

Ketamine: A Transformational Catalyst

presented by Michael Ziegler from TheGuidingPresence.com

Phil Wolfson and Glenn Hartelius have edited a new book entitled, *The Ketamine Papers: Science, Therapy and Transformation*, published by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS). Ketamine is a Schedule 3 prescription drug that has been safely used in anesthesia for decades. Many years ago, it was discovered that as anesthesia wore off, patients were having unique and often disturbing psychedelic effects for which they were unprepared. These effects were dubbed an “emergent syndrome.” This propensity of ketamine to occasion psychedelic experiences was pursued and used in psychedelic psychotherapy following the lead of the Mexican psychiatrist Salvador Roquet. In one chapter, Richard Yensen recounts his direct experience with Roquet’s methods and describes their evolution in psychedelic practice.

With the familiarity that arises from wide spread applications, anecdotal information indicated that ketamine produces relief from depression. This was pursued in the late 1990s and thereafter by researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health, who made every effort by reducing dosage to exclude the psychedelic effects but still produce an antidepressant response.

Wolfson and others have come to understand from their practices that while psychedelic effects may not be necessary for the antidepressant response, if you eliminate them entirely then you lose the therapeutic effect. At a minimum, a state of dissociation, or what Wolfson describes as a ‘trance,’ appears to be both necessary and desirable. It is necessary to use a sufficient dose of ketamine that occasions a full immersion experience in order to benefit from its available therapeutic effects.

Pharmaceutical approaches to treat depression have met with limited success over the preceding decades. Ketamine’s addition

to the psychiatric tool box has therefore been hailed as an important breakthrough. The current generation of doctors and psychotherapists have pioneered new uses for ketamine which can provide opportunities for drug treatment and psychotherapeutic work. These uses are considered to be 'off label.' That is to say the drug is being used for applications that were not specifically indicated for the molecule as an anesthetic agent for which it was originally given FDA approval. At sub-anesthetic dosages, that produce at least a trance effect on recipients, ketamine has been increasingly revealed to be frequently effective in the treatment of severe and unresponsive depression, suicidality, PTSD, and other psychiatric diagnoses, as well as for treating addiction and drug dependencies (alcoholism and opioid dependency).

Some of ketamine's more profound effects, which are generally occasioned at higher but sub-anesthetic doses, include the simulation of a near death experience, the complete dissolution of the identity of the participant and visionary states that can occur with other psychedelic molecules. Given the potentially profound and singular nature of the ketamine psychedelic experience, the meaning making that can be derived from such experiences can effect a radical transformation of an individual's worldview.

The contributors to this book weigh in on their fruitful personal experiences regarding how to use the material (dose and delivery system), and their clinical strategies for ketamine psychotherapeutics. *The Ketamine Papers* provides an exposition of how this unique molecule can specifically be used in clinical settings to ameliorate difficult states of mind by relaxing and enabling recipients to be more receptive to compassion and understanding for themselves and others. The book provides a clear exposition of the different protocols utilized for ketamine. Physicians and lay persons looking for an understanding of this new and controversial set of methodologies will benefit from a careful read of the collected papers in this book.

Ketamine's potential lies in its ability to catalyze individual transformation. The primary effect of ketamine seems to be its ability in recipients to shift their awareness from one fixated mind state perspective to a new one. Hopefully and usually, this kind of paradigm shift leads to a more enlightened view of their human condition. With adequate attention given to set and setting in its application, this can lead to better personal behavior. A radical shift of awareness can break the cycle of depression. A paradigm shift of awareness can also bring a person into a new relationship with their addictions. Users have reported that ketamine can also occasion profound non-dual and transpersonal experiences that provide them with a deeper understanding of their place in the world. Our evolving relationship with consciousness as revealed with these unique molecules may move us towards greater sensitivity, awareness and compassion for ourselves and our fellow travelers on the planet.

Transformation can be either personal or political. The journey of transformation implies that we are capable of moving from one state to another. Sometimes there comes with this perceptual shift the ability to stay in that new awareness that we discover. We are able to overcome the constraints of past inertia, habit and the 'rubber band effect' (which describes how after an expansion we tend to go back to where we started). Political transformation of unjust systems or personal transformations out of depression or addiction may be aided by particularly potent catalysts. Ketamine may be a unique molecule that provides individuals with an experience that so powerfully shifts their awareness that it can, with the proper support, provide a real tool for individual transformation.

