Title: Ketamine reverses chronic stress-induced behavioral changes via the expression of Ca^{2+}-permeable AMPA receptors in mice

Abbreviated title: Ketamine induces antistress effects

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Number of pages: 34

Number of figures: 8

Number of tables: 1

Number of words for abstract: 236

Number of words for introduction: 628

Number of words for discussion: 1406

Conflict of interest statement: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Acknowledgments: We thank members of the Kim laboratory for their generous support. This work is supported by Student Experiential Learning Grants and College Research Council Shared Research Program from College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, Colorado State University and a research grant from Korea Ginseng Corporation.

Abstract

Chronic stress affects brain functions leading to the development of mental disorders like anxiety and depression, as well as cognitive decline and social dysfunction. Among many biological changes in chronically stressed brains, disruptions in AMPA Receptor (AMPAR)-mediated synaptic transmission in the hippocampus are associated with stress responses. We have revealed that low-dose ketamine rapidly induces the expression of GluA1-containing, GluA2-lacking Ca^{2+}-Permeable AMPARs (CP-AMPARs), which enhances glutamatergic synaptic strength in hippocampal neurons. Additionally, subanesthetic low-dose ketamine decreases anxiety- and depression-like behaviors in naïve animals. In addition to reducing depression, some research indicates that ketamine may have protective effects against chronic stress in both humans and animals. However, the role of CP-AMPARs in the actions of ketamine's antistress effects is largely unknown. Here, we use whole-cell patch-clamp recordings from CA1 pyramidal neurons in female and male hippocampal slices to affirm that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine treatment induces CP-AMPAR expression in these cells. Using multiple behavioral assays including reciprocal social interaction, contextual fear conditioning, and tail suspension test, we demonstrate that low-dose ketamine treatment reverses chronic restraint stress (CRS)-induced social dysfunction, hippocampus-dependent fear memory loss, and depression-like behavior in both female and male mice. Furthermore, we show that the ketamine-induced antistress effects on these behaviors are dependent on CP-AMPAR expression. From this, our findings suggest that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine rapidly triggers the expression of CP-AMPARs in the hippocampus, which in turn enhances synaptic strength to induce antidepressant and antistress effects.

Significant Statement

The subanesthetic low-dose ketamine-induced increase of glutamatergic synaptic strength is presumed to underlie antidepressant effects in humans and animals. Importantly, we have revealed that low-dose ketamine rapidly induces the expression of GluA1-containing, GluA2-lacking Ca^{2+}-Permeable AMPARs (CP-AMPARs), important for ketamine' antidepressant effects in naïve animals. However, the role of CP-AMPARs in the actions of ketamine's effects is largely unknown. The current study shows that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine can reverse depression-like behavior, fear memory loss, and social dysfunction caused by chronic restraint stress (CRS) in mice via CP-AMPAR expression. The significance of the current research is predicated on identifying the CP-AMPAR-mediated mechanisms of ketamine's effects, which may guide the development of safer fast-acting therapy.

Introduction

An extensively postulated mechanism for ketamine's rapid antidepressant actions involves the enhancement of excitatory synaptic drive in the hippocampus (Miller et al., 2016; Aleksandrova et al., 2020; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020). However, it has been demonstrated that ketamine is a noncompetitive NMDA receptor (NMDAR) antagonist that inhibits excitatory synaptic transmission (Anis et al., 1983). This poses a contradictory question of how ketamine enhances excitatory activity while blocking NMDARs. This can be explained by an increase in AMPA receptor (AMPAR)-mediated synaptic activity but the mechanisms are unknown (Aleksandrova et al., 2017). In addition to reducing depression, some research indicates that ketamine may have protective effects against chronic stress in both humans and animals (Feder et al., 2014; Brachman et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2019; Gill et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022). Chronic stress affects brain functions, resulting in the development of mental disorders like anxiety and depression, as well as cognitive decline and social dysfunction (Kessler, 1997; Lupien et al., 2009; daSilva et al., 2021). Among many biological changes in chronically stressed brains, disruptions in AMPAR-mediated synaptic transmission in the hippocampus are associated with stress responses in animal models and individuals with depression (He et al., 2023). Thus, recovery from AMPAR-mediated synaptic dysfunction may be the key target of ketamine's antistress and antidepressant effects.

There are two general types of AMPARs formed through combination of their subunits: GluA2-containing Ca^{2+}-impermeable AMPARs and GluA2-lacking, GluA1-containing Ca^{2+}-Permeable AMPARs (CP-AMPARs) (Diering and Huganir, 2018). Compared to Ca^{2+}-impermeable AMPARs, CP-AMPARs have higher single channel conductance, which contributes to synaptic plasticity (Thiagarajan et al., 2005; Goel and Lee, 2007; Aoto et al., 2008; Goel et al., 2011; Lee, 2012; Kim and Ziff, 2014; Kim et al., 2015a; Sanderson et al., 2016; Sanderson et al., 2018; Purkey and Dell'Acqua, 2020). Both preclinical and clinical studies show that chronic stress significantly reduces GluA1 levels in hippocampal synapses, while there are conflicting results describing alterations in hippocampal GluA2 under chronic stress (He et al., 2023). These results suggest that the stress-induced decrease in synaptic GluA1 levels diminishes excitatory synaptic transmission in the hippocampus and exacerbates negative behaviors in chronic stress. Therefore, recovery from GluA1-mediated synaptic dysfunction may be the key target of ketamine's antidepressant and antistress effects. We have revealed that low-dose ketamine (1 μM, a concentration that blocks approximately 50% of NMDAR-induced

currents) (Hare et al., 2019) rapidly induces the expression of CP-AMPARs in cultured hippocampal neurons, which is mediated by increasing GluA1 phosphorylation and its surface expression (Zaytseva et al., 2023). Moreover, we have shown that this ketamine-induced CP-AMPAR expression enhances glutamatergic synaptic strength in cultured neurons (Zaytseva et al., 2023). Additionally, subanesthetic low-dose ketamine (5-10 mg/kg) decreases anxiety- and depression-like behaviors in naïve animals (Zaytseva et al., 2023). In fact, an increase in hippocampal activity is known to improve anxiety- and depression-like behaviors, fear memory, and social behavior in mice (Bird and Burgess, 2008; Tovote et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2016; Okuyama et al., 2016; Aleksandrova et al., 2020; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Grieco et al., 2022). This suggests that ketamine-induced recovery from disruptions in AMPAR-mediated synaptic transmission and behaviors in stressed animals is likely associated with an increase in synaptic GluA1 expression in the hippocampus (Li et al., 2011; Fischell et al., 2015).

Here, we confirm that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine treatment induces CP-AMPAR expression in hippocampal pyramidal neurons. We further show that low-dose ketamine treatment reverses chronic restraint stress (CRS)-induced behavioral changes in mice, which is dependent on the expression of CP-AMPARs. Our findings thus suggest that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine rapidly triggers the expression of CP-AMPARs in the hippocampus, which in turn enhances synaptic strength to induce antidepressant and antistress effects.

Materials and Methods

Animals

C57Bl6J (Jax 000664) mice were obtained from Jackson laboratory and bred in the animal facility at Colorado State University (CSU). Animals were housed under a 12:12 hour light/dark cycle. CSU's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) reviewed and approved the animal care and protocol (3408).

Chronic Restraint stress (CRS)

CRS has been widely used as a model of chronic psychoemotional stress to induce depression- and anxiety-like behaviors, learning and memory deficits, social dysfunction, and hippocampal neuronal damage in mice (Yun et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2015; Park et al., 2018). 3-month-old C57Bl6 female and male mice were individually placed into 50 mL polypropylene conical tubes with multiple holes for ventilation, and they were exposed to restraint stress (2 hr/day) for 14 consecutive days. After restraint stress, mice were returned to the home cage. Following 2-week CRS, drug injections, blood collection, and multiple behavior assays were carried out as shown in the experimental timeline in **Fig. 1**.

Drug treatment

Ketamine hydrochloride (VetOne, 510189) was used in both *in vitro* and *in vivo* experiments. 5 mg/kg and 10 mg/kg ketamine were intraperitoneally injected into 3-month-old female and male C57Bl6 mice, respectively (the conditions have been shown to exclusively increase hippocampal GluA1 and induce antidepressant effects on naïve animals' behaviors) (Zaytseva et al., 2023), and saline was administered to controls. We have approval from IACUC to use ketamine and have the United States Drug Enforcement Administration license to use ketamine for research purpose (DEA# RK0573863). 20 μM intracellular 1-Naphthyl acetyl spermine trihydrochloride (NASPM, Tocris Bioscience) was used to block CP-AMPARs in hippocampal neurons (Kim and Ziff, 2014; Zaytseva et al., 2023). 10 mg/kg IEM-1460 (Tocris Bioscience, 1636) was intraperitoneally injected into 3-month-old male and female C57Bl6J mice to inhibit *in vivo* CP-AMPAR activity because it is blood-brain barrier (BBB)-permeable (Wiltgen et al., 2010; Szczurowska and Mares, 2015; Adotevi et al., 2020). Following CRS, we performed the experiments in the presence or absence of IEM-1460

and compared outcomes to examine whether ketamine treatment reversed the CRS-induced effects via the expression of CP-AMPARs.

