

Jayne Tubb



ON THE BORDER

Info & insights from the interface between energy healing & science

May 2018



Welcome to the May 2018 edition of 'On the Border'

For those of you new to 'On the Border', this is Jayne's monthly Ezine newsletter about the latest information and insights into energy fields, healing and science. Each month I share with you some of the latest research and how it applies to healing, energy work & (daily) life. There is also a 'Freebie' section

where you get something for nothing, gratis.

Can the 'Date Rape' Drug Rapidly Relieve Depression?

Ketamine has been called the biggest thing to happen to psychiatry in 50 years. The notorious party drug may act as an antidepressant by blocking neural bursts in a little-understood brain region that may drive depression. It improves symptoms in as little as 30 minutes, compared with weeks or even months for existing antidepressants, and is effective even for the roughly one third of patients with so-called treatment-resistant depression.

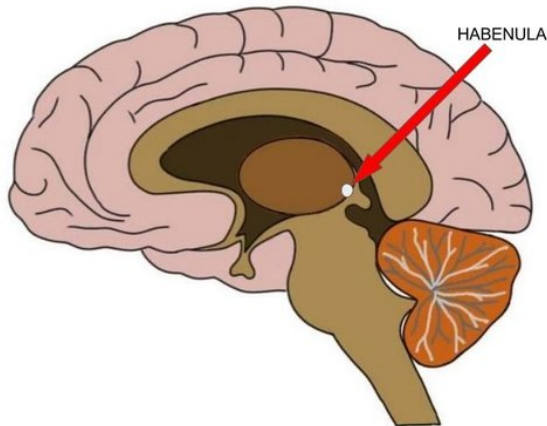
Although there are multiple theories, researchers do not quite know how ketamine combats depression. Now, new research has uncovered a mechanism that may, in part, explain ketamine's antidepressant properties. Two studies recently published in *Nature* describe a distinctive pattern of neural activity that may drive depression in a region called the lateral habenula (LHb); ketamine, in turn, blocks this activity in depression-prone rats.

Originally licensed as an anesthetic in 1970, ketamine has since gained fame as a party drug for causing out-of-body experiences, hallucinations and other psychosis-like effects. Its antidepressant properties in humans



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were discovered almost 20 years ago. Ketamine does not directly influence the same chemical messengers as standard antidepressants such as serotonin, but rather works via interaction with another chemical, glutamate—not usually associated with mood but rather with brain plasticity. One prominent idea about how it alleviates depression is by promoting the growth of new neural connections. If this proves to be right, then Hailan Hu of Zhejiang University in China and her group may have identified multiple new lines of attack for treating a condition the World Health Organization calls the leading cause of disability worldwide.



Both new studies probe the workings of the LHb, a small, central brain region wedged between the stalk of the pineal gland and the thalamus that acts like the dark twin of the brain's reward centres by processing unexpectedly unpleasant events. For example, if an animal has been trained to expect food when reaching the end of a maze and the reward is not there, the LHb activates, signalling a discrepancy

