It takes away the feelings of self-hatred and condemnation, which are the biggest obstacles to insight. That's what makes ordinary psychotherapy take so very long. It takes a long time for the therapist to get patients just to look at what's there, at what they're doing to themselves, and to try to do so without negative judgment and blame. For reasons we don't understand, MDMA allows people to do this, typically in one session.

SS: There's another aspect that ties this together a little bit with the rave scene. It seems that MDMA allows most people to accept other people. In the case of therapy, it's a matter of accepting yourself and therefore being able to speak to a therapist with a fair amount of honesty and less reserve. You can explain where you are and why you're there, and, of course, that's

the whole art of therapy, to get people to acknowledge that and be able to accept themselves. There is also the acceptance of others—that is one of the reasons the drug is so successful at raves. There is no paranoia about revealing anything about yourself. You do it openly and honestly and with recall. You open yourself up to yourself and to others.

AS: As Sasha says, there is complete recall; there is no amnesia for the event. Also, there is never any loss of control, which is probably the main unconscious fear that most people have in taking any drug that affects the mental processes. With a lot of psychedelics, especially at high doses, there can be a feeling that you don't have any control, and that is never present with MDMA.

MDMA is also great for marital therapy. It enables two people to step out of the negative patterns that they might set up between themselves so that they can't communicate openly anymore. They've gotten into what I call "bookkeeping" mode. "You did this first, and I only did that because you did so and so." That drops away, and a couple who is having trouble can, for the first time in a very long time, recapture their original empathy and love for each other. They're able to see each other not as an enemy but as a friend and lover, which may have become lost. I've seen that happen very often.

One of the most important potential uses for MDMA is in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. This is where it really should be used. It can be an aid in the context of all sorts of traumas, whether sexual or physical abuse in childhood or postwar trauma. MDMA is the perfect agent for opening up these areas and really being able to look at them, assimilate them, and get rid of a lot of the symptoms of having repressed the memory for so long.

JH: *Ann, you performed MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, didn't you?*

AS: I performed MDMA-assisted psychotherapy as a lay therapist for about three years, and I probably worked with about fifteen individuals and maybe half a dozen couples. About five of these people had completely repressed memories of early sexual abuse. Interestingly, four of them had gone into careers where they were helping children who had been sexually abused. They had no memory of their own abuse, but they had been driven unconsciously to become therapists. MDMA is superb for uncovering repressed memories.

JH: Do either of you think there is any use for MDMA outside psychotherapy?

AS: Oh, I do. I think that it's a lovely, gentle way for people to connect with each other. People who have no problems in their relationship but would just like to spend an evening together, just being loving toward each other. It should be emphasized that ninety-nine percent of the people I've met would agree that MDMA is not a sexual drug. It is almost impossible for most people to have a sexual response, but it opens up the ability to feel love.

SS: There is an incredible magic for the first few times you use MDMA, and that magic sometimes is lost. People try to recover it; sometimes there's a temptation to go to a larger dose to try to recapture that magic. It's the kind of drug that cannot be used frequently.

AS: I've been warning people that if they're going to use this material, first, they should be careful, because it is illegal. Second, I would advise them not to use it more than four times a year. If you use it more often than that, you're going to lose the magic. It seems to be a pretty permanent loss for most, but not all, people. Some people can go a year without taking it and then come back and revive that feeling. But for most people, once they have overused it, it is very difficult to get back to that original state.

The more you use it, the less effective it is. That's why it is best used in therapy. Many people need only one or two sessions. It isn't something you would take every time you go to the therapist. And it isn't something casual. Our particular group of people who occasionally took psychedelics or MDMA together would always do a blessing beforehand. It's considered a sacred journey.

JH: What do you think about the current rave culture?

SS: My feeling about the rave culture is that it is a representation of an inevitable form of behavior of people who are coming into adolescence and young adulthood. It's a way of becoming an independent person—not having to answer to authority, to parents, and establishing oneself as an individual. In that age group of fifteen to twenty-five years, you are immortal, and you don't care for the older generation. As the old saying goes, "Don't trust anyone over thirty." And I don't think it is unique to the rave community; it is

specific to that stage of development. Everyone through the entire history of human beings has experienced that same rebellion against authority. It happened to express itself in this generation as rave culture, but in another, it might be jazz music at Golden Gate Park [in San Francisco].