Brain slice preparation

The mice were deeply anesthetized with isoflurane, and their brains were removed. The brains were submerged in cold, oxygenated (95% O_2 and 5% CO_2) slicing medium containing (in mM): 85 NaCl, 1.25 NaH_2PO_4, 4 $MgCl_2$, 0.5 $CaCl_2$, 24 $NaHCO_3$, 2.5 KCl, 75 sucrose, and 25 glucose. Horizontal hippocampal slices (350 μm thick) were cut using a vibratome (Leica VT 1000S; Leica Microsystems). The solution was continuously oxygenated with 95% O_2 and 5% CO_2. Slices were initially maintained at 33°C for 30 min, then at room temperature (22 ± 1°C) until they were used for electrophysiological recordings.

Electrophysiology

Whole-cell patch-clamp recording procedures used in the present study were similar to those described previously (Govindaiah et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2020). Electrophysiological recordings were performed on CA1 pyramidal cells at 33°C in oxygenated (95% O_2 and 5% CO_2) artificial cerebrospinal fluid (ACSF) containing (in mM): 126 NaCl, 2.5 KCl, 26 $NaHCO_3$, 2 $CaCl_2$, 2 $MgCl_2$, 1.25 NaH_2PO_4, and 10 glucose. Slices were superfused with ACSF at a rate of 2.0 ml/min. Individual neurons were visualized using an upright microscope (Olympus BX51WI) with infrared differential interference contrast (DIC) optics. CA1 pyramidal cells in the stratum pyramidale (the pyramidal cell layer), visualized using differential interference contrast microscopy, will be selected based on their morphology as described previously (Kang et al., 2020). Whole-cell patch-clamp recordings were obtained from CA1 pyramidal cells with borosilicate patch pipettes (2–4 MΩ) filled with an internal solution containing (in mM): 126 K-gluconate, 4 KCl, 10 HEPES, 4 ATP-Mg, 0.3 GTP-Na, and 10 phosphocreatine. The pH and osmolarity of the internal solution were adjusted to 7.2 and 290 mOsm, respectively. Recordings were obtained using a MultiClamp 700B amplifier (Molecular Devices). After forming the whole-cell configuration, the recording was allowed to rest for at least 5 min prior to data acquisition. Signals were sampled at 10 kHz, low-pass filtered at 3 kHz using Digidata 1440A analog-to-digital digitizer (Molecular Devices), and stored on computer for subsequent analysis using pClamp 10 software (Molecular Devices). Series resistances were continuously monitored with recordings being discarded if the

series resistance increased >20%. We then measured the amplitude and frequency of spontaneous AMPAR-mediated EPSCs (sEPSCs) (V_{hold} = -70 mV) in CA1 pyramidal cells and analyzed them using the Mini Analysis software (Synaptosoft) (Kim and Ziff, 2014; Kim et al., 2015b; Kim et al., 2015a).

Reciprocal social interaction

We performed the reciprocal social interaction test to examine social interaction between two freely moving mice (Bolivar et al., 2007; Matsuo et al., 2009). A test mouse (3-month-old) and a stranger mouse of identical genotypes that were previously housed in different cages were placed into the open field chamber (40 W x 40 L x 40 H cm) and allowed to explore freely for 20 min. Social behavior was recorded using a camera mounted overhead. Social contacts were determined by the sniffing time that was defined as each instance in which a test mouse's nose came within 2 cm toward a stranger mouse. The total number of reciprocal interactions and total duration of reciprocal interactions were measured manually.

Open field test (OFT)

We measured locomotor activity and anxiety-like behavior using the open field test as carried out previously (Shou et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2021; Zaytseva et al., 2023). The test mouse was first placed in the center of the open field chamber (40 W x 40 L x 40 H cm) for 5 min. Animals were then allowed to explore the chamber for 20 min. The behavior was recorded by a video camera. A 20 x 20 cm center square was defined as the inside zone. Data were analyzed using the ANY-maze tracking program (Stoelting Co.) to acquire total traveled distance (locomotor activity) and time spent outside and inside (anxiety-like behavior).

Contextual fear conditioning (CFC)

Contextual fear conditioning (Habitest Modular System, Coulbourn Instrument) was carried out as described previously (Kim et al., 2016; Shou et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2024). On Day 1 (encoding), the test mouse was placed in a novel rectangular chamber with a grid floor. After a 3-min baseline period, the test animal was given one shock (a 2 sec, 0.5 mA shock) and stayed in the chamber for an additional 1 min after the shock before being returned to the home cage for overnight (consolidation). A contextual memory test was conducted the next day (Day 2 - retrieval) in the same conditioning chamber for 3 min. Fear memory was

determined by measuring the percentage of the freezing response (immobility excluding respiration and heartbeat) using an automated tracking program (FreezeFrame).

Tail suspension test (TST)

Studies suggest that the forced swim test and the tail suspension test are based on the same principle: measurement of the duration of immobility when rodents are exposed to an inescapable situation (Castagne et al., 2011). Importantly, it has been suggested that the tail suspension test is more sensitive to antidepressant agents than the forced swim test because the animals remain immobile longer in the tail suspension test than the forced swim test (Cryan et al., 2005). We thus used the tail suspension test to examine depression-like behavior as described previously (Kim et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018; Zaytseva et al., 2023). The test mouse was suspended by its tails from a rod suspended 20 cm above the tabletop surface with adhesive tape placed 1 cm from the tip of the tail. Animals were immobile when they exhibited no body movement and hung passively for > 3 sec. The time during which mice remained immobile was quantified over a period of 6 min. Mice that successfully climbed their tails to escape were excluded from the analysis. The behavior was recorded by a video camera and, where data were analyzed using the ANY-maze tracking program to acquire immobility (depression-like behavior).

Corticosterone

Corticosterone levels in mice were measured as described previously (Luo et al., 2016; McCosh et al., 2024). 50 µl tail-tip whole blood samples were collected and centrifuged at 5,000 rpm for 10 min. 10 µl of serum was harvested and stored at −20°C until assay. 5 µl of serum samples in each condition was assayed using the DetectX® Corticosterone Multi-Format Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kit (Arbor Assays, Inc. K014-H).

Statistical analysis

All behavior tests were blindly scored by more than two investigators. The Franklin A. Graybill Statistical Laboratory at Colorado State University was consulted for statistical analysis in the current study, including sample size determination, randomization, experiment conception and design, data analysis, and

interpretation. We used the GraphPad Prism 10 software to determine statistical significance (set at $p < 0.05$). Differences between multiple groups were assessed by N-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the Tukey test. The graphs were presented as mean ± Standard Deviation (SD). We discard data points that are located further than two SD above or below the average as an outlier.

Results

Subanesthetic low-dose ketamine induces the expression of CP-AMPARs in hippocampal CA1 pyramidal neurons

The hippocampus is one of the key brain regions controlling cognition, motivation, and social behavior (Felix-Ortiz et al., 2016; Schumacher et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2019; Kim and Cho, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Watarai et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2021; Hong and Kaang, 2022; Tao et al., 2022; Wang and Zhan, 2022). An increase in hippocampal activity reverses stress-induced memory impairment, social dysfunction, and mood disorder-associated behaviors (Bird and Burgess, 2008; Tovote et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2016; Okuyama et al., 2016; Aleksandrova et al., 2020; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Grieco et al., 2022; Su et al., 2023). More importantly, the hippocampus is selectively targeted by ketamine at the low doses (Davoudian et al., 2023). This suggests that the hippocampus is the primary brain region to be responsible for ketamine's antistress effects. In fact, we have discovered that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine significantly increases synaptic GluA1 but not GluA2, an indication of CP-AMPAR expression, in the hippocampus of naïve animals (Zaytseva et al., 2023). We thus decided to examine whether low-dose ketamine was able to induce CP-AMPAR expression in hippocampal neurons using whole-cell patch clamping. We intraperitoneally injected 5 mg/kg and 10 mg/kg ketamine to female and male C57Bl6 mice, respectively, and saline was administered to controls. These ketamine concentrations were shown to exclusively increase hippocampal GluA1 and induce antidepressant effects on naïve animals' behaviors (Zaytseva et al., 2023). One hour following injection, hippocampal slices were obtained, and we then measured the amplitude and frequency of spontaneous AMPAR-mediated EPSCs (sEPSCs) (V_{hold} = -70 mV) in CA1 pyramidal cells. We found that ketamine treatment significantly elevated the amplitude of sEPSCs in these cells when compared to controls (FEMALE; Saline, 24.67 ± 3.17 pA and Ketamine (Ket), 27.79 ± 3.03 pA, p = 0.0384. MALE; Saline, 23.69 ± 1.82 pA and Ket, 26.80 ± 2.66 pA, p = 0.0034) (**Fig. 2 and Extended data Table 2-1**). To examine whether the ketamine-induced increase in the amplitude of sEPSCs was dependent on CP-AMPARs, we added 20 μM NASPM, a CP-AMPAR antagonist, to the internal solution and measured the amplitude of sEPSCs in CA1 pyramidal cells from both female and male animals in the presence or absence of ketamine. We found that NASPM treatment reversed the ketamine's effects on the amplitude of sEPSCs in these cells (FEMALE; Ket + NASPM, 23.08 ± 3.17 pA, p = 0.0014. MALE; Ket + NASPM, 23.51 ± 3.18 pA, p = 0.0031) (**Fig. 2 and Extended data Table 2-**

