



# THE AGONY OF ECSTASY

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1 x 31 min documentary episode  
*Opening Shot III series*  
Broadcast: ABC 2

Director/Producer: Katrina Lucas





## ABOUT THE FILM



### One Liner

*EPG program listing (max 225 characters)*

Convinced that ecstasy use is behind her struggle with anxiety, depression and memory loss, 28-year old Lise sets out to discover how the 'Love Drug' is affecting her brain and those of the half a million Ecstasy users in Australia today.

### Short Synopsis

Can ecstasy use cause lasting mental problems? 28-year-old university student Lise is convinced it can, and that her past use has left her struggling with anxiety, depression and memory loss. With ecstasy use on the rise, Lise sets out to discover how the 'Love Drug' is affecting her own brain, as well as those of the half a million ecstasy users in Australia. What does it mean for the future of our youth if ecstasy is the most popular party drug today?

technical term...

{ 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine }

A.K.A →



## One Page Synopsis

While ecstasy may have positive connotations - we call it the love drug, hug drug, happy pill, eccy, essence, candy and disco biscuits – its effects can be deeply disturbing. When ecstasy first hit mainstream Australia in the late 90s / early 2000s, a major UK survey showed that ecstasy users were 25 percent more likely to suffer a mental health disorder than the rest of the population.

Despite such warnings, ecstasy steadily gained in popularity until a massive worldwide shortage in 2011 affected the availability of the drug. Now ecstasy use is on the rise again and in Australia is the most common illicit drug of choice after cannabis. According to the 2014 UN World Drug Report, Australians are the biggest users per capita in the world, with one in ten people over the age of 14 having tried it. This means thousands of young Australians could experience anxiety, depression, mood disorders or significant memory loss from taking ecstasy. What kind of impact is this having on our society?

Like many of her generation, 28-year-old uni student Lise experimented with ecstasy when she was younger, taking up to four pills every weekend for about two years. She had heard about its detrimental effects on serotonin in the brain, but like all her friends she was having too much fun to care. Then the lows between the highs began to last much longer and were darker than ever and her moods fluctuated wildly. After a period of crippling anxiety and agoraphobia, Lise eventually lost her grip on reality and was rushed to the psychiatric ward in hospital, where she was diagnosed with psychosis and then clinical depression.

After several months of intensive psychiatric treatment and counseling, Lise felt stable enough to enroll again at university, determined to pursue her passion for poetry and linguistics. But she's now worried her Ecstasy use may not only have triggered a possible life-long struggle with mental illness, but also caused other long-term damage, particularly to her memory and capacity for learning.

Determined to get some answers to help her understand the lasting impact of Ecstasy, Lise tracks down other former and current users on the street, a detective, psychologists and scientists. She also decides to reveal her past drug use to her mum who, until now, had no idea Lise had taken so much Ecstasy years before.

According to the National Drug Strategy Household Survey, around half a million people are believed to take 'E' every year in Australia, yet there has been very little research into what it does in the brain. Lise visits a lab at Sydney University and discovers that animal studies have shown the active ingredient of ecstasy – MDMA – can seriously damage some neurons. But does this evidence apply to the human brain and particularly her own?

To find out if she has suffered any long-term damage, Lise gets her brain tested at the Adelaide Brain Clinic, which involves a cognitive test and measurement of her brain's electrical activity, with the aim to have her results compared with the average for females her age. She also decides to have her motor function skills tested as part of a scientific study into the long-term effects of Ecstasy use on movement.

Her test results are unexpected and disturbing, and Lise is forced to dig deeper into her past and confront the true reasons for her Ecstasy use. As a member of the 'E' Generation, can it ever be 'happily ever after' for her? Were all those fleeting moments of euphoria on E really worth it? And would she do it all again, knowing now the price she's paid?





