

Like Stepping Outside the Noise: Narrative Experiences of Esketamine-Induced Dissociation in Patients with Treatment-Resistant Depression

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INTRODUCTION

Esketamine-induced dissociation is a **transient, pharmacologically mediated alteration in consciousness**, often **distinct from pathological dissociation**. While not required for clinical improvement, these states may engage neural circuits implicated in therapeutic change.

STUDY AIM

This study explores patients' lived experiences of dissociation as potentially meaningful transitional states rather than merely adverse effects.

METHODS

Study design: Qualitative, narrative-based study.

Sample: 36 adult patients with Treatment-Resistant Depression (TRD) treated with intranasal Esketamine in Northern Italy (2022–2024).

Data collection: Participants provided detailed narrative accounts of dissociative experiences occurring during treatment sessions.

Data handling: Narratives were anonymized prior to analysis.

Analytical approach: Inductive thematic analysis with a phenomenologically informed interpretative framework.

RESULTS

SENSORY ALTERATIONS

"It was like being in a cloud inside galleries full of colors..."

Enhanced colors, synesthetic-like experiences, and altered auditory perception.



TIME SUSPENSION

"Time did not move forward. It wrapped around itself."

Experiences of time dilation, looping, and heightened present-centered awareness.



DETACHMENT From the BODY

"My body dissolved into space."

Feelings of weightlessness, out-of-body perspectives, and merging with surroundings.



DETACHMENT FROM PSYCHIC SUFFERING

"It felt like walking outside the storm."

Temporary relief from depressive thoughts and emotional pain.



Four thematic domains emerged:

1. Sensory Intensification
2. Temporal Distortion
3. Body–Space Alteration
4. Psychic Distance from Suffering

CONCLUSIONS

Esketamine-induced dissociation may function as a **liminal mental state** temporarily interrupting maladaptive self-processing.

When framed within a supportive therapeutic context, these states **may foster relief, insight, and** facilitating processes of psychological reorganization.

Clinical protocols should incorporate psychoeducation and post-treatment reflection to enhance meaning-making processes and reduce distress.

Overall Experience

Most participants described neutral-to-positive experiences, interpreting dissociation as peaceful, transformative, or as offering a 'pause' from suffering.

A minority reported transient fear or disorientation, often reduced through preparatory guidance and post-session integration.