1). However, NASPM had no effect on the amplitude of sEPSCs in the absence of ketamine (FEMALE; Saline + NASPM, 23.80 ± 2.02 pA, p = 0.8692. MALE; Saline + NASPM, 22.50 ± 1.26 pA, p = 0.6295) (**Fig. 2 and Extended data Table 2-1**). Interestingly, when compared to controls, we found that ketamine treatment significantly increased the frequency of sEPSCs in hippocampal CA1 pyramidal neurons from only female mice (FEMALE; Saline, 0.79 ± 0.40 Hz and Ket, 1.18 ± 0.51 Hz, p = 0.0455. MALE; Saline, 1.01 ± 0.63 Hz and Ket, 0.87 ± 0.68 Hz, p = 0.9122) (**Fig. 2 and Extended data Table 2-2**). To test whether CP-AMPARs were involved in increased frequency of sEPSCs in ketamine-treated cells of the female hippocampus, 20 μM NASPM was added to block CP-AMAPRs, and we analyzed the frequency of sEPSCs in the presence of ketamine. We found that NASPM treatment significantly decreased the frequency of sEPSCs in these neurons of the female hippocampus (Ket + NASPM, 0.44 ± 0.19 Hz, p < 0.0001) (**Fig. 2 and Extended data Table 2-2**). In contrast, NASPM had no major effect on the frequency of sEPSCs in neurons from the male hippocampus (**Fig. 2 and Extended data Table 2-2**). These findings demonstrated that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine induced the expression of CP-AMPARs to increase synaptic strength in hippocampal CA1 pyramidal neurons.

CRS-induced social dysfunction is reversed by ketamine via the expression of CP-AMPARs.

Repeated stress can induce the development of social dysfunction (daSilva et al., 2021). Importantly, it has been shown that an increase in hippocampal activity reverses stress-induced social dysfunction (Okuyama et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020). More importantly, it has been demonstrated that ketamine specifically targets the hippocampus at the low dosages (Davoudian et al., 2023). Due to this, we conducted a reciprocal social interaction test to examine whether CRS induced social dysfunction and whether ketamine reversed this via the expression of CP-AMPARs. First, we found that CRS significantly decreased the total number of reciprocal interactions (FEMALE; Naïve, 32.67 ± 8.41 and CRS, 16.83 ± 4.31, p = 0.0425. MALE; Naïve, 33.00 ± 10.94 and CRS, 16.77 ± 7.18, p = 0.0028) and total time of reciprocal interactions (FEMALE; Naïve, 16.28 ± 3.55 sec and CRS, 7.37 ± 4.83 sec, p = 0.0315. MALE; Naïve, 19.03 ± 6.56 sec and CRS, 9.02 ± 2.22 sec, p = 0.0026) in both female and male mice when compared to Naïve controls, an indication of social dysfunction (**Fig. 3 and Extended data Table 3-1 and 3-2**). This suggests that CRS significantly disrupted social behavior in animals. We then injected low-dose ketamine to CRS animals and examined whether ketamine reversed CRS-induced

social dysfunction one hr after the treatment. We discovered that ketamine markedly increased the total number of reciprocal interactions (FEMALE; CRS + Ket, 44.29 ± 12.41, $p < 0.0001$. MALE; CRS + Ket, 33.25 ± 11.83, $p = 0.0001$) and total time of reciprocal interactions (FEMALE; CRS + Ket, 23.09 ± 6.29 sec, $p < 0.0001$. MALE; CRS + Ket, 17.71 ± 8.13 sec, $p = 0.0009$) in both female and male mice (**Fig. 3 and Extended data Table 3-1 and 3-2**). This suggests that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine can restore normal social behavior in chronically stressed animals. Finally, we tested whether these ketamine's effects on social behavior were mediated by CP-AMPAR expression, we treated IEM-1460 (IEM), a BBB-permeable CP-AMPAR antagonist, with low-dose ketamine in CRS mice and carried out the social behavior test. We revealed that IEM treatment significantly reduced the total number of reciprocal interactions (FEMALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 19.23 ± 9.08, $p < 0.0001$. MALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 16.61 ± 7.33, $p < 0.0001$) and total time of reciprocal interactions (FEMALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 11.60 ± 5.03 sec, $p < 0.0001$. MALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 12.04 ± 4.38 sec, $p = 0.0286$) in both female and male mice when compared to ketamine-treated CRS mice (**Fig. 3 and Extended data Table 3-1 and 3-2**). These findings demonstrate that CRS impairs animals' social behavior, which is reversed by low-dose ketamine treatment, and the ketamine's effects are mediated by CP-AMPARs.

CRS-induced fear memory loss is reversed by ketamine via the expression of CP-AMPARs.

Repeated stress can impair learning and memory (Kim and Kim, 2023). In fact, it has been shown that CRS disrupts hippocampus-dependent fear memory in mice (Yun et al., 2010). We thus examined whether low-dose ketamine reversed CRS-induced hippocampus-dependent fear memory loss via the expression of CP-AMPARs. To measure hippocampus-dependent fear memory, contextual fear conditioning was used (Tovote et al., 2015). As shown previously (Yun et al., 2010), we found that freezing was significantly lower in CRS female and male animals compared to naïve controls, an indication of fear memory loss (FEMALE; Naïve, 33.55 ± 11.50% and CRS, 15.24 ± 5.64%, $p = 0.0026$. MALE; Naïve, 26.45 ± 11.14% and CRS, 16.35 ± 7.64%, $p = 0.0133$) (**Fig. 4 and Extended data Table 4-1**). Next, low-dose ketamine was intraperitoneally injected to CRS female and male mice, and we carried out CFC to address the ketamine's effects on fear memory. We discovered that ketamine treatment significantly increased freezing in CRS female and male mice (FEMALE; CRS + Ket, 28.16 ± 13.92%, $p = 0.0454$. MALE; CRS + Ket, 27.79 ± 11.50%, $p = 0.0021$) (**Fig. 4 and**

Extended data Table 4-1). This suggests that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine can restore normal hippocampus-dependent fear memory in chronically stressed animals. To address that this ketamine's effect was mediated by CP-AMPAR expression, we treated ketamine and IEM together in CRS mice. We revealed that blocking CP-AMPARs markedly reduced freezing in ketamine-treated CRS female and male animals compared to ketamine-treated CRS mice (FEMALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 11.65 ± 4.45%, p = 0.0092. MALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 19.06 ± 5.34%, p = 0.0322) (**Fig. 4 and Extended data Table 4-1**). This data suggest that CRS disrupts hippocampus-dependent fear memory in animals, which is reversed by low-dose ketamine treatment, and the ketamine's effect is dependent on CP-AMPARs.

CRS-induced depression-like behavior is reversed by ketamine via the expression of CP-AMPARs.

Repeated stress is a known trigger for depression in humans and depression-like behavior in animals (Tafet and Nemeroff, 2016; Richter-Levin and Xu, 2018). Indeed, CRS is known to induce depression-like behavior in rodents (Mao et al., 2022). Moreover, disruptions in AMPAR-mediated synaptic transmission in the hippocampus are associated with stress responses in animal models and individuals with depression (He et al., 2023). We thus employed the tail suspension test to examine whether low-dose ketamine reversed CRS-induced depression-like behavior in mice via the expression of CP-AMPARs. As shown previously (Mao et al., 2022), CRS significantly elevated immobility in female and male mice when compared to Naïve controls, an indication of depression-like behavior (FEMALE; Naïve, 97.07 ± 42.05 sec and CRS, 168.80 ± 40.18 sec, p = 0.0130. MALE; Naïve, 78.80 ± 29.96 sec and CRS, 139.10 ± 36.04 sec, p = 0.0016) (**Fig. 5 and Extended data Table 5-1**). Importantly, low-dose ketamine treatment markedly decreased immobility in CRS female and male animals, an indication of antidepressant effects (FEMALE; CRS + Ket, 79.43 ± 35.91 sec, p = 0.0006. MALE; CRS + Ket, 90.25 ± 37.03 sec, p = 0.0066) (**Fig. 5 and Extended data Table 5-1**). We further discovered that immobility in IEM and ketamine-treated CRS mice was significantly higher than that ketamine-treated CRS mice (FEMALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 131.50 ± 61.21 sec, p = 0.0472. MALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 128.30 ± 31.56 sec, p = 0.0400) (**Fig. 5 and Extended data Table 5-1**). The data show that CRS induces depression-like behavior in animals, which is reversed by low-dose ketamine treatment via the expression of CP-AMPARs.

No abnormality in the open field test

As animals' locomotor capacities can influence behavior, we carried out the open field test to examine whether there were any abnormalities in animals' locomotion in each condition. We found that there was no difference in total distance traveled, total time spent outside, and total time spent inside between the conditions (**Fig. 6 and Table 1**). Moreover, as time spent outside and inside can be interpreted as anxiety-like behavior (Zaytseva et al., 2023), normal behaviors in the open field test indicate that animals used in our study had normal locomotor activity and no anxiety-like behavior. These findings suggest that behavioral alterations we described in the above are not due to changes in animals' movement and anxiety levels.

