

# You Are Not Broken. How Cannabis Can Help Treat PTSD.



The experience of trauma is as ancient as humanity itself. Certainly, our ancestors were familiar with the biological urgency to fight or flee. Escape the saber tooth tiger, or be eaten. This innate survival strategy is one of many mechanisms orchestrated by our autonomic nervous system (ANS) to protect us, both physically and psychologically, in the face of danger.

Ideally, once the threat has passed, the body's protective responses switch off and we return to a state of balance, safety and homeostasis - thanks in part to the endocannabinoid system (ECS).

But what happens when trauma overwhelms the system?

## **When Trauma gets "Stuck"**

Some experiences are so severe that they disrupt our natural recovery process. Instead of returning to balance, the trauma becomes imprinted in the body, often leading to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a complex mental health condition which manifests as dysfunction on every level: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

PTSD presents as a constellation of symptoms including:

- Intrusive memories and flashbacks
- Nightmares and disturbed sleep
- Emotional dysregulation

- Hyperarousal or hypervigilance
- Dissociation and numbing
- Withdrawal from relationships and everyday life
- Anxiety and depression
- Addiction issues and substance abuse
- Chronic pain or chronic illnesses

As trauma expert Gabor Maté puts it:

***"Trauma is NOT what happens to us, it is what happens inside of us, in response to events that happen to us".***

In other words, trauma is a natural response to an overwhelming event. You are not broken - your body was trying to protect you.

### **Healing the Mind-Body Split**

Conventional therapies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, and pharmacological treatments like SSRIs and SNRIs remain the standard of care for PTSD management, and yet the majority of individuals report incomplete relief or troubling side effects.

If trauma is a natural response, could nature also hold the antidote to our suffering?

### **What does the Endocannabinoid System have to do with it?**

The endocannabinoid system (ECS) plays a central role in stress regulation. During acute stress, levels of certain naturally occurring endocannabinoids decrease to allow the "fight or flight" response to activate. After the threat passes, levels of other endocannabinoids rise to calm the amygdala, the brain's fear center, and deactivate the stress response.

In PTSD, this reset doesn't happen. The fear response stays stuck in the "on" position. In fact, growing research suggests that PTSD may involve a clinical endocannabinoid deficiency - a state where the body struggles to produce enough of its own cannabinoids. This deficiency can contribute to impaired fear extinction, persistent hyperarousal, chronic anxiety and disconnection, and the inability to feel safe or grounded - all hallmarks of PTSD.

Cannabinoids from the cannabis plant can help correct this imbalance, offering a neurochemical reset that helps patients reduce anxiety, regulate mood, and restore a sense of internal safety.

### **THC and CBD: Plant-Based Allies in Trauma Recovery**

The two most well-known cannabinoids, THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) and CBD (cannabidiol), play distinct but complementary roles in trauma recovery:

#### **THC**

- Binds directly to CB1 receptors in the brain and nervous system
- Helps calm the nervous system and reduce hyperarousal

- Suppresses REM sleep, which may help reduce trauma-related nightmares
- Enhances sleep quality, helping to restore circadian rhythm

## **CBD**

- Doesn't bind directly to cannabinoid receptors but supports the ECS indirectly
- Boosts anandamide, known as the "bliss molecule"
- Activates serotonin receptors (5-HT1A), improving mood and reducing anxiety
- Helps modulate emotional memory, aiding in emotional processing

## **Potential Risks and Considerations**

Like any medication, cannabis must be used wisely. Overuse of high-THC products can lead to downregulation of the ECS, increased anxiety or emotional numbness, and dependency, especially in those using cannabis as their sole coping mechanism.

Research by Dr. Ethan Russo and others suggests that using CBD in conjunction with THC can mitigate some of these risks. Importantly, CBD has been shown to deactivate the brain's "drug-seeking" circuits, reducing cravings in those struggling with cannabis overuse, as well as addiction to other substances such as alcohol and narcotics.

It is essential to recognise when cannabis use becomes problematic. For instance, when it interferes with living in alignment with one's values, or when attempts to reduce use are unsuccessful. Intentional, therapeutic use means working with the plant consciously, not relying on it to avoid discomfort, but using it as a tool to help build resilience and develop other coping skills.

## **Integrating Cannabis with Other Trauma-Informed Therapies**

In fact, cannabis is most effective for the treatment of PTSD when it is used in conjunction with other healing modalities. As a "master teacher plant" - one that mirrors our body's own chemistry - it offers a unique ability to deepen self-awareness when used with intention. Somatic practices, talk therapy, breathwork, and nervous system regulation techniques can be amplified by cannabis when used under guidance, in a safe, supported environment.

In the right doses, cannabis can interrupt unhelpful communication patterns in the brain, reduce overactivity in the fight-or-flight response, engage the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's innate healing mode and foster feelings of safety, calm and connection.

## **Cannabis as a "Container" for Healing**

Through these mechanisms, cannabis can help create a physiological and psychological "container" - a temporary safe space in which the nervous system finds relief from the hypervigilance and overwhelm of PTSD. Within this state, deeper emotional processing, insight, and curiosity become possible.

The goal is to practice feeling safe and connected within that container, then integrate those experiences into everyday life. In time, the states that were once accessible only through cannabis become more consistent and self-generated.

## **A Conscious Path to Recovery**

Healing from trauma is not about erasing the past. It's about rewiring how we relate to it. The path is rarely straightforward. It is a messy, complex, deeply personal and ongoing process. But it is also full of possibility.

When used with respect and intention, cannabis doesn't replace your inner wisdom. It helps reveal it. It can quiet the noise of hypervigilance, soften the grip of fear, and open a window of safety where insight, connection, and healing become accessible. But cannabis is not the healer. You are. The plant simply supports your capacity to meet yourself with more compassion, curiosity, and courage.

If you're navigating the aftermath of trauma, please know that you don't need to walk this path alone. In fact, we aren't meant to. Healing happens in relationship. With safe people, skilled guides, supportive communities, and, for some, with conscious plant allies. Remember that wholeness is not the absence of pain, but the presence of connection, choice, and self-trust. Recovery is possible. You are not beyond repair. There is nothing wrong with you. There is only something that happened to you, and there is a way forward.