## DIRECTOR Q & A

by Katrina Lucas

### Why were you interested in this topic?

Although I've never been a massive drug-taker, I did do some experimenting with illicit drugs (including ecstasy) in my teens and early 20s. But even on those few occasions, I always felt there was the potential for recreational drugs to have a serious impact on my mental health. Thus it was hardly surprising when I learned that some of my friends, who had been much heavier drug users, were now suffering from lasting mental health problems, including severe anxiety and depression. The one common thread that linked these friends together was that they had all taken ecstasy over an extended period of time and although they had stopped using, their symptoms hadn't diminished. I wanted to know how many other people were in the same situation.

I was also interested to know if there are real scientific links between increasing rates of mental illness and ecstasy use in Australia, and if the latest scientific research was pointing to serious long-term effects. When the opportunity to apply for ABC / Screen Australia's Opening Shot documentary initiative for filmmakers under 35, I knew it could be a great opportunity for exploring these issues.

### What do you want to leave the viewer thinking about?

Ecstasy is far more common than most people realise. Even if you haven't tried it, it's most likely that you know someone who has. Despite its prevalence, most people know very little about the long-term effects and risks of Ecstasy use, and I really wanted to bring more awareness to these issues in the hope of informing people regarding the choices they make around drug taking, but without pushing an 'anti-drug' agenda.

**What were the biggest challenges in making the film?**

Our biggest challenge was to find the right person to drive the narrative of the film. The candidate had to be willing to explain their mental health problems and also be honest about their past drug use. As both these issues are still quite taboo in society, several participants who we had lined up in the early stages of production dropped out as they ultimately felt uncomfortable about being involved in the film. It was thus a wonderful stroke of luck to meet Lise, who not only has a compelling story, but is also incredibly candid and articulate about herself and her past experiences. Furthermore her mother was willing to be involved in a very emotional scene in which they both speak honestly about their fears and anxieties around these issues.

**What were the most interesting things you learnt?**

One of the interesting things I learnt about in researching this program is the recent push, particularly in the UK, for scientific research into the immediate positive effects of MDMA on the brain, with the view to potentially use the drug in the clinical treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. Although it's an interesting premise, given the amount of scientific evidence to suggest the negative effects and potential toxicity, the scientists that I spoke to in the field of neuroscience and psychopharmacology consider it unlikely that MDMA would ever realistically be approved for clinical use.

## **Principal Participant Q & A**

by Lise van Konkelenberg

**1. Why did you want to make this film?**

The topic of ecstasy use and its link to mental illness is one that has greatly affected not just my life, but the lives of my family, my friends, and millions of others around the world. Yet, still, it is a topic that is incredibly misunderstood. Drug users are still very much judged by society and viewed in a negative light, when in reality most young people have tried an illicit drug of some form or another. Because the culture exists behind closed doors and underground, a lot of misinformation is passed around, and the only way to combat this is to shine a light on the contemporary research and insight in the fields of drug use and mental health. By producing a candid, "in the raw" account of the effect of drug culture, it is possible to put a face on the issue and open up an approachable, safe dialogue between those whose lives are touched by addiction and mental illness, whether they partake in drug culture or not. I jumped at the honour of making a documentary as an important contribution to this process.

**2. What was the best / most interesting thing about the process?**

The most interesting experience was being able to meet and talk with truly intelligent minds doing research in the area, not to mention several people whose lives it has affected personally, and learn of their experiences; people like Prof Iain McGregor at Sydney University, who can



barely contain his enthusiasm for pharmacology and new therapeutic treatments (such as oxytocin for therapy), and is such a wealth of knowledge.

Furthermore, as someone who is very interested in documentary and filmmaking, learning about the process was incredibly enriching, seeing the project progress from a concept and bare bones treatment to an overload of information that needed to be edited into a cohesive narrative (and putting those final touches on the voiceovers - I loved being a voice actor!)