Ketamine reverses the CRS-induced elevation of corticosterone levels, which is not dependent on the expression of CP-AMPARs.

Chronic stress activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, resulting in the release of glucocorticoid class stress hormones (Phillips et al., 2006; McEwen, 2007). Cortisol is the primary endogenous adrenal steroid in most mammals, including humans, whereas corticosterone is the primary adrenal corticosteroid in rodents (Raff et al., 1989; Usa et al., 2007; Raff et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2015). Chronic stress can keep these hormone levels high, which in turn alters brain functions (McEwen, 2007; Burke et al., 2024). In fact, CRS is known to increase corticosterone levels in animals, which is associated with stress-induced behavioral changes (Marin et al., 2007). We thus examined whether low-dose ketamine reversed the CRS-induced elevation of corticosterone levels via the expression of CP-AMPARs. As shown previously (Tan et al., 2017), we found that CRS significantly increased serum corticosterone levels in both female and male animals when compared to naïve mice (FEMALE; Naïve, 831.1 ± 376.8 pg/ml and CRS, 2374 ± 1101 pg/ml, $p = 0.0001$. MALE; Naïve, 756.1 ± 210.6 pg/ml and CRS, 2140 ± 721.1 pg/ml, $p = 0.0005$) (**Fig. 7 and Extended data Table 7-1**). Ketamine is known to significantly decrease the CRS-induced increase in serum corticosterone levels in mice (Tan et al., 2017). Consistent with this finding, we discovered that low-dose ketamine significantly reduced serum corticosterone levels in CRS animals (FEMALE; CRS + Ket, 834.3 ± 372.0 pg/ml, $p = 0.0001$. MALE; CRS + Ket, 1089 ± 851.3 pg/ml, $p = 0.0146$) (**Fig. 7 and Extended data Table 7-1**). Finally, we tested whether the ketamine's effects on corticosterone levels were mediated by CP-AMPARs. In contrast

to behavioral assays, serum corticosterone levels of ketamine-treated CRS animals did not differ in the presence or absence of IEM (FEMALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 1095 ± 481.9 pg/ml, $p = 0.9247$. MALE; CRS + Ket + IEM, 1082 ± 383.5 pg/ml, $p > 0.9999$) (**Fig. 7 and Extended data Table 7-1**). The data show that low-dose ketamine treatment reverses the CRS-induced increase in serum corticosterone levels, which is independent of the expression of CP-AMPARs.

Discussion

It is challenging to understand how ketamine works due to its complex dose-dependent effects, with multiple pharmacologically active metabolites, and various mechanisms associated with the facilitation of synaptic plasticity (Kohtala, 2021). Importantly, the subanesthetic low-dose ketamine-induced increase of glutamatergic synaptic strength is presumed to underlie antidepressant effects in humans and animals (Miller et al., 2016; Aleksandrova et al., 2020; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020). These actions of ketamine are likely mediated by enhancing AMPAR activity due to its nature of NMDAR antagonism (Aleksandrova et al., 2017). However, the entire role of AMPARs in the actions of ketamine remains undetermined. Additionally, treatment with ketamine is associated with psychomimetic side effects and risk of addiction, which prevent its broader application (Ng et al., 2010). Therefore, it is critical to identify the mechanisms of ketamine's effects, particularly on glutamatergic synapses, to guide the development of safer fast-acting therapy.

Disruptions of AMPAR-mediated synaptic transmission in diverse cell types in the hippocampus are one of major biological changes in chronically stressed brains of animal models and individuals with depression (He et al., 2023). Importantly, recovery from GluA1-mediated synaptic dysfunction is thought to be the key target of ketamine's antidepressant and antistress effects. Moreover, ketamine-induced recovery from disruptions in AMPAR-mediated synaptic transmission and behaviors in stressed animals is suggested to be associated with an increase in synaptic GluA1 expression in the hippocampus (Li et al., 2011; Fischell et al., 2015). In fact, we have discovered that low-dose ketamine rapidly induces the expression of CP-AMPARs in cultured hippocampal neurons, which is mediated by increasing GluA1 phosphorylation and its surface expression through a reduction of neuronal Ca^{2+} and Ca^{2+}-dependent phosphatase calcineurin (CaN) activity (Zaytseva et al., 2023) (**Fig. 8**). In particular, GluA1-containing CP-AMPARs have higher single channel conductance, which contributes to synaptic plasticity (Thiagarajan et al., 2005; Goel and Lee, 2007; Aoto et al., 2008; Goel et al., 2011; Lee, 2012; Kim and Ziff, 2014; Kim et al., 2015a; Sanderson et al., 2016; Sanderson et al., 2018; Purkey and Dell'Acqua, 2020). We have indeed shown that ketamine-induced CP-AMPAR expression enhances glutamatergic synaptic strength in cultured neurons (Zaytseva et al., 2023). We further show that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine decreases anxiety- and depression-like behaviors in naïve animals (Zaytseva et al., 2023). Importantly, an increase in hippocampal activity is known to improve stress-induced negative behaviors in mice (Bird and Burgess, 2008; Tovote et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2016; Okuyama et al.,

2016; Aleksandrova et al., 2020; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Grieco et al., 2022), which further supports our findings. However, the mechanisms of ketamine's protective effects against stress-induced disorders are not completely understood. Here, our electrophysiological data demonstrate that low-dose ketamine induces CP-AMPAR expression in pyramidal neurons of the hippocampus CA1 area. Additionally, the current study reveals that subanesthetic low-dose ketamine can rapidly reverse social dysfunction, fear memory loss, and depression-like behavior caused by CRS in mice via CP-AMPAR expression (**Fig.8**). This suggests that low-dose ketamine induces the expression of CP-AMPARs in the hippocampus, which in turn enhances synaptic strength to reverse hippocampus-dependent behavioral dysfunctions in chronically stressed animals.

The mechanisms underlying ketamine's antidepressant effects are not fully understood, although multiple ideas have been proposed. These hypotheses include *1)* direct NMDAR inhibition-mediated mechanism in excitatory neurons (Miller et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2018; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020; Ma et al., 2023; Zaytseva et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024); *2)* NMDAR inhibition-independent, ketamine metabolite-dependent mechanism (Carrier and Kabbaj, 2013; Franceschelli et al., 2015; Zanos et al., 2016); and *3)* NMDAR inhibition-induced disinhibition- and BDNF-induced protein synthesis-dependent mechanism (Deyama and Duman, 2020; Gerhard et al., 2020). Low-dose MK-801, a NMDAR antagonist, has shown to improve depression-like behavior and working memory in mice (Wesierska et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2016). Conversely, others suggest that the metabolism of ketamine to (2R,6R)-hydroxynorketamine (HNK), devoid of NMDAR inhibition properties, is important for the antidepressant effect (Carrier and Kabbaj, 2013; Franceschelli et al., 2015; Zanos et al., 2016). Although multiple studies including our own support the NMDAR inhibition-mediated mechanisms, it is important to investigate how our current findings integrate or act independently from other described mechanisms.

Research identifying the mechanisms of the antidepressant effects of ketamine has largely focused on the hippocampus, since it is known to be dysfunctional in depressive disorders (Carreno et al., 2016; Duman et al., 2016; Zanos et al., 2016; Moda-Sava et al., 2019). However, given its brief half-life (3 hours in humans and 13 min in mice), the hippocampus-dependent mechanisms are unable to fully account for the ketamine's rapid onset and long-lasting effects (which persist for days in humans and 24 hours in mice) (Silva and Proulx, 2024). More recently, other areas of the brain have been investigated, including the lateral habenula (Yang et al.,

2018; Ma et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). A recent study shows that in CRS animals, ketamine selectively inhibited NMDARs in lateral habenula neurons, but not in hippocampal pyramidal neurons. This suggests that the lateral habenula-NMDAR inhibition–dependent mechanism likely occurs more upstream in the cascade of ketamine signaling *in vivo* (Chen et al., 2024). In contrast, another recent study using a systematic and unbiased mapping approach that provides a comprehensive coverage of all brain regions discovers that ketamine primarily targets the hippocampus (Davoudian et al., 2022). The hippocampus is a crucial brain area that governs learning, memory, social interaction, and depression (Jarrard, 1993; Fortin et al., 2002; Campbell and Macqueen, 2004; Bird and Burgess, 2008; Xu et al., 2021; Ghasemi et al., 2022). Research also demonstrates that an increase in hippocampal activity can be protective against stress (Bird and Burgess, 2008; Tovote et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2016; Okuyama et al., 2016; Aleksandrova et al., 2020; Kavalali and Monteggia, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Grieco et al., 2022). Importantly, one of the most vulnerable targets of stress is hippocampus, because it abundantly expresses both glucocorticoid (stress hormone) and mineralocorticoid receptors (stress hormone receptors) (Uno et al., 1989; Smith, 1996). Moreover, stress changes hippocampal neural activity and synaptic plasticity, activating hippocampal glucocorticoid receptors, and decreasing neuronal cell survival and neurogenesis (Kim and Diamond, 2002; Egeland et al., 2015; Ryu et al., 2016). This suggests that the hippocampus is the important brain region responsible for ketamine's effects. Since ketamine is delivered systemically in most studies, many regions in the brain can potentially be responsive to ketamine. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the cross-talk from the hippocampus to other brain regions including the lateral habenula for better understanding of the ketamine's therapeutic effects.