Although there is been much publicity recently about the possible beneficial transformative powers of illegal psychedelic drugs such as MDMA, DMT, LSD, and psilocybin, today ketamine is the only psychedelic drug that is currently legal and maybe administered and prescribed by MDs. All of the other psychedelic drugs are

confined to Schedule 1, and thus their use is prohibited and criminalized. Recently a small number of these Schedule 1 molecules have been studied in tightly controlled research settings. Psilocybin and MDMA (the latter research being sponsored by MAPS) are the first of these medicines to be put through a rigorous screening process by the FDA after decades of suppression. This process of re-scheduling will go on for many years and may or may not lead to them being shifted into a category that will enable them to be used as prescription drugs. All the while, many tens of millions of people worldwide use psychoactive substances to explore their awareness, in spite of the risk that their actions could land them in jail. What makes the ketamine molecule unique is that it is the only potentially transformative catalytic (psychedelic) available for use by the medical community.

The Ketamine Papers describe fresh protocols and strategies for using this molecule. Previously most of the medical literature on this molecule has been limited to its anesthetic properties and applications. What the authors of the various papers in this book describe are their clinical experiences and the evolving practices that they have developed to use ketamine for the treatment of depression, addiction, PTSD and psychedelic exploration. The book provides doctors with a way to understand the novel applications of a psychedelic material and to understand how their peers are using it in their clinics, often without a psychedelic intention. This book provides the medical community with a resource guide of best practices for the burgeoning uses of ketamine. Laypeople will find it stimulating to participate in the medical and psychotherapeutic journeyman's conversation that dives into the specifics regarding how psychedelics can occasion transformative and transpersonal experiences.

Wolfson describes how ketamine works as follows: "A ketamine psychedelic experience tends to offer up the possibility for transformation of the self by isolating the mind to some extent

from external sensations, altering body consciousness towards an experience of being energy without form, and by amplifying in scrambling the contents of mind in unpredictable ways – all of this generating the potentiality for changes in consciousness that may be beneficial and persistent.”

Ketamine research has shown that the substance creates a high degree of neuro-plasticity in rats. This may explain in humans the so-called “cumulative effect” that produces transformative results from multiple sessions in a relatively short time frame, often two weeks in duration. One attribute of neuro-plasticity is the physical remodeling of the brain by dendritic shifts. It may be that the ability to occasion a shift in consciousness while under ketamine’s influence and its aftermath contributes to optimistic neuro-plasticity among the challenging mind states such as depression, PTSD and addiction.

Ketamine seems to allow these uncomfortable dis-eases to be felt in their origins and subsequently relaxed and re-contextualized. As recipients of ketamine move forward, what was previously experienced as a hell realm may be released as another variant in the flow of mind states that spontaneously and constantly arise and pass away.

There arises the visceral experience that these impacted mind states can be loosened and not felt as inevitable and intrinsic parts of the self. Instead they can be experienced as transitory and impermanent. One of the great benefits of the ketamine experience is the learning that comes from the way it powerfully alters and interrupts a person’s perceptual flow so that fixed dimensions can become more fluid again. Ketamine has demonstrated its power to break the fixated continuity of inflexible and neurotic experiences that characterizes chronic addictive behavior, PTSD and depressive episodes.

Many of the book’s contributors describe how an individual's experience of the ketamine mind state can provide a doorway to

another mode of seeing and being. Patients have reported that with a single session of ketamine, persistent and previously untreatable depressions and suicidal intentions have gone away. In some cases the transformative capacity of the ketamine experience needs to be contextualized and grounded within a longer-term guided psycho-spiritual healing process. In other practices, low dose applications of ketamine used repeatedly over time have been shown to be effective for treatment resistant depression and other emotional difficulties by means of a straight forward application of the molecule itself, in medical settings, without a psychotherapeutic component. *The Ketamine Papers* expands on all of these applications.

For a transformative catalyst to have widespread clinical applications, it must also be economically viable. The cost for the molecule and its delivery has to be reasonable, especially in this case, as at this stage ketamine therapy will not be covered by insurance. Its duration of influence has to fall within a time frame where the cost of all attending doctors, psychotherapists, nurses and other care givers has to be within the economic reach of those who are seeking treatment. In the cases of MDMA and Psilocybin, these molecules require more than 4-7 hours of dedicated care. We must consider the delivery cost for any medicine if it is to find widespread prescription use. Ketamine is unique among these materials because it is relatively short acting.