AS: I think Sasha's absolutely right, but I have another point to add about the use of MDMA at raves. Most raves, but not all, are held in or near large cities. In most large cities in the United States and in other countries, young people learn to be very cautious and careful when they're out in public. We all know not to meet the eyes of a stranger when we're out in the streets. This becomes magnified in a place like New York. We are cautious to the point of near paranoia. We learn to be extremely careful and alert and aware, whether it's of the potential pickpocket or of someone whose sanity may be just on the edge. The only time these young people can totally relax these feelings of suspicion and caution and distrust is when they go to a rave, where you don't have to be worried about strangers. Everybody is on the same wavelength. People can touch and hold hands and be affectionate with people they've never met before. Whether this is wise is not the important point; they feel that they can be trusting.

SS: There is another aspect of MDMA use that has never received much attention. Whether it still occurs, I don't know. Years ago it did happen, when there were sports contests between England and other European countries, soccer primarily. In the early days, these young sports enthusiasts would end up drinking alcohol and getting into fights, and there would be property damage and injuries. And then, after many years, there was a tendency to move toward intoxication not with alcohol but with MDMA. This changed the entire flavor of the post-game celebration. This phenomenon was written up by Nicholas Saunders [1993].

***JH:** I don't know if you're familiar with Terence McKenna's theory of how mushrooms were possibly an evolutionary tool in early man [1975], but I'm wondering whether MDMA isn't some sort of evolutionary tool in modern man.*

SS: It certainly has made people adopt a different attitude toward other people and interpersonal interactions. I think the blending and integration of interactions between people is an extremely healthy evolutionary adaptation.

Instead of being defensive and protecting yourself, be cautious, but not necessarily by putting up a barrier that could be interpreted as being angry or challenging. I think it's an excellent direction in which to go. In some ways, it may be emulating the use of marijuana over the past couple of generations. That was something shared by people, and it was *shared* rather than used competitively. MDMA may be playing that role now.

JH: The other thing I think it's mirroring is the Internet, the interconnectivity of people around the world.

SS: I hadn't thought of that, but it's a very nice parallel. The barriers are dropped—not physical or territorial barriers but communication barriers. The Internet is achieving a unification through communication that has never been seen before. MDMA can do this too.

AS: Of course, critics are going to point out that MDMA and the Internet can be misused by people who are damaged or dangerous, but so can anything in the world.

SS: That's the nature of humans. There's a small percentage of these people everywhere.

AS: In other words, nothing is a cure for all the problems of humankind. There's no single thing that can fill that role. But the idea of connectivity is something that we have almost entirely lost in this modern world—at least in the West. There is a complete lack of the extended family living together, and people are very isolated, especially in big cities. I think that the Internet has helped and is part of the answer. MDMA is also an answer for the younger generation, though young people are not the only ones using MDMA.

JH: Is there anything that you regret that has happened in the past twenty years with MDMA?

SS: My general response to that is that I very seriously regret the overall approach to drug use and drug abuse as a criminal issue, as opposed to a medical or a spiritual issue. The bifurcation of this entire area into that which is use and abuse, that which is legal and illegal, is a great disservice to the integrity of this country and our constitution.

AS: There's another point, which also applies to other countries where the authorities are desperate to hold on to power and to control the population, because they have total distrust of their citizens. In the old Soviet Union certain music wasn't allowed because of the message it conveyed. China and other countries with authoritarian dictatorships have tried to repress religious freedom and prevent individual expression of various opinions or even emotions. The authorities try to maintain control over people's thinking, their perceptions, and their expression of emotions, which may not be healthy for the dictatorship. I think it's the same impulse here that makes the government criminalize certain kind of drugs. They're trying to control the thinking and perceptions and feelings of the people over whom they wield power.

***JH:** Drugs are subversive. They make those in power very nervous.*

SS: Also, those in power see changing consciousness as something they do not wish to do, because they will lose control. Therefore, they tend to bar that from happening, partly out of their own fear and inability to alter where they stand and how they think.