Chronic stress is known to increase the release of corticosterone in animals (Phillips et al., 2006; McEwen, 2007). In fact, we discover that ketamine significantly reduces serum corticosterone levels in CRS mice, which is consistent with the previous finding (Tan et al., 2017). In contrast to ketamine-induced protective effects against CRS-induced behavioral changes, this effect is not dependent on CP-AMPAR expression. Interestingly, chronic stress can induce disorders through increased pre-inflammatory cytokines, reactive microglia numbers, and up-regulated regulatory molecules (Liu et al., 2017). Moreover, chronic inflammatory responses directly affect brain structure and function, resulting in pathological behaviors in animals (McEwen et al., 2016). Importantly, ketamine is known to be associated with anti-inflammatory effects in humans (Dale et al., 2012; Nikkheslat, 2021) and animals (Wang et al., 2015; Spencer et al., 2022; Ommati et al., 2023),

suggesting that its ability to reduce the inflammation may play a role in its effects on ketamine's protective effects against stress. Therefore, it is possible that the mechanism underlying the ketamine-induced decrease in stress hormones following chronic stress can be mediated by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis rather than the hippocampus. It is thus possible that hypothalamic neurons may not express CP-AMPARs in response to ketamine treatment. In fact, there are multiple mechanisms proposed to explain the ketamine's anti-inflammatory effects, including the involvement of the gut microbiome (Zhang et al., 2017; Getachew et al., 2018) and priming of Type 1 T helper (Th1)-type immune response (Ohta et al., 2009). However, clinical relevance of ketamine-induced inflammatory modulation is still unclear. Therefore, further studies are needed to identify the precise mechanisms of its anti-inflammatory properties.

In summary, the current study addresses how chronic stress and ketamine affect hippocampal synaptic activity and hippocampus-dependent behaviors, providing a new evidence-based idea that NMDAR inhibition by ketamine leads to the antistress effects through the expression of CP-AMPARs. Therefore, our work advances current understandings on the mechanisms of ketamine's antistress effects to guide the developments of new therapies.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Experimental timeline of chronic restraint stress (CRS) that is applied to mice for 2 weeks, drug treatment, blood collection, and behavioral tests - reciprocal social interaction test, open-field test (OFT), contextual fear conditioning (CFC) day 1 and 2, and tail suspension test (TST). Single intraperitoneal injection of ketamine (5 mg/kg for females and 10 mg/kg for males) or saline in CRS mice.

Figure 2. Subanesthetic low-dose ketamine induces the expression of CP-AMPARs in hippocampal CA1 pyramidal neurons. Representative traces and summary of the amplitude and frequency of sEPSCs in each condition (n = number of cells [n = number of animals]. Female; Saline = 15 [5], Saline + NASPM [3] = 9, Ketamine (Ket) [5] = 13, and Ket + NASPM [3] = 12. Male; Saline = 17 [12], Saline + NASPM [3] = 9, Ket [8] = 15, and Ket + NASPM [5] = 14). *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$, and ****$p < 0.0001$, Two-Way ANOVA, Tukey test.

Figure 3. CRS-induced social dysfunction is reversed by ketamine via the expression of CP-AMPARs. Summary of total numbers and time of reciprocal interactions in each condition (n = number of animals. Female; Naïve = 5, CRS = 6, CRS + Ket = 14, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 13. Male; Naïve = 7, CRS = 12, CRS + Ket = 14, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 17). *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$, and ****$p < 0.0001$, One-Way ANOVA, Tukey test.

Figure 4. CRS-induced fear memory loss is reversed by ketamine via the expression of CP-AMPARs. Summary of fear memory in each condition (n = number of animals. Female; Naïve = 8, CRS = 9, CRS + Ket = 8, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 8. Male; Naïve = 9, CRS = 15, CRS + Ket = 11, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 14). *$p < 0.05$ and **$p < 0.01$, One-Way ANOVA, Tukey test.

Figure 5. CRS-induced depression-like behavior is reversed by ketamine via the expression of CP-AMPARs. Summary of immobility in each condition (n = number of animals. Female; Naïve = 9, CRS = 8, CRS

+ Ket = 13, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 10. Male; Naïve = 10, CRS = 10, CRS + Ket = 14, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 11). *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001, One-Way ANOVA, Tukey test.

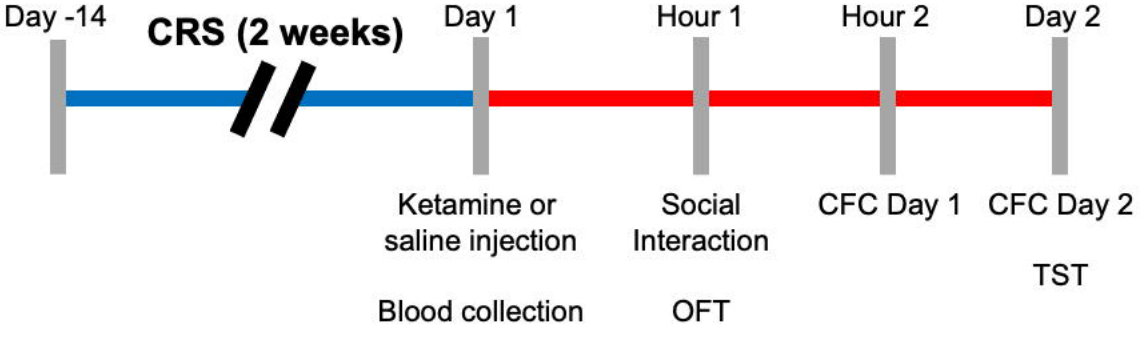
Figure 6. No abnormality in the open field test. Summary of total distance traveled, total time spent outside, and total time spent inside in each condition (n = number of animals. Female; Naïve = 9, CRS = 9, CRS + Ket = 16, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 14. Male; Naïve = 8, CRS = 15, CRS + Ket = 16, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 18).

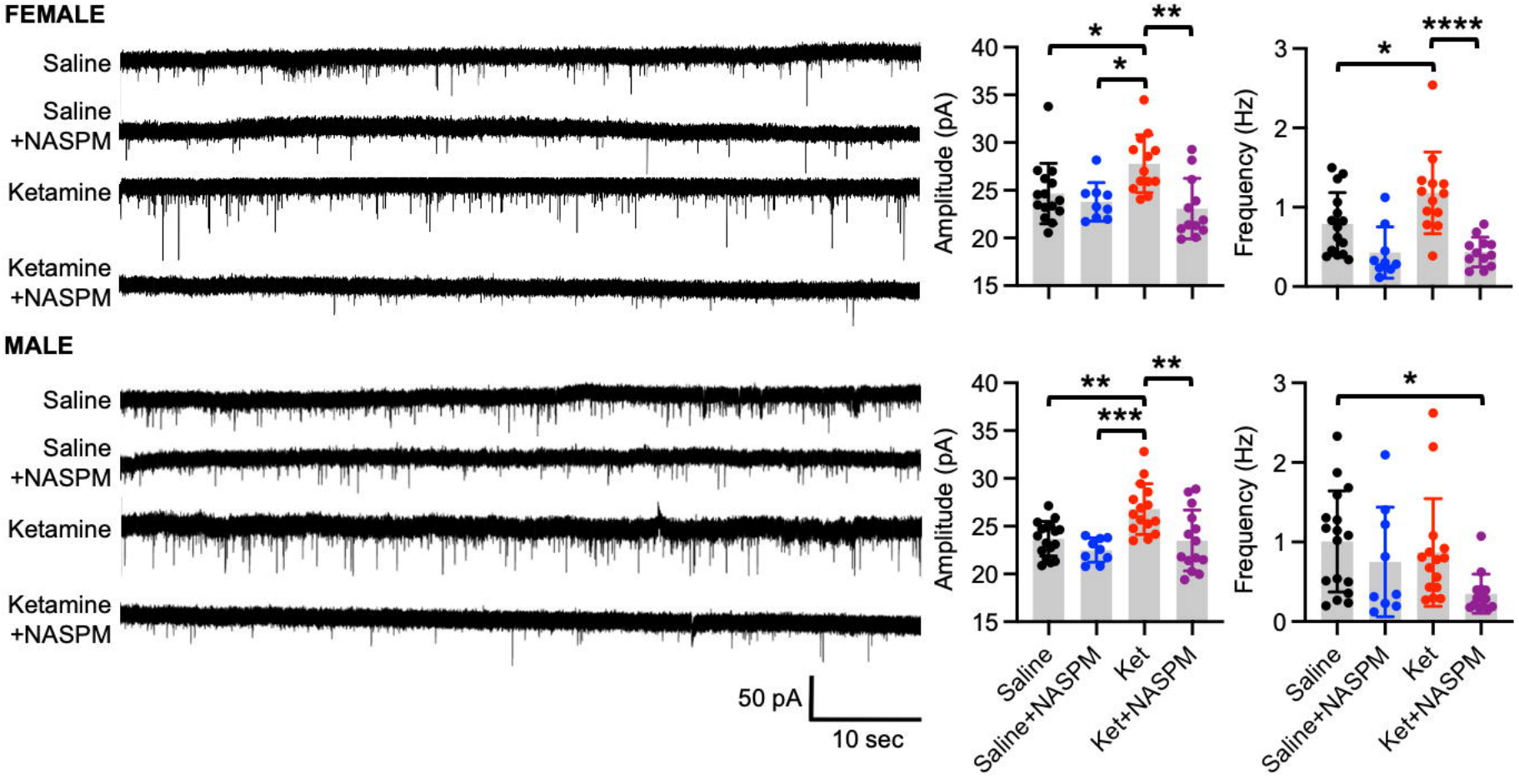
Figure 7. Ketamine reverses the CRS-induced elevation of corticosterone levels, which is not dependent on the expression of CP-AMPARs. Summary of serum corticosterone levels in each condition (n = number of animals with duplication. Female; Naïve = 5, CRS = 5, CRS + Ket = 5, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 2. Male; Naïve = 4, CRS = 4, CRS + Ket = 3, and CRS + Ket + IEM = 3). *p < 0.05 and ***p < 0.001, One-Way ANOVA, Tukey test. n.s. – not significant.