A ketamine experience generally lasts 25 minutes to an hour with another hour or more needed for recovery to baseline. The more emphatic intravenous sessions run 45 minutes to an hour and occasion the trance experience. Ketamine Assisted Psychotherapy (KAP) sessions tend to run to three hours which covers the arc of an initiation/induction, the direct experience of the medicine and recovery and integration. All the ketamine delivery options can be delivered at a reasonable cost. As the market for this new psychiatric medicine widens we would expect to see delivery costs fall. Ketamine itself is an inexpensive generic

medicine, costing only a few dollars for a dose, thus the markup for treatment is solely based on the professional markups that are charged.

It appears that we are entering a new era in which our understanding of the relationship between neurochemistry and mind states and behavior is rapidly expanding. The careful observations of the clinical community have revealed that there are existing psychoactive molecules that possess under-appreciated primary effects which can aid in transformation and relieve suffering. We are just at the beginning of a journey where we are developing a deepening understanding around a class of pharmaceuticals which Ralph Metzner calls “allies for our awakening”. The editors and contributors to this book are to be applauded for their trail breaking efforts in bringing us a renewed vision of the ketamine molecule as an important ally for the therapeutic community that can provide relief for impacted mind states, offer deep meaning-making possibilities and can serve as a catalyst for growth and transformation of consciousness.

What follows is other material that will not be in the published in the MAPS article which further expands on the prevalent uses of ketamine beyond the current “off label” applications pursued by the medical profession which are discussed in crowd sourced publications. This is the more esoteric view of uses for non-therapeutic purposes:

Ketamine has been traditionally described as a dissociative anesthetic because its primary use has been for anesthesia. In a dissociated experience one feels detached from oneself, perhaps having the sense that what you are experiencing is depersonalized and at a distance, as if you are seeing oneself and the world around you from the third person point of view of a camera shooting a film. This can also include a feeling of the dissolution of one’s body and personal identity, the perception that your perception of people and things around you may be distorted and not real, and a new sense that there are multiple cognitive

reality maps that exist simultaneously beyond our normative base line. At higher doses the users persona disappears though a conscious observant witness remains that is in experience. You feel you are in the experience but not of it. These “dissociative” qualities are present in the ketamine mind state. The higher dose injected ketamine mind state is so ontologically unique that once one has passed through that gateway, one’s experience of consciousness is forever altered.

There are multiple ways that ketamine can be delivered: orally, nasally or through injection. A sublingual troche of 100 mg. of Ketamine will bring on a slightly altered mind state in which there is a sense of expansion and dissolution. At this dose and with this delivery method the individual can track instructions, even stand up and walk around or dance. It is conducive to guided work and the ability to have a conversation is not fully impaired. A first time injection of ketamine at a sub-anesthetic dose ranging from 70-100 ml. will reveal a mind state to the recipient which radically shifts their normative perceptual paradigm and compels visitation to an alternate universe of cognitive possibility beyond the familiar daily mind set.

By injecting Ketamine a much greater portion of the medicine is active in the system. Some researchers have suggested that the IV injection method delivers close to 100% potency whereas the oral or nasal route delivers only about 20% in comparison. The injection route delivers a fundamentally different mind state than the oral and nasal methods at typical dose levels. It is possible at very high dose levels using the oral and nasal delivery methods to reach the injection levels of intensity.

At a sufficient dose ketamine suggests that our perceptual reality map may lie in a narrower bandwidth than what it is possible to perceive. Evolution has bounded our perceptual framework so that we can focus on the tasks and awareness required at hand and thus has limited our access to expanded states of awareness when we are engaged in worldly tasks. Many of the primary

effects of the ketamine mind state are much valued by many spiritual traditions who specifically seek to occasion non-dual awareness, which is a kind of dissolution of the false dichotomy of the mind / body duality of perception.

This type of unitive perception and experience of oneness may also be occasioned through contemplative practices including but not limited to, prayer, fasting and meditation. Religious traditions have used specific language to capture the unique felt experience when one moves past normative consciousness and enters a non-dual or expanded experience. The western religious tradition has called this: radical amazement, standing in the presence, and Christ-consciousness. In eastern traditions like Zen Buddhism it has been named kensho.

