

A Report of Group Ketamine Therapy Combined with Altered-States Breathwork

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INTRODUCTION

Psychedelic medicines, such as psilocybin, MDMA, and ketamine, can occasion a wide variety of subjective experiences. Common to many of them is the experience of boundlessness and interconnectedness. This interpersonal phenomenon has been utilized throughout the millennia to enhance psychospiritual well-being and unity in social groups. Participants of group psychedelic experiences report increases in long-term levels of well-being^[1,2].

Since the emergence of psychedelics in the 1960s, group psychedelic experiences have almost exclusively occurred in underground settings under the radar of law enforcement. After the prohibition of psychedelic medicines in the 1970s, research into their use essentially stopped until the 21st century. As such, group settings have not been well-described^[3].

The psychedelic prohibition ushered in non-medicinal forms of altered-states therapy, popularly seen in Holotropic Breathwork^[4] and the Wim Hof Method^[5], which use a pattern of deep, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing to induce non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC). Furthermore, breathing exercises have been shown to decrease anxiety states and improve well-being, even without the induction of NOSC, by up-regulation of the parasympathetic nervous system^[6-8].

Today, ketamine has been increasingly used for treating mental health disorders, such as depression and PTSD. While not a classic serotonergic psychedelic, ketamine shares many experiential similarities to psilocybin and LSD in that ketamine produces feelings

of boundlessness, loss of self, interconnectedness, and other domains as are common to mystical-type experiences.

As the quality of the psychedelic experience correlates with therapeutic success^[9], practitioners are seeking methods to improve the experience of ketamine therapy. This article describes—to our knowledge—the first report of a group ketamine session facilitated by supra-ventilatory breathwork.

CASE INFORMATION

The participants met in a small pioneer-style adobe house in Southern Utah. Lying on the floor with mats and blankets, each self-administered 200mg oral ketamine troches. The breathwork facilitator led the group through a series of deep breathing exercises for 25 minutes, culminating in a supra-ventilatory pattern. The supra-ventilatory pattern alone can occasion a slightly altered state of consciousness.

The session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Afterward, the group engaged in a period of self-disclosure.

Participant 1

A 37-year-old male previously treated with intravenous ketamine therapy for depression described the group ketamine+breathwork session as more ‘lucid’ than an IV session. Coming into the session, he had been troubled by political tribalism, and the ketamine experience allowed him to see the artificial divisions as well as experience a sense of connectedness to others. He described a deep feeling of acceptance and compassion. He

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was able to self-guide the experience more easily than in previous treatments.

Another insight for him was the idea of being a thermostat versus a thermometer. In most group settings, he lets others set the mood. In this group experience, he could set his own temperature and not let the conversations of others determine his mood.

This participant felt that the breathwork session created an anxiety-free state prior to the ketamine peaking and that he was at less risk for a ‘bad trip.’

Participant 2

A 44-year-old male mental health professional previously treated with ketamine once via a 150mg troche without breathwork described the group ketamine+breathwork as an ineffable experience. “The vernacular is lacking to be able to describe the whole experience,” he said.

He said that the breathwork allowed him to relax into the experience. It was a gradual and natural process and made for an easy transition into the psychedelic state. “The experience gave a sense of unifying with the people that were there.” He described feelings of gratitude and closeness.

This participant felt like the breathwork allowed him to go deeper into the experience with less anxiety. “I think this could help people ease into trauma-focused therapy,” he said. “It lowers your guard.”

Participant 3

A 50-year-old male healthcare provider previously treated with ketamine IV, intranasal, and 250mg troche said the breathwork placed him into a very calm state while the ketamine was coming on. He described the ketamine+breathwork experience as being as deep as his previous IV session but that he was better able to control his body as the IV session produced a profound out-of-body

experience. The breathwork placed the experience in a very joyful and peaceful place.

He also said the ketamine+breathwork experience allowed him to recover more quickly than IV ketamine. The experience allowed him to change his lens of perspective, especially since he had set intentions previously. The positive mental effects lasted at least one week, during which he felt he was ‘buzzing.’

DISCUSSION

Ketamine is usually administered intravenously or intramuscularly in a physician’s office. However, therapists have begun using ketamine troches (lozenges) to facilitate in-depth psychotherapy. This case report describes the use of ketamine troches in a group setting while being led through rhythmic deep-breathing exercises.

The participants all agreed that deep rhythmic breathing enhanced the session and likely potentiated the troche, enabling a lower dose of oral ketamine to produce a deep, psychedelic state.

Based on previous studies, deep breathing has been shown to lower anxiety and improve mood. Preceding a ketamine experience with breathwork seems to improve the mindset of the participant and may provide an optimal setting in which to conduct ketamine therapy.

CONCLUSION

Ketamine troches at doses of 200mg and, when combined with deep breathing exercises, may be able to occasion an experience that approximates an IV infusion. Deep rhythmic breathing may lower anxiety and improve the mindset of participants. Additionally, a group experience of ketamine+breathwork is well-tolerated, may result in increased well-being, and may lower the out-of-pocket costs of ketamine therapy.

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Allen, S; Garnett, S; Bean, R (2022, June). A Report of Group Ketamine Therapy Combined with Altered-States Breathwork. *The Journal of Psychedelic Psychiatry*, 4(2).

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