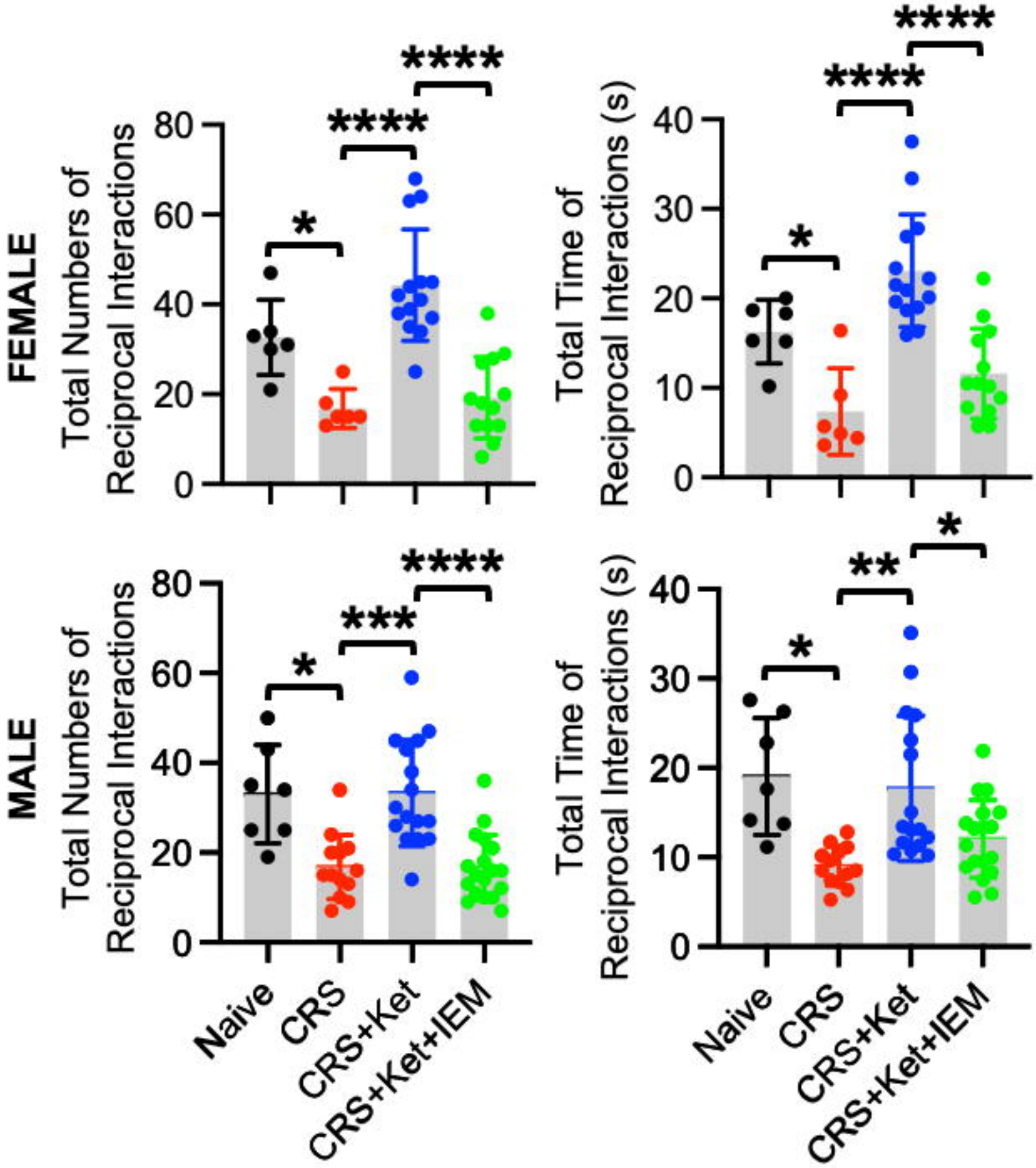
Figure 8. A schematic model of ketamine's antistress effects. Because ketamine is a noncompetitive NMDAR antagonist, a therapeutic dose is enough to block NMDAR-mediated Ca^{2+} influx in excitatory synapses. This can lower the activity of calcineurin (CaN), a Ca^{2+}-dependent phosphatase that dephosphorylates the AMPA receptor (AMPAR) subunit GluA1, and promote GluA1 phosphorylation, resulting in increased synaptic expression of GluA2-lacking, GluA1-containing Ca^{2+}-permeable AMPARs (CP-AMPARs). When ketamine is administered, CP-AMPAR-mediated Ca^{2+} influx may replace NMDAR-dependent Ca^{2+} signaling. This increases neural plasticity, which leads to antistress effects in animals. Therefore, inhibition of CP-AMPARs using antagonists such as NASPM and IEM-1460 prevents the ketamine's effects.

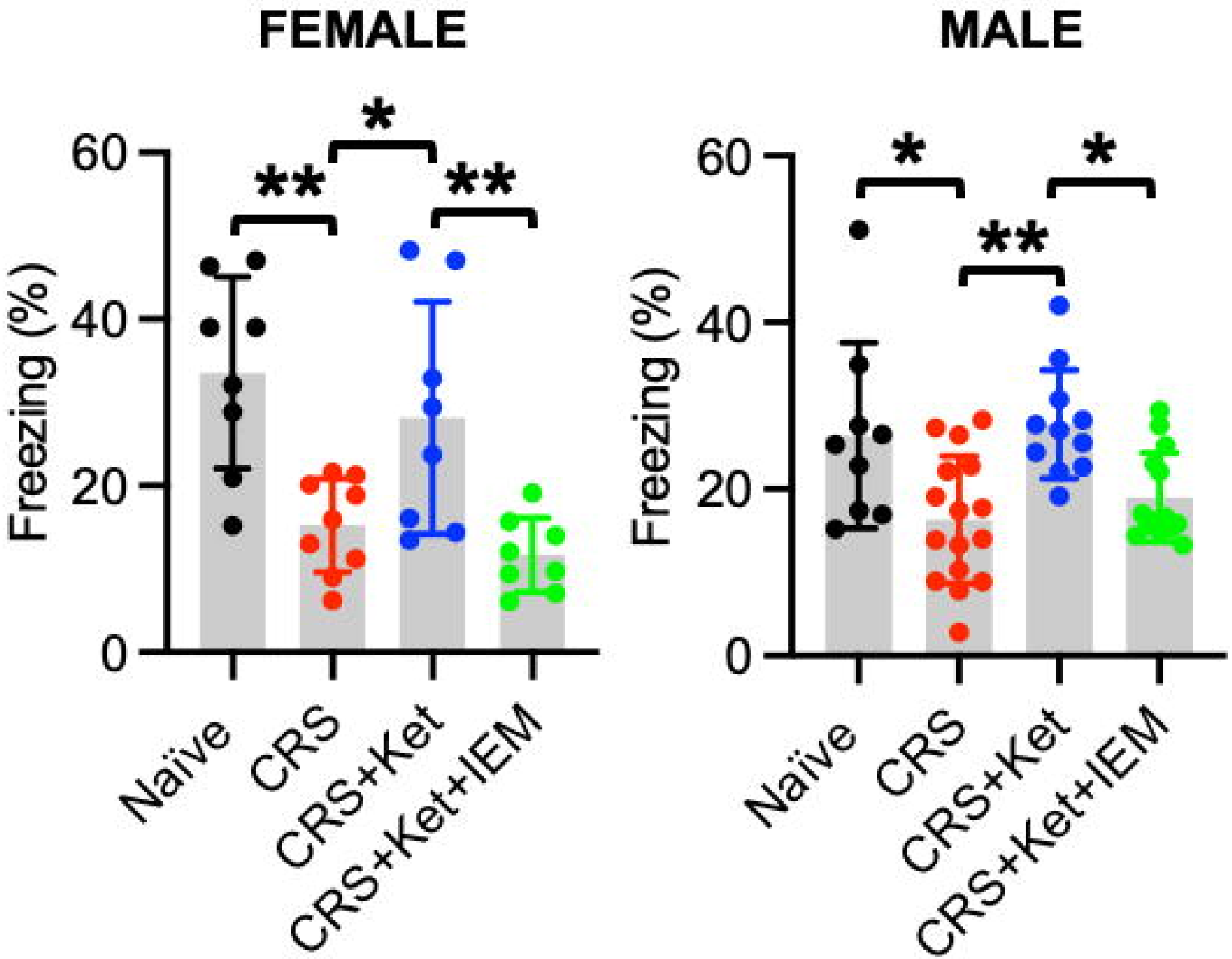
Table 1. Summary of the open field test.