There are fruitful studies ahead of us as we begin to investigate how our brain chemistry relates to our primary religious experience. One person's distress in a dissociative episode might be another's holy grail of non-dual spiritual attainment. Both cases might share the same perceptual qualities, though how the individual digests the integration of the experience is the difference between heaven and hell. The unique mind state that it reveals may also provide lines of experiential inquiry into transcendent primary human experience, which some participants might refer to as spiritual or religious experience and for others, a secular felt expression of the same.

Many individuals have been drawn to explore the ketamine experience with a gaze beyond its anesthetic qualities and uses to treat pathologies. There are revealing aspects to the mind state that arises with its use that seem to be able to inform us about consciousness itself. John Lilly was a pioneer in using injected ketamine for investigating consciousness, sometimes in conjunction with a sensory isolation tank. The combination of sensory deprivation and the ketamine mind state allows to explorer to bear witness to the ways in which consciousness can reveal itself. In this silence, the interested observer can pay

attention to refined state of awareness that are not disturbed by extraneous sensory inputs. Lilly suggested that it seems to allow the perceptive witness to view awareness from the place it arises. For Lilly these states also led him to experience extra human contact with cosmic entities and what he considered deeper wisdom tradition frequencies.

For individuals who are not seeking a remedy for a pathology, the ketamine experience can bring forth an alternative view of consciousness that suggests deeper possibilities of sensory dimensions. It is all but impossible to capture the other dimensionality of ketamine awareness, though language like: non-dual, beyond the normative mind-body matrix, archetypal, reveals a unique visual ecology, deepens synesthesia, dream potentiation, and ego dissolved- begin to suggest what the felt experience is like. In this state, one is aware of other dimensions of experience and in reflecting on the unique qualities of the ketamine mind state seems to promote meaningful insights to those who have taken the journey.

Some users prefer to combine this psychoactive material with others in order to benefit from these synergies. The Mexican psychiatrist Salvadore Roquet was one of the first to capitalize on the useful primary affects of ketamine in combination with other psychoactive materials. He would use sequential injections of ketamine to help facilitate a sense of psychological resolution to the material that was revealed after all night extended guided experiences on LSD and/or psilocybin mushrooms.

A survey of the testimony of participant observer experience reports on the crowd sourced web sites Erowid and TripSit reveals that ketamine is frequently used in combination with other molecules. There are two trends. Ketamine is frequently used at the tail end of another psychedelics effective arc. For example, at the end of an LSD, MDMA, or mescaline journey. This is reminiscent of uses pioneered by Salvadore Roquet, who noticed that ketamine could "resolve" material that arose in the earlier

journeys. What does “resolve” mean in this case? Resolution might be better understood as the ability to dissolve and thus resolve the felt residue of the prior journey into a final stage mind state where the user is left with more unitive feelings that in turn leaves them with a new and more balanced relationship to their experience that preceded. Any fixations or particularly strong energetics that have lingered from the prior psychedelic journey may be thus be said to be resolved in the dissolving and unifying psychedelic effects of injected ketamine. It is also reported that ketamine softens the come down or tail of other drugs experiences.

The prudent protocol for ketamine injections requires safe and contained spaces in private and protected settings, where the individual can lay still in their own experience and not be disturbed by outside influences such as noise, light, or social interaction. Once they begin to return to base line, at that time they may be able to recount their experience to a third party. It appears that the more attention that is paid to preparation, the curating of the experience and the integration of what arises, that the inclusion of such qualities of good attention will deliver more transformational meaning making on the other side of the experience.

Based on crowd sourced reports and the recent work within the medical community, ketamine might have future applications for overcoming the fear of death and learning how to die consciously. The ability of ketamine to occasion the experience of near death states (death in the most existential, psychological and spiritual sense) suggests that it may be a useful tool to provide access to explore these realms. Its ability to dissolve the body/mind matrix can also provide a useful catalyst for the contemplative cultivation of non-dual awareness. People report that they benefit from the ability to shift their gaze, from focused inquiry to letting go in surrender as they oscillate between exploring their consciousness and then dissolving again. This provides the sense of how one is

the author of one's narrative. There seem to be useful applications at lower doses for talk therapy sessions where a mildly expanded state help open individuals to challenging memories. The primary benefit of its use seems to come from the realization that human consciousness is comprised of a multiplicity of unique mind states and that the ketamine molecule can provide an access point for this felt sense.

The Guiding Presence is an online program which features candid presentations by leading experts on the art of guiding others in psychedelic consciousness.