

# Seeking healing at a cannabis wellness retreat in the woods of Ontario

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Dimensions resort tries to help people with big doses of cannabis.

DIMENSIONS RETREAT

I don't feel anything.

I hear the soothing ring of crystal bowls and the tinkling of monsoon rainsticks – vibrational sounds often used to transport listeners into a deep meditative state. I

breathe in the strong scent of cannabis that fills the air as we take hits from a vape in the hopes of inducing a psychedelic experience.

But it's not working for me.

I've used medically prescribed cannabis for the past few years to help myself recover from a second life-changing traumatic brain injury. But in this moment, it feels futile. My mind is unable to rest. I feel self-conscious as other participants at this retreat appear to be relaxed and in the zone.

As we move toward the end of this cannabis ceremony, the retreat leader suggests I lie on a large, soft, buffalo-skin rug in the centre of the dome-like structure we are in. He wraps me in the rug and almost instantly, tears roll down my face. Counsellor Gina Miranda sits beside me, repeatedly whispering, "Let it go, you don't need to hold on to the accident any more." In minutes, I'm a sobbing mess, unsure of what's happening. I definitely didn't feel like I'm having a psychedelic or otherworldly experience, yet the tears keep flowing as her words echo in my mind.

While I may not have entered another "dimension," I've entered into this Dimensions healing retreat wholeheartedly.

On the shores of Maple Lake in Ontario's Haliburton County, about a 3½-hour drive from Toronto, Dimensions quietly popped up last spring. The clinically supervised cannabis healing retreat centre offers "psychedelic-assisted therapy," which involves a plant-medicine ceremony, psychotherapy and wellness activities.

The centre only uses high-dose cannabis – for now. It hopes to use magic mushrooms once they're legal in Canada. Researchers are studying the effects of psilocybin – magic mushrooms' psychedelic compound – and some doctors and therapy centres are already using it to treat anxiety and depression, and for end-of-life care.



Writer Charmaine Noronha is still recovering from two brain injuries.

#### DIMENSIONS RETREAT

Dimensions joins a recent wave of psychedelic wellness retreats that hold out the possibility of profound mental, emotional and spiritual healing trips. Once the realm of somewhat-underground Ayahuasca trips in Latin America, retreats offering cannabis, magic mushrooms, LSD, DMT and MDMA are opening around the world. The Netherlands, Jamaica, Oregon, Costa Rica and Mexico are front and centre of this new kind of travel, which typically comes with high price-tags (no pun intended). Such centres include The Innershift Institute in The Netherlands and The Journeymen Collective in British Columbia.

“Cannabis and other psychedelics have a way of bringing things to the surface,” says Dimensions’ clinical director Donald Currie, a registered psychotherapist. (There are two other registered psychotherapists on staff, and Dr. Douglas Cook, the chief medical officer at Dimensions, is a professor of neurosurgery at Queen’s University.)



“With proper preparation and integration, cannabis can help people release trauma and cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world,” Currie says.

I came to Dimensions seeking all of the above. Four years ago, I was a passenger in a car accident that left me with a second traumatic brain injury (TBI). In an instant, I was slammed with more than 50 symptoms and a plethora of health conditions. My life was upended once again after it had taken me three long, hard years to recover from my first concussion in 2017.

The last few years felt like a battle of survival, especially since TBIs are complex and complicated with no guaranteed medical protocol for recovery. Most survivors of significant brain injuries require multiple health care professionals and wellness providers to recover since a TBI affects your cognitive, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Many survivors find themselves mourning the loss of who they once were, since personality changes and long-term health challenges can arise.



Guests take part in mind-body therapies such as breathwork, reiki, meditation, float tank therapy, biofeedback, massage and psychotherapy.

BRILYNN FERGUSON/DIMENSIONS RETREAT

I've struggled with nervous-system deregulation since my injury, stuck in flight-or-fight mode, which makes day-to-day life tough. I was drawn to Dimensions because it focuses on nervous-system supportive therapies, integrating developments in neuroscience and neurobiology with plant medicine.

Guests take part in mind-body therapies such as breathwork, reiki, meditation, float tank therapy, biofeedback, massage and psychotherapy. In the evenings, there are sound bath sessions, where we lie on mats and listen to monsoon rainsticks, crystal harps and koshi chimes to help calm our systems before sleep.

I have tried many of these practices in the past, with the exception of biofeedback. I understand the science behind them and do believe they can be valuable. However, as someone dealing with persistent health issues, the four-day Ascend retreat I'd signed up for didn't give me enough time to facilitate significantly transformational healing.

