# Party drugs MDMA and ketamine in therapy for gay men



As the realm of mental health treatment evolves, two drugs traditionally known for their recreational uses in the gay community - MDMA and ketamine - are garnering attention for their therapeutic potentials, though we should say right at the top of this piece that home dosing is seriously not recommended. With ketamine therapy already legally practiced and MDMA therapy awaiting FDA approval, these substances could revolutionise treatments, especially for trauma and treatment-resistant conditions.

Originating as an anaesthetic and pain management tool, ketamine has shown significant promise beyond its initial applications. Medical professionals observed its anti-inflammatory properties, which have a profound impact on mental health. Chronic pain and inflammation are often linked to conditions such as depression, and alleviating these physical symptoms can lead to substantial mental health improvements.

Corinne Bailey, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and ketamine therapist at My Denver Therapy, elaborates on the transformative effects of ketamine on the brain. "Brains and nervous systems that are very depressed or filled with trauma are packed with inflammation," Bailey explained. Ketamine’s ability to reduce this inflammation can result in rapid mood improvements, often described as comparable to years of traditional talk therapy achieved in just six sessions.

Bailey likens the impact of ketamine to a "hard reboot" of a computer, giving the brain a fresh start. By acting as an NMDA receptor antagonist, ketamine blocks glutamate—a chemical tied to anxiety and stress—thereby providing the brain the opportunity to heal and reevaluate ingrained thoughts and behaviours.

The potential benefits of ketamine therapy resonate deeply within the gay community, which frequently faces systemic discrimination, oppression, and abuse. Such trauma manifests in various forms, impacting people on multiple levels—physically, relationally, and biologically. Bailey notes that ketamine therapy is particularly effective in addressing these deep-seated traumas swiftly and affordably compared to conventional therapies.

Typically, ketamine therapy spans six to eight months, with recommended yearly check-up sessions. At My Denver Therapy, the process begins with a thorough evaluation by a nurse practitioner to identify any potential contraindications such as schizophrenia or bipolar mania.

Patients are encouraged to journal to connect with their subconscious mind, enhancing the therapeutic experience. During sessions, after initial health checks, patients set therapeutic intentions, take their ketamine dose, and participate in guided meditations with their therapist. Post-session, the therapist assists in interpreting the experience and deriving its implications for the patient’s mental health.

While ketamine therapy is already in practice, MDMA-assisted psychotherapy is undergoing clinical trials for its effectiveness in treating PTSD. Erin Carpenter, an MDMA-trained therapist at Psychedelic Growth in Boulder, explains MDMA's unique therapeutic properties. Unlike other treatments, MDMA reduces fear responses, enabling patients to confront and process trauma more effectively.

MDMA increases oxytocin and targets serotonin receptors, fostering a loving introspection that can ease individuals into exploring their trauma. This therapeutic setting creates a safe environment for patients to delve into suppressed thoughts and feelings, facilitating healing.

MDMA therapy involves several preparatory talk therapy sessions to establish safety and trust between patient and therapist. On the dosing day, sessions can last between six to eight hours, with patients often wearing eyeshades and headphones, similar to ketamine therapy protocols.

While both ketamine and MDMA offer remarkable therapeutic advantages, they operate distinctly. Carpenter describes ketamine as a dissociative substance that provides distance from trauma, allowing new perspectives. In contrast, MDMA draws patients closer to their experiences but mitigates anxiety and fear, enabling a more profound engagement with traumatic memories in a secure manner.

Both ketamine and MDMA therapies mark significant advancements in treating mental health conditions, particularly for marginalised groups such as the queer community. As these therapies gain traction, it is crucial for patients to seek certified professionals and approach these treatments with respect towards their cultural origins. As research and clinical practice evolve, the landscape of psychiatric care stands on the cusp of potential transformation, driven by these innovative therapeutic approaches.