

The Beginner's Guide to Ketamine Therapy for Mental Health

By Leah Benson, LMHC, Ed.M

Introduction

Several years ago, my patients started asking me about ketamine (sounds like “*keh-tuh-meen*”) and psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. I didn’t have a clue...

That’s all changed. Since 2020, I have been in overdrive to build my expertise in the subject. At this point, I’ve worked with dozens of clients using ketamine to elevate their emotional status quo, developed the integration program of one of the fastest growing ketamine startups in the country, and most importantly, methodically built my own experiential knowledge of ketamine and psychedelic-assisted therapy.

Coming from a background in what is called “depth psychology” at the beginning of my career, in 2013 I moved into body-based psychotherapy because it had become clear that for therapy to be effective, the body has to be involved.

My book *Emotional Utopia* is all about how that works. And it DOES work.

There are times, though, when even bigger guns are required, for depth or speed. That’s where ketamine and psychedelics shine. Ketamine in particular is especially helpful for those who are not comfortable with intense feelings in their bodies.

First and foremost, you need to know that “doing drugs” is not something I take lightly. I’m a cautious person. I never “took drugs,” and I thought people who did were mostly irresponsible losers, or at least struggling addicts. (I was one type of casualty of the War on Drugs).

Understanding the way different “drugs” work—and how they can be effective in making people’s lives better—has changed all that.

Rather than make this book about both ketamine and psychedelic-assisted therapy, I opted to focus on ketamine. Mostly because ketamine’s mechanism of action and subjective experience is so different from that of traditional psychedelics—those being LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, DMT, and ayahuasca. (Not to mention the myriad of other mind-altering substances being used for mental health: MDMA, Ibogaine, and 2C-B, among many others.) For that reason, ketamine deserves its own book. Also, ketamine is currently the only “psychedelic” that is legal across the nation, so we’re not in any gray areas when discussing its use. (Remember, I’m a cautious person).

The important thing for you to know about ketamine versus traditional psychedelics is that a ketamine experience is a much gentler experience physically, even at very high doses. The fact that the molecule is an anesthetic practically assures that gentler experience, even if subjectively you begin to wonder or worry while under its influence.



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Ketamine is a serious treatment for mental health concerns, and deserves to be treated as such. To make the material extremely accessible, however, I designed this book to flow as an informal conversation you and I are having in my consulting room. Try not to be fooled by my casual tone, though. There is nothing casual about this material.

Our conversation begins with the basics of ketamine, ketamine therapy, and safety. That's because I'm cautious, and because the drug war gave ketamine a bad reputation as dangerous—which it isn't. In Chapter Two I'll answer questions to help you decide if ketamine might be right for you. Chapter Three is about what to expect if you decide to take the leap. Chapter Four contains warnings and contraindications. Chapter Five will illustrate the practical changes ketamine can help create in your daily life. After that comes a glossary of terms you'll probably run across as you research this whole topic of psychedelics. A lot of the terms are pretty vague, as are the definitions out there. I've tried to make them very concrete to give you an idea of what these terms mean in a practical sense for everyday life. Lastly, I've added endnotes and a bibliography, in case you want to read more about the subject.

Rest assured, I am not selling ketamine or psychedelics. My business is therapy and coaching. You'll see the term "integration" all over the place when it comes to responsible ketamine and psychedelic journeying. Therapy and coaching are versions of the "integration" of ketamine and psychedelic journeys that lead to the lasting change and the elevated emotional status quo you're looking for. Therapy and coaching are not the only ways to integrate, but they're good ones. No bias here!

I'll end with a warning that I repeat ad nauseam. Ketamine and psychedelics are not a panacea. They are a catalyst for lasting change. If you use them for symptom management—which you can absolutely do—then that's all you'll get. If you use them as a springboard to the practice of new thought patterns and new behaviors, you'll get lasting results. These lasting results are, of course, best facilitated by a systematic self-paced program like The Feel Good Formula® I created, or by regular meetings with a therapist, coach, mentor, or guide, individually or in a group setting.

Good journey and safe travels.

Leah Benson
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