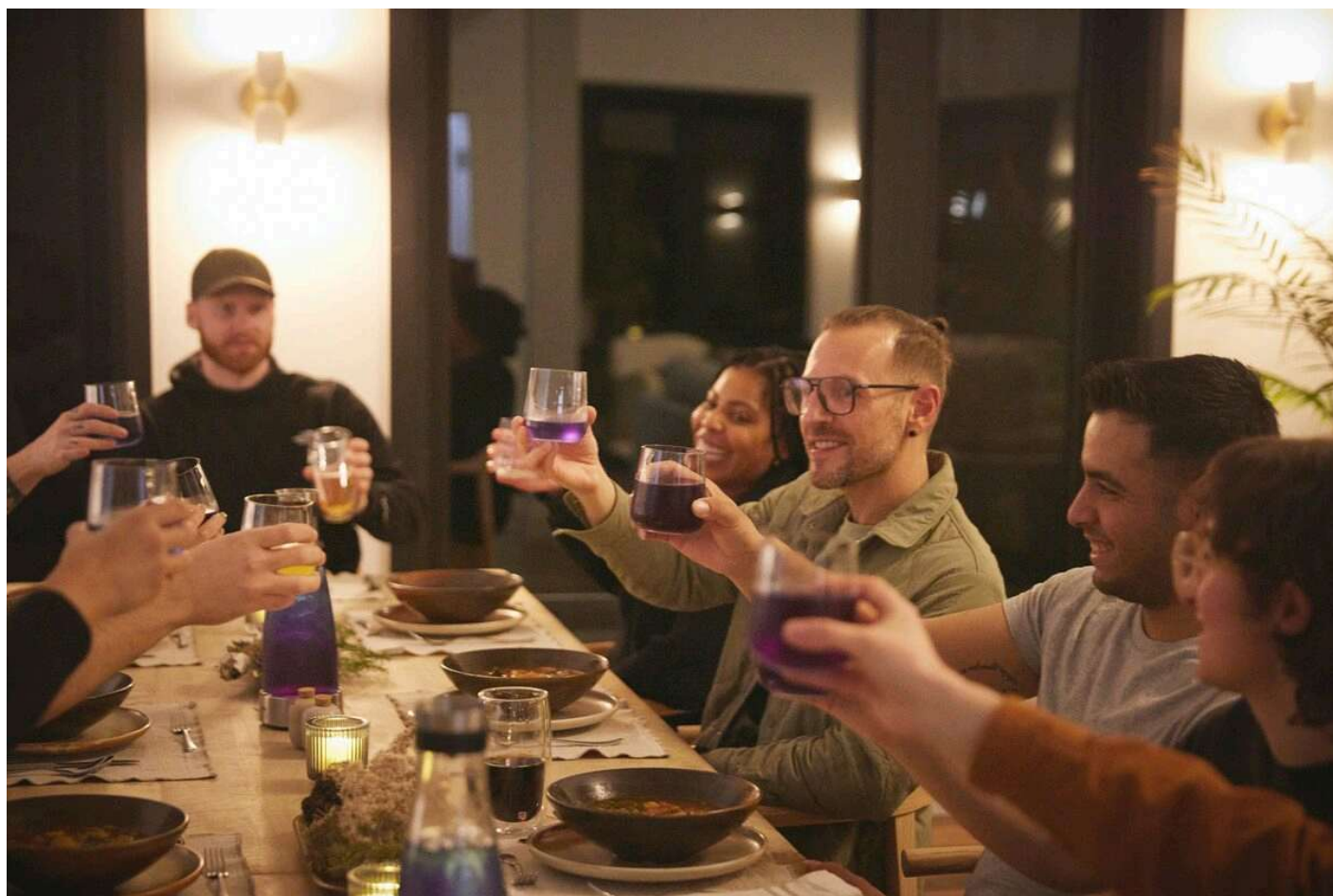
During my stay, each night I retired to my sleek, 450-square-foot cabin in the forest, which came with a soaker tub and a private deck with restorative views over Maple Lake. The nervous-system-supportive environment here is fostered with an empathetic community and healthy, delicious food. Menus are filled with antioxidant greens, immune-boosting berries and mushrooms, which contribute to brain health.

Retreat attendees gathered for each meal in a bright and airy lodge, where we broke homemade, gluten free flax crackers together. (They taste much better than they sound.) The all-inclusive experience is \$1,250 a night, with staff on hand to provide support and offer counselling during the program.

"The mind, body and spirit need to come together for us to be at peace," counsellor Gina Miranda tells me one day. She can relate to my experience having also sustained multiple brain injuries, something I find deeply valuable, as a TBI can be an isolating experience.

“Somatic therapies, as opposed to talk therapy, are a body-centric approach that aims to release the negative emotions, such as grief, anger and resentment, that result from trauma. Ninety-five per cent of our actions are subconscious,” she adds. “Are you willing to go deep?”

I’m still unsure about whether I “went deep” during the cannabis ceremony, but I do know Dimensions gave me an opportunity I hadn’t had during my four-year recovery: The kind, compassionate staff created a safe haven of genuine care, and healing can only take place when one feels seen, heard and cared for. That’s a Dimension I’d happily enter again.



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DIMENSIONS RETREAT

**If You Go**



Arrive with an open mind and heart. Participate in everything that's offered, as the programming is carefully curated. Dimensions Retreats offers programs for veterans, first responders, individuals and groups. The Ascend Retreat runs four nights from \$5,000, which includes meals, accommodation, one guided cannabis ceremony, psychotherapy, counselling and somatic treatments. Two-night wellness retreats begin at \$750 per night (single) and \$1,250 per night, double occupancy.

[dimensionsretreats.com](https://www.dimensionsretreats.com)

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*The writer was a guest of Dimensions. It did not review or approve the story before publication.*