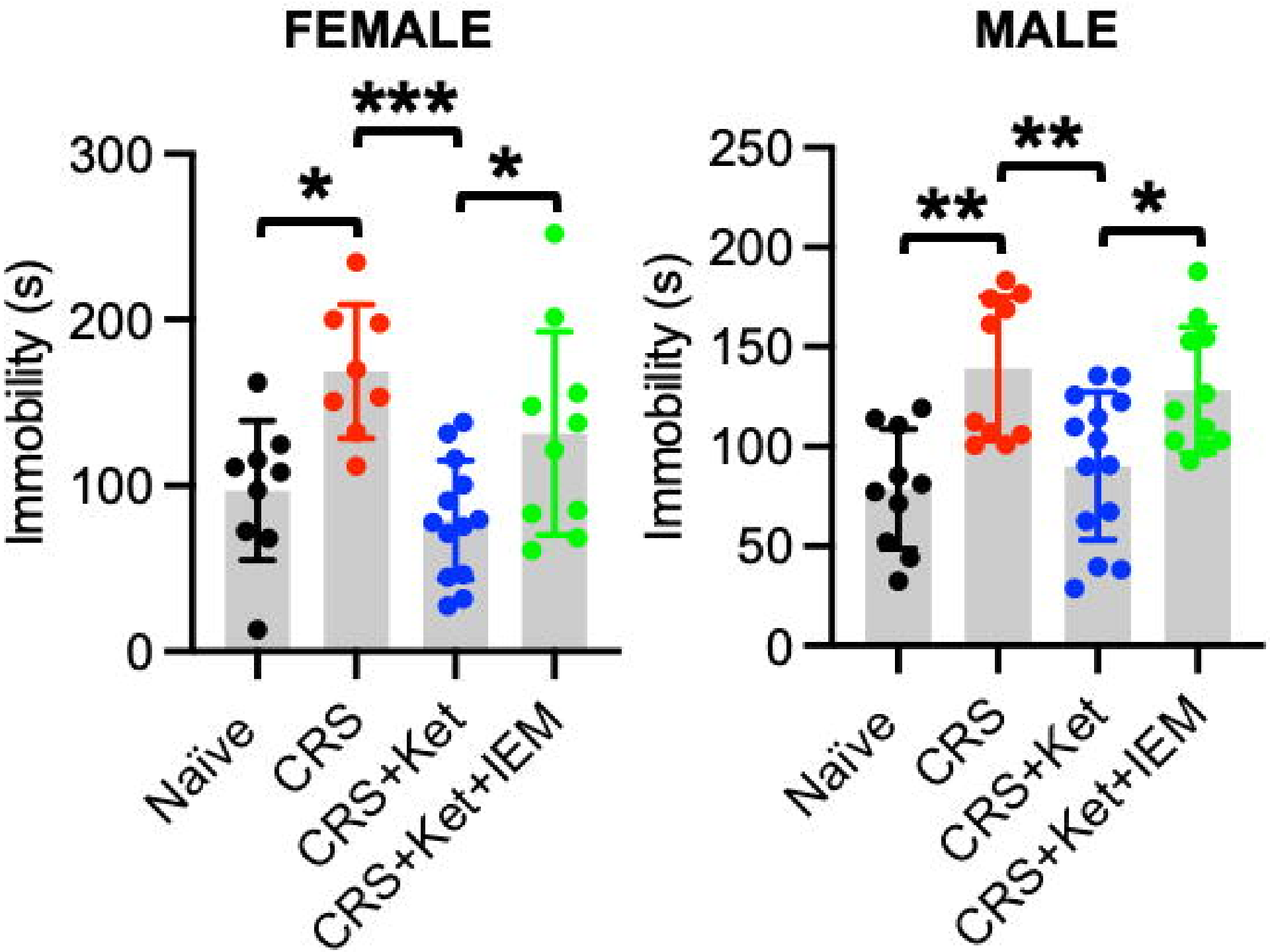
	FEMALE				MALE			
	CTRL	CRS	CRS + Ket	CRS + Ket + IEM	CTRL	CRS	CRS + Ket	CRS + Ket + IEM
Total distance traveled (m)	37.52 ± 15.31	45.02 ± 12.62	47.37 ± 16.47	45.43 ± 12.24	36.55 ± 9.70	42.37 ± 12.86	39.34 ± 10.56	40.07 ± 14.65
Total time spent outside (sec)	962.8 ± 85.57	989.6 ± 122.0	1029 ± 115.9	991.8 ± 106.0	947.6 ± 167.2	1044 ± 60.74	1042 ± 101.2	975.9 ± 128.1
Total time spent inside (sec)	237.2 ± 85.57	210.4 ± 122.0	170.8 ± 115.9	208.2 ± 106.0	252.4 ± 167.2	155.6 ± 60.74	158.4 ± 101.2	224.1 ± 128.1

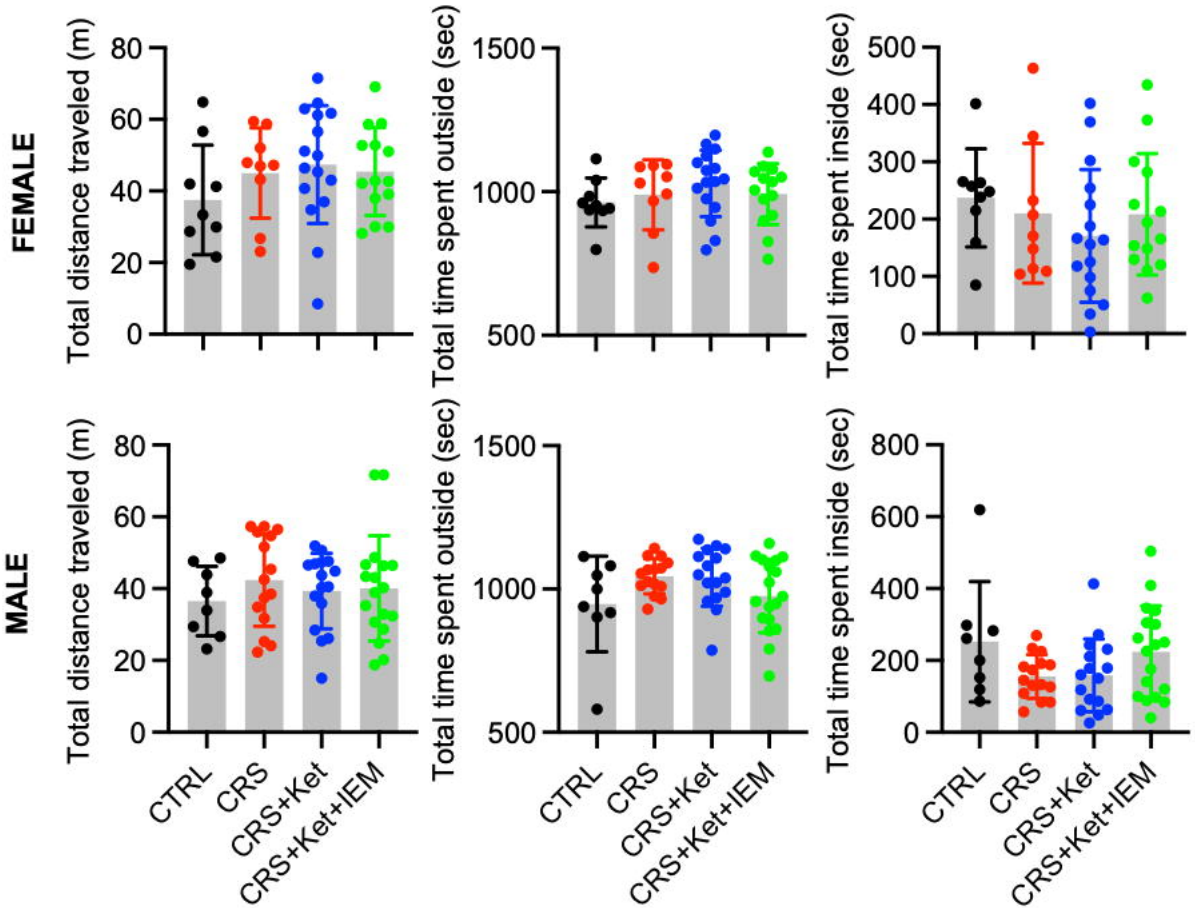

Day -14
CRS (2 weeks)
Day 1
Hour 1
Hour 2
Day 2
Ketamine or saline injection
Blood collection
Social Interaction
OFT
CFC Day 1
CFC Day 2
TST