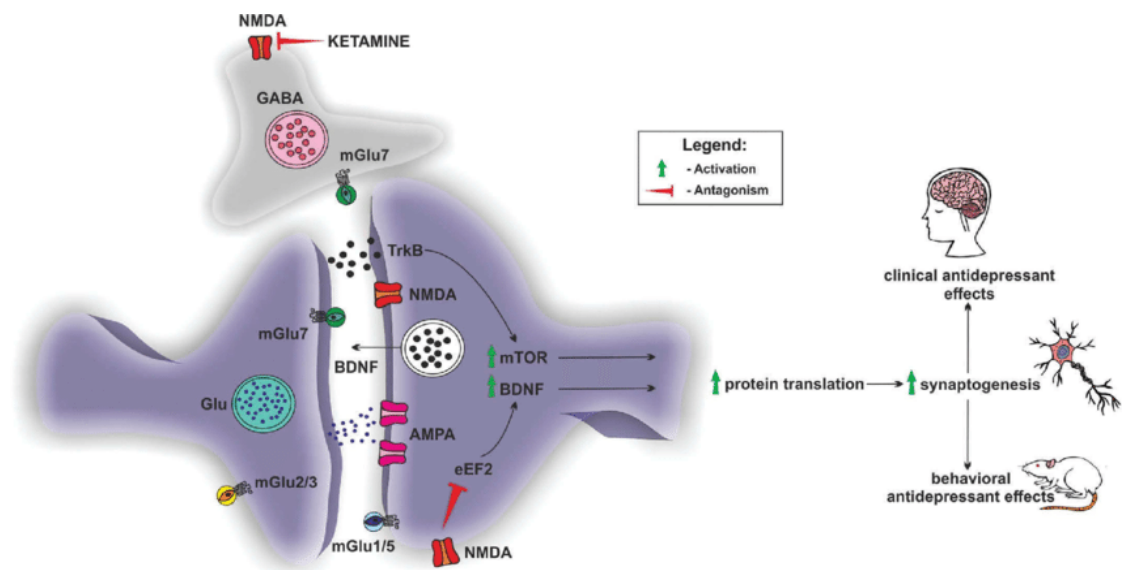
between expectation and outcome. This has led to the LHb being dubbed the key part of a “disappointment circuit.” If the LHb is overactive, it could suppress rewards from normally pleasurable activities—a symptom known as anhedonia—leading to long-term apathy and hopelessness. Studies in animals suggest hyperactivity in the LHb contributes to depression, but the details have been murky.

The first study, led by neuroscientist Yan Yang, also at Zhejiang, discovered a distinctive pattern of rapid bursts in the LHb of rats that display depressionlike behaviours. More usual neural activity, where neurons fire at spaced intervals, was not related to depression, suggesting it is burst activity, rather than increased LHb activity per se, that is related to depression. Exactly why bursts are important is not clear, but the researchers think they may enhance communication with other regions. Imagine that it's like a machine-gun shooting versus single shooting, so it carries information more efficiently to downstream brain areas. The team also provoked LHb neurons into burst firing using optogenetics, a technology that allows neurons to be activated with light. The results showed increased depressive behaviours, indicating the bursts actually cause depression rather than just occur alongside it.

The researchers stumbled on ketamine after they injected a drug that blocks NMDA receptors (for glutamate that, when activated, allow calcium to flood inside cells, causing them to fire) in the LHbs of depression-prone rats and saw strong antidepressant effects. Ketamine also blocks NMDA receptors, so the team repeated this with ketamine and again alleviated depression, within one hour. Infusion of ketamine into just one brain region was sufficient to cause rapid antidepressant effects (in rats). Studies of brain tissue samples showed that

whereas ketamine silenced burst firing within minutes, the standard antidepressant fluoxetine hydrochloride, commonly known as Prozac, had no such effect at these timescales.

The second study, led by another Zhejiang neuroscientist Yihui Cui, looked at what might cause burst firing in depression. The researchers found a protein, Kir4.1, was present at higher levels in depressive rats. Kir4.1 is found in cells called astrocytes, which influence neuronal activity. The team showed this protein promotes burst firing in LHB neurons. Raising Kir4.1 levels increased depressionlike behaviours whereas blocking its function reduced them.



The studies do not reveal **how** burst firing influences depression but the researchers have a hypothesis. The LHB connects to parts of the limbic system—which processes emotion—as well as reward centres that signal using chemical messengers associated with pleasure and mood, like dopamine and serotonin. The LHB inhibits activity in these regions, so burst firing may more effectively put the brakes on systems that produce reward signals from pleasurable activities.

Among researchers not taking part in the work, not everyone agrees the story can be this simple, however. Neuroscientist Jonathan Roiser of University College London found in his research that the habenula was underactive in depressed patients, which is inconsistent with the Chinese data. But if these discrepancies can be resolved, studying the LHB is a promising path toward entirely new approaches to treating severe depression.

The new findings have several implications for treatment. Understanding how ketamine acts so quickly could provide greater insight into the core mechanisms of depression and help to develop next-generation ketamine-based treatments that do not have the same side effects as the drug itself, such as dissociation and bladder problems. Several pharmaceutical companies have been pursuing this



Contact Details

Email: jayne@jaynejubb.com

Website: www.jaynejubb.com

Telephone: 020-6206680, or from outside The Netherlands ++31 20 6206680.

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