### **3. What were the biggest challenges?**

Because the issue of drug use and mental health is so personal and has for decades existed behind closed doors, finding interviewees who were willing to discuss their experiences on camera or to contribute to the film was difficult for us, and understandably so - even I struggled at times with a subject as intimate as mental health. As we progressed we all realised how huge and complicated the issue truly is, so deciding what material to include that would best introduce viewers to the subject (and how they could find out more) was also a challenge. For example while filming voxpops on Hindley street, we had the opportunity to meet and talk with several people who contribute to online resources such as [pillreports.com](http://pillreports.com), [erowid.com](http://erowid.com) and [reddit.com/r/mdma](http://reddit.com/r/mdma), which are supportive digital communities designed around education and the proliferation of (sometimes lifesaving) information, but of course we couldn't include all of them so had to decide which was the most relevant.

### **4. What are you doing now?**

Continuing my studies, research and work into the increasingly overlapping fields of documentary, literature and media. You can find me at my blog [infinitemonkeyson.wordpress.com](http://infinitemonkeyson.wordpress.com) where I keep myself very busy!

## LINKS



The Ecstasy pill global database website that Lise looks at in the film: [www.pillreports.com](http://www.pillreports.com)

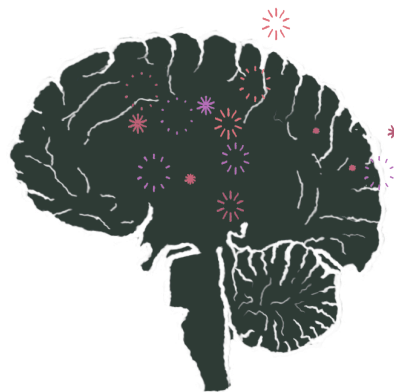
For more information about Professor Iain McGregor's research into the effects of MDMA on rats, and developing new drugs that imitate the social aspects of MDMA, contact:

<http://sydney.edu.au/science/people/iain.mcgregor.php>

For more information about Professor Jason White /Dr Gabrielle Todd's study into effects of MDMA on motor function contact:

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/staff/Homepage.asp?Name=Gabrielle.Todd>

More info about QEEG testing of electrical activity in brain: <http://qeegsupport.com/what-is-qeeg-or-brain-mapping/>





## ABOUT THE CREW

### **Katrina Lucas**

Writer / Director / Producer

As a creative producer and director, Katrina's documentary film work has screened on both big and small screens in Australia and internationally. In 2009 she was the recipient of the South Australian Screen Awards (SASA) 'Emerging Producer Award', and in 2011 directed an educational film about Melbourne street art that was nominated for an ATOM award. Recently Katrina produced AFI-nominated director Shalom Almond's documentary *My Long Neck* (2013), which premiered at DocWeek 2014, and is currently producing the Screen Australia Signature documentary funded 'Driving My Mother Sane' for filmmaker Paul Gallasch. Her next project as director follows a pop girl group with intellectual disabilities as they create and release their debut album.



### **Lauren Drewery**

Writer / Executive Producer

Lauren works as a writer, producer, director and story editor in partnership with filmmakers in Australia, Canada, the US and Italy. She was executive producer/script editor on 'My Long Neck' (2013), 'Project Baby' (2012 – ABC2) and 'Chasing Shadows' (2011 – ABC); she also directed 'The Graduate from Sudan' for SBS (2009), and was a writer/producer on 'The Lost Ship of Venice' for Discovery/France 5 (2007), 'Born to Fly' for Nat Geo International (2006), and the PBS series 'Secret Files



### **Juju Haifawi**

Co-Writer / Co-Producer

Juju is an experienced arts producer, having worked for Gorgeous Festival and MIMM Festival in Adelaide and as curator for numerous group exhibitions. Juju currently works at a national NGO as a facilitator for artists living with mental illness, as well as being visual artist and designer herself. Her designs have been featured in various galleries around Australia as well as on the children's television program 'The Fairies' for Channel 7. Juju's personal life has been impacted by ecstasy use and mental illness, which is why she took this project on board.