AS: In other words, it's a projection of their fear of their own unconscious.

SS: It's more than that, though. By having this degree of control, by being able to seize and confiscate things and arrest people and put people you don't like into prison, you're gaining power, money, and control. And that is the overwhelming drive of anybody who is in authority—to get as much control and power and money as you can. The war on drugs is providing an unparalleled example of a mechanism for doing just that.

***JH:** What is your opinion about the way the media has been handling MDMA over the past several years?*

AS: I'm a media freak. I watch a lot of news programs. There has been a change, though, just within the beginning of this century. The establishment media, the non-cable shows, wore themselves out with documentaries on "the killer drug" Ecstasy—they never called it MDMA—and the rave scene. Then John Cloud's *Time* magazine cover story (2000) came out with a different article, paying more attention to both sides of the issue. All of a sudden we were

getting calls from the networks wanting to pursue the idea of MDMA in therapy. They weren't doing it out of the goodness of their hearts or greater wisdom, but perhaps because it would help boost their ratings. CBS especially took a stab with a segment on *48 Hours*, even though they included some horrific stupidities in that program. At least they kept the Sue Stevens section intact, showing an MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session, and that was really well done. And this trend is absolutely new; it would have been unthinkable five years ago. I haven't seen any positive mention of the war on drugs in the main media in 2001.

SS: On the other hand, the President of Uruguay gave two press conferences, in his country and in Mexico, at which he recommended that his country and other South American countries repeal their drug laws. Even though members of the press from the United States were present at that speech, no one in this country ran the story.

AS: The important thing to me is that he said it and he intends to do it, but the important thing to Sasha is that no one reported it! But the report at least is making the rounds on the Internet. And that takes a lot of courage, because most of these countries have become dependent on American money.

JH: *We gave a billion dollars to Colombia—they better look as if they're tough on drugs.*

AS: Right. And in our country, I don't know who is worse, the Republicans or the Democrats.

SS: Senator Dianne Feinstein, who is a Democrat from California, introduced a horrible methamphetamine bill, which multiplies everything into more severe penalties.

AS: Feinstein also attempted to put into two different bills a penalty for publishing information on drugs.

JH: *That information ban drove me crazy and made me very nervous until it was struck down. People were e-mailing me and saying, "Are you still going to go ahead with the book?"*

AS: Thank heaven somebody with sense took that portion out of the bill.

SS: And yet every even-numbered year, people have to be elected to Congress and every even-numbered year another bill comes up with the same things in it. One of these days it's going to pass.

AS: Having gone to the Shadow Convention in Los Angeles, I am very hopeful, because the Black Caucus has become more aware all of a sudden that the majority of people in jail on nonviolent drug offenses are young black men. There were many people speaking out against the war on drugs at that convention, including Congressmen Charles Rangel from New York and John Conyers from Michigan. I don't know that they're going to continue to go along with higher penalties if an entire generation of black men are being disenfranchised.

SS: You asked me how I feel about the past twenty years. Am I happy about where MDMA stands now? No, I am quite sad. Here is a compound, an incredibly safe compound when used appropriately, that has the potential of giving pleasure to the user and of being of medical value to those who have certain psychological problems. It is thus both an affirmative and a curative agent. And yet, for political and self-serving reasons, the authorities have demonized it and made it a felony to possess and use. In effect, they forbid information about its virtues to be made available. I am proud to have had some hand in uncovering its value, but I am sad to see it become illegal and thus effectively unavailable to those who could benefit from it. A good analogy is the total ignorance shown by an entire generation of German youth to Mendelssohn's music in Nazi Germany in the mid-thirties to early forties because he happened to be a Jew and his music was politically forbidden by the police state. It was unavailable to those who might have enjoyed it.

JH: What are your hopes for the future regarding MDMA?

SS: My hope is that it be relocated from a legal and criminal arena to the medical and personal arena—that it be removed from legal control and be placed in personal control.

AS: I think that MDMA should be made available for psychotherapy, just as there's a push for marijuana to be made available as a prescription medicine. That's what we hope will happen.

