
Karl Jansen’s new book, *Ketamine: Dreams and Realities*, summarizes a tremendous amount of basic and clinical data about ketamine, an anesthetic agent that, in subanesthetic doses, elicits a syndrome quite similar to that seen with the classical hallucinogens like lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), dimethyltryptamine (DMT), and psilocybin (Bowdle, Radant, Cowley, Kharasch, Strassman, and Roy-Byrne, 1998). This unique and valuable book is most notable for the wealth of first-person accounts by recreational ketamine users. In including these accounts, Jansen greatly expands the only other comparable publication, by Ronald Siegel nearly 25 years ago (Siegel, 1978). Considering the recent upsurge in ketamine use and abuse, this is an important and timely contribution. It also complements the increasing use of ketamine in psychiatric research as a “psychotomimetic” agent (Krystal, Karper, Seibyl, Freeman, Delaney, Bremner, Heninger, Bowers, and Charney, 1994).

The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), a nonprofit organization promoting education about, and research into, hallucinogens and marijuana, published *Ketamine: Dreams and Realities*. In addition, the founder of DanceSafe, a group dedicated to minimizing the harm done to those who take drugs in nightclubs and other large dance venues, wrote the Introduction to this book. Thus, in the spirit of “harm reduction,” Jansen does not attempt to gloss over the problems associated with ketamine abuse.

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Jansen published a paper outlining his theories relating ketamine and the near-death experience in this Journal's Fall, 1997 issue (Jansen, 1997), and I was one of several invited commentators. His basic hypothesis was that since ketamine administration replicates many of the features of the naturally-occurring NDE, and since endogenous ketamine-like compounds may exist in the brain, these endogenous substances could mediate NDEs. The "neuroprotective" effect of ketamine-like compounds might explain the reason for the release of these substances near death. However, as I suggested in my comments on this paper, there is no need for such chemicals to be psychedelic (Strassman, 1997), unless of course, they truly do mediate our perception of a nonmaterial reality.

While his book reviews this material in greater detail than the 1997 paper, the intervening years have produced little additional support for endogenous ketamine-like compounds in the brain. Thus, Jansen emphasizes here the descriptive similarities between ketamine intoxication and NDEs more than the causative role of ketamine or related compounds in the phenomenon.

Part I, "The Light Within," paints a broad view of the history of ketamine and the context of its current popularity in Europe and North America. Jansen presents in detail the stories of two well-known ketamine abusers, Marcia Moore and John Lilly, who, while valuing and enjoying its effects, later lost control over their use. This helps set the stage for later descriptions of its effects, reports that Jansen obtained from interviews and written correspondence, and a review of the literature.

Jansen then discusses the similarities between ketamine effects and those of the NDE, similarities that are evident and striking. This section concludes with some far-reaching speculation about how ketamine might modify brain function and consciousness to generate these effects. The works and writings of Stanislav Grof and Timothy Leary figure prominently in this section.

Part II, "The Dark Side," describes adverse effects of ketamine, including dependence and its treatment. Jansen also offers advice on how to minimize physical and psychological problems when using ketamine.

Part III, "Unity," summarizes Russian psychiatrist Evgeny Krupitsky's pioneering ketamine-assisted psychotherapy research (Krupitsky and Grinenko, 1997), and suggests future areas for similar investigations.

Upon completing reading this book, I experienced a feeling that it could have been more. Maybe it was the sense of the search for meaning, health, and personal integration that Jansen's respondents relate, and their difficulty obtaining these through their ketamine use. Perhaps the
nature of these reports, all retrospective and not obtained in a clinical research setting, gave the impression of too-great "exegesis" in their reporting. Also, I was left wondering how similar the ketamine and near-death conditions really are. Jansen's figure that 15 to 50 percent of those who enjoy ketamine's effects develop ketamine abuse, does not comport with the natural history of those who have had a spontaneous NDE. That is, those with a "real" NDE rarely make repeated attempts to reproduce such experiences, and instead put into effect the lessons learned.

These concerns do not diminish the importance of ketamine in understanding the biological concomitants of near-death experience, nor ketamine's potential therapeutic utility. However, they may restrain enthusiasm for overinterpreting the data.

Jansen's attempt to align himself squarely within the ketamine "scene," while it may appeal to those within that milieu, seemed unnecessary for a book that purports to offer a balanced perspective. While Jansen is a fount of information and opinion regarding the social contexts of drug use, consciousness, religion, and science, a second edition would benefit from focusing his writing.

Despite these shortcomings, there is no other book on ketamine as exhaustive and thorough as this one. The reference list contains 635 citations, and it is well-indexed. The full gamut of ketamine's subjective effects appear here, and anyone with an interest in why people take mind-altering drugs will find Jansen's book indispensable.

References