### **Mark Andersson**

Cinematographer / Editor

As a cinematographer and editor with a strong background in observational documentary, Mark's films have screened on SBS, ABC, NITV, Australia Network, Al Jazeera and at numerous national and international festivals. Mark has won a number of ACS awards for his cinematography, and previously shot two of the Opening Shot programs for ABC2 in 2012 – 'Love Heart Baby' and 'Meatwork'. Mark is currently shooting and editing the behind the scenes/DVD extras for the Foxtel miniseries 'Deadline Gallipoli'.



## CREDIT LIST

Written, Directed & Produced by  
**Katrina Lucas**

Writer / Executive Producer  
**Lauren Drewery**

Co-Writer / Co-Producer  
**Juju Haifawi**

Cinematographer / Editor  
**Mark Andersson**

Additional Cinematography  
**Paul Gallasch**  
**Maxx Corkindale**

Editor / Colourist / Online  
**Ernest Weiss-Hariyanto**

Sound Supervisor  
**Tom Heuzenroueder**

Sound Mix  
**Petar Ristic**

Animation & Motion Graphics  
**Brad Pickford**

Narration Editor  
**Ruth Cullen**

Legals  
**Kelly & Co Lawyers**

Produced in **South Australia**

Principal Participant  
**Lise van Konkelenberg**

Special Thanks to Participants  
**Robyn van Konkelenberg**  
**Detective Chief Inspector Steve Taylor**  
**Professor Iain McGregor**  
**Dr Richard Clark**  
**Professor Jason White**  
**Dr Gabrielle Todd**  
**Dr Dominic Thewlis**

Thanks also to  
**Alyssa Orvis - Screen Australia**  
**Melissa Juhanson - South Australia Film Corporation**  
**Nicky Ruscoe - ABC Development**

**Stan Mahoney & Format Collective**  
**Matea Gluscevic**  
**Verity Pearson-Dennett**  
**Linnet Ramos**  
**Dr Robert Wilcox**  
**Superintendent Bob Fauser**  
**Stacey Solomou**  
**Andrew Camilleri**

Music

**'Til it's too late'** Written by Angela Schilling, Katie Schilling and Sam Reynolds  
Performed by **Swimming** © 2013

**'New Friends'** Written by Angela Schilling, Katie Schilling and Sam Reynolds  
Performed by **Swimming** © 2013

**'Through Inner Sorrow'** by **Thursday Bloom** © 2013

**'Eden Valley, Loghouse'** Written by Angela Schilling, Katie Schilling and Sam Reynolds  
Performed by **Swimming** © 2013

**'Right Over You'** written by Alex Gooden and Tony Mitolo  
Performed by **Adapt Or Die** © 2014  
Courtesy of Sweat It Out

**'Intervals'** Written by David Brewer, Ben Smith, Martin Regan and Damon Satenek  
Performed by **Urtekk** © 2013  
Courtesy of Pilot Records

**'Zero (The One)'** by **Babicka** © 2013  
Courtesy of Untzz Records

**'Orkney'** Written by Angela Schilling, Katie Schilling and Sam Reynolds  
Performed by **Swimming** © 2013

**'Reprise'** by **Thursday Bloom** © 2013

**'Triplebrie'** Written by Angela Schilling, Katie Schilling and Sam Reynolds  
Performed by **Swimming** © 2013

**'Laissez-faire'** by **Flamingo** © 2014

**'O.T.H.A.F.A.'** by **Flamingo** © 2014

**'Fifteen'** Written by Angela Schilling, Katie Schilling and Sam Reynolds  
Performed by **Swimming** © 2013

Financed with the assistance of the  
**South Australian Film Corporation**



Produced in association with the  
**Australian Broadcasting Corporation**



Commissioning Editors  
**Edwina Waddy**  
**Andrea Ulbrick**

Financed with the assistance of  
**Screen Australia**



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