



## MY NOT-SO-SECRET: I'M ALWAYS A LITTLE BIT HIGH

Beyond stigma – how cannabis became the catalyst for profound healing and a dream job.

BY ASHLEY KEENAN

**A**s long as I live, I will never forget the first time I got way too stoned. My heart was pounding, I was sweating profusely, and it felt like the walls of that tiny Toronto comic book store were closing in. Convinced I was having a heart attack, my husband joked that maybe I would be the first person ever to die from too much weed. That did not help – at all.

Too much of a good thing is not always a good thing. Of course, I was never in any danger but that’s the thing about being too high – it really feels like you are. Ingesting cannabis can be tricky and I had just become a patient, learning as I went how the plant affected my body. Patients aren’t exactly given a how-to when they start medical cannabis. It’s mostly trial and error.

I am a cannabis patient in Canada. For me, that means taking cannabinoids like THC and CBD on a daily basis to treat medical conditions. I use dried flower, extracts, oils, dissolvable powders, topicals, and edibles made from cannabis on a regular basis. Just like any other medication, my cannabis is doctor prescribed.

## WHAT KIND OF ADULT OWNS A BONG?

The last thing I expected in my early thirties, as I was starting my second career, was to be unemployed and using cannabis daily. You are certainly not alone if that conjures a stereotypical

“

**NOTHING QUITE PREPARES YOU FOR THAT MOMENT WHEN YOU REALIZE THAT YOU WILL NEVER HAVE A NORMAL LIFE.**

”

“stoner” type in your mind’s eye. After a health crisis in 2015, years before recreational cannabis legalization, I pursued a medical marijuana authorization.

Nothing quite prepares you for that moment when you realize that you will never have a normal life. A decade of chronic health

issues mixed with a lifetime of an undiagnosed genetic disorder had rendered me disabled. Imagine having the debilitating pain and fatigue of the flu, only for years at a time. Conventional treatments had failed and I was unable to perform even the simplest tasks, let alone work a full-time job.



*Cannabis has helped me to deal with my health concerns.*



*I am passionate about the industry.*

The choice to pursue this line of treatment wasn't an easy one. I could accept being sick for the rest of my life, but what I couldn't accept was this barely functional version of myself I had become. In order to become a cannabis patient, I had to navigate a minefield of stigma and misinformation, as well as personal bias, about what kind of grown adult smokes weed. Despite being legally accessible to those with chronic health issues and disabilities for over a decade, medical cannabis was, and remains, highly stigmatized.

The science confused me but the real struggle was internal. Caught up in the perceived morality around cannabis, I had been taught that the only people who used the "devil's lettuce" were unmotivated and unproductive – lost individuals. I hid my prescription at first, medicating in secret, filled with guilt and shame, despite having the green light from my doctor.

The feeling was familiar to me, reminiscent of my early 20's when I started needing daily pharmaceuticals for an autoimmune disease. There was an



inherent shame around needing medication and being sick, regardless if that medication is plants or pills.

My road to medical cannabis was fairly easy, which is not the case for many patients. My doctor was on board, deeming it a smart decision and relieved that I wanted to avoid the opioids route. At first I feared my improvement was a placebo effect. As time passed, I needed less and less of my pharmaceutical medications, and with their lower doses came more mobility and a greater sense of personal control over my health.

Medical cannabis is often treated more like a punchline than a legitimate therapeutic treatment, conjuring the image of a burnout puffing on a joint while insisting "it's medicinal," as his buddies laugh. In reality, cannabis patients are just as diverse as the plant itself. While treatment for certain illnesses like cancer is widely accepted, there is a diverse array of conditions patients use cannabis for.

Medical use is authorized for a variety of reasons, including

chronic pain, insomnia, seizures, muscle spasms, inflammation, and regulating mood. There are mounting clinical studies, observational data, and compelling stories around the healing properties of cannabis. We have only scratched the surface in terms of research, as scientists continue to find new cannabinoids and their medicinal properties.

## WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, YOU MAKE INFUSED LEMONADE.

Not only did cannabinoid treatment drastically improve my health, but it also allowed me to turn a “home hustle” into a full-time career when I was too sick to work a conventional job. I have worked in the cannabis industry as a journalist, consultant, and patient advocate for just over two years now. As a solopreneur, I get to do what I love, support myself financially, and manage the dynamic demands of my health.

Cannabis isn't regulated like any other medicine in Canada. You can't simply get a prescription from your doctor and take it to your pharmacy. Patients have to seek out a doctor that authorizes medical cannabis, submit that authorization to a license holder, and then order their products online for mail delivery. The onus is on the patients to educate themselves on where to find a doctor, which places to order from, and even what products to buy.



*My quality of life is much improved.*

For many, the road to medical cannabis is not linear. Pursuing cannabinoid treatment can be a costly and difficult expenditure for people already struggling with health issues. Unlike other medications, medical cannabis is taxed provincially and federally. Employee health benefits largely do not cover it; neither do social assistance programs that aid with other prescriptions. These barriers, and others, lead to a lack of clinical research and physician support. Cannabis is still a last resort in medicine, considered only once other treatments have failed.

Frankly, it shouldn't be this hard. The path to this medicine is riddled with issues of access, affordability, and regulations that

vary by province. That is why medical cannabis reform and patient advocacy are so important to me – and why I built my career around them.

My cannabis journey isn't a unique one, but that doesn't make it any less transformative. Like so many other patients with a disability or chronic illness, I found that medical cannabis gave me back my life. Some people ask me what my secret is and I tell them: the not-so secret is, I'm always a little bit high. 🌿

---

**Ashley Keenan** is a journalist, consultant, and patient advocate in the cannabis industry. Ashley uses her way with words to normalize cannabis and chronic illness through science and storytelling.