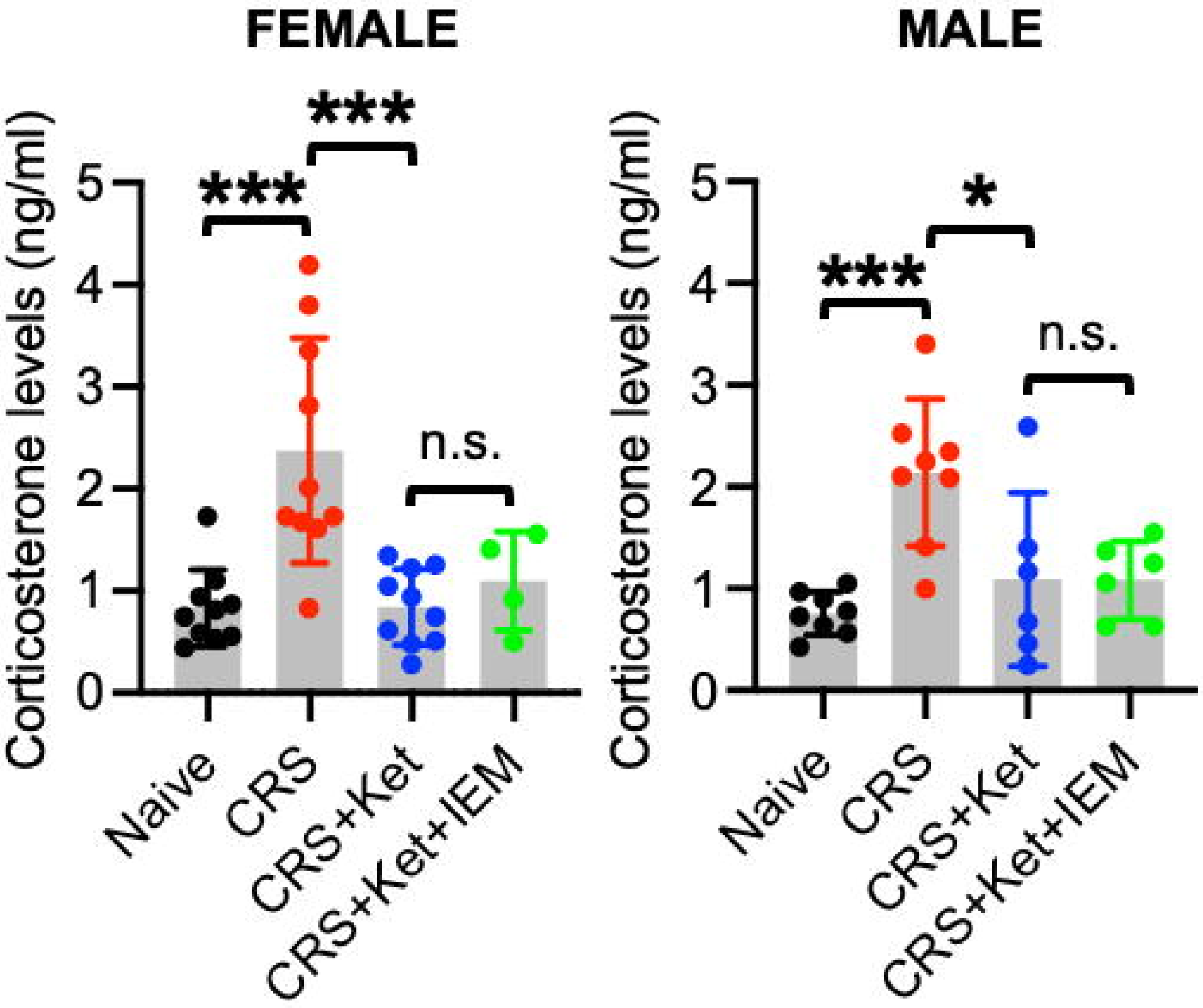

FEMALE
Saline
Saline +NASPM
Ketamine
Ketamine +NASPM
MALE
Saline
Saline +NASPM
Ketamine
Ketamine +NASPM
50 pA
10 sec
Amplitude (pA)
Frequency (Hz)
Saline
Saline+NASPM
Ket
Ket+NASPM

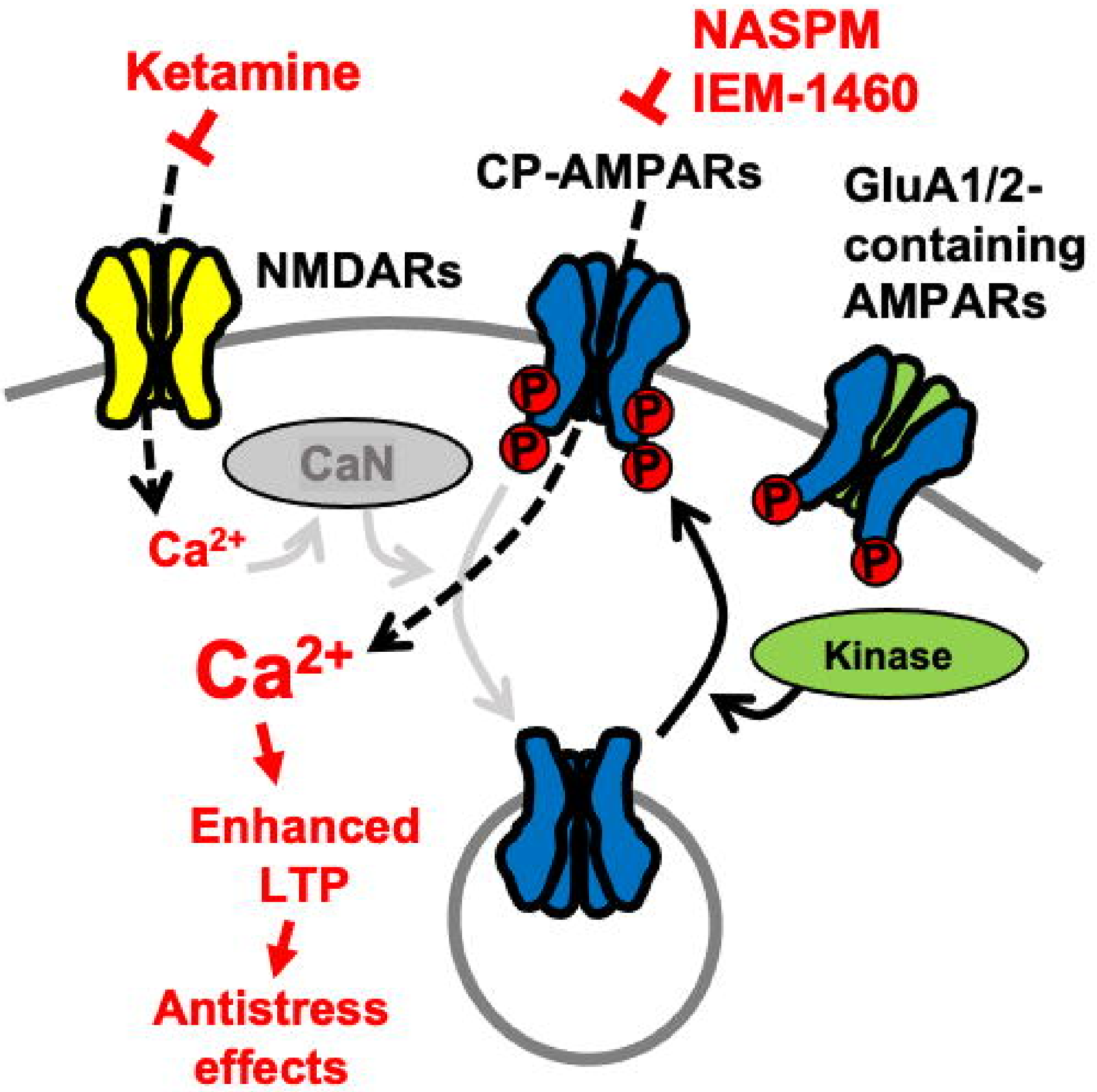

FEMALE
MALE
Total Numbers of Reciprocal Interactions
Total Time of Reciprocal Interactions (s)
0
20
40
60
80
10
30
*
**
***
****
Naive
CRS
CRS+Ket
CRS+Ket+IEM


FEMALE
MALE
Freezing (%)
60
40
20
0
*
**
**
Naïve
CRS
CRS+Ket
CRS+Ket+IEM


FEMALE
MALE
Immobility (s)
300
200
100
0
250
150
50
*
***
**
Naïve
CRS
CRS+Ket
CRS+Ket+IEM


FEMALE
MALE
Total distance traveled (m)
Total time spent outside (sec)
Total time spent inside (sec)
CTRL
CRS
CRS+Ket
CRS+Ket+IEM


FEMALE
MALE
Corticosterone levels (ng/ml)
0
1
2
3
4
5
***
***
n.s.
*
Naive
CRS
CRS+Ket
CRS+Ket+IEM


Ketamine
NASPM
IEM-1460
CP-AMPARs
GluA1/2-
containing
AMPARs
NMDARs
CaN
Ca2+
Ca2+
Kinase
Enhanced
LTP
Antistress
effects