

How to Support a Loved One Undergoing Ketamine Treatment

Ketamine offers an innovative approach for treating conditions like depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and PTSD. Unlike conventional pharmaceuticals designed to be ingested daily, ketamine is used no more than once or twice per week; rather than build up in the system gradually, ketamine's power lies in the way it alters patterns in the brain to help patients make lasting changes.

Ketamine infusions produce experiences ranging from relaxation and dissociation to dream-like visions and psychedelic states. These experiences present a unique opportunity for healing, but they also pose a unique set of challenges. Entering into the ketamine space involves a high degree of uncertainty and vulnerability. While some patients feel more comfortable undergoing infusions alone, others report that undergoing ketamine infusions in the presence of a trusted person helps them feel safer and freer to have more positive and transformational experiences.

Friends and family members often ask us what they need to know before accompanying their loved one to an infusion. We've put together this document of best practices to help guide you in supporting somebody before, during, and after ketamine treatment.



Before the First Infusion

Plan ahead. Set aside enough time so that you are not rushed on the tail end of the infusion. Ketamine infusions typically last about two hours, but some folks need extra time to be ready to leave afterward.

Discuss expectations. It's important to have a conversation a day or two ahead of time to discuss expectations, boundaries, and to set a loose plan for the rest of the day. You can talk about what your loved one is hoping to see, experience or learn. Discuss any of your loved one's fears or worries about their infusion, and how you can help if challenging experiences arise. Healing often involves patients getting to know and trust themselves better, so try to avoid providing unsolicited advice or opinions about their healing journey.

It's also good to discuss how involved your loved one wants you to be during the infusion. Helpful things you might offer to do include offering to take notes, hold hands, or deejay music. Some patients enjoy interacting during infusions, while others get distracted or disoriented. Many patients are comforted by the simple presence of another person in the room and prefer to be left alone unless they request support.

Discussing boundaries around touch beforehand will also help limit uncertainty or confusion during the experience. Does your loved one want you to be available to hold their hand or hug? If they ask you to hold your hand, should you hold it the entire time or let go after a few minutes, and they can ask for it again if needed? Tip: For some patients and at some doses, ketamine can make it harder to communicate verbally. You can arrange for a signal if they need support, like flipping their hand over or reaching out in your direction.

Have a conversation ahead of time about what your loved one prefers for their first infusion. Afterward, you can talk about how it went, and decide on a plan for future infusions.

Avoid bringing up stressors. You can help your loved one have a positive infusion experience by avoiding bringing up tough topics beforehand. Conversations about money, work, or family drama can produce stress that follows patients into their infusions. In particular, we've observed that discussing concerns about the cost of ketamine treatment or putting pressure on a loved one to get better more quickly negatively impacts mindset going into infusions. Keeping your conversation calm, light, and neutral will increase the likelihood of a positive experience.

Be mindful. People undergoing ketamine experiences can be extra sensitive to the environment around them, including your mood, and the energy you bring into the room can have a major impact on the ketamine experience. Notice how you're feeling leading into the session. Are you feeling angry, resentful, or stressed? Acting bored, irritated, or upset can negatively affect your loved one's experience. If you're not in a good enough place emotionally to stay neutral during the session, reconsider sitting for your loved one. You can offer to hang out in the waiting room and come in if needed.



During Infusions

Cultivate a safe setting. “Setting” refers to the physical and social environment in which the experience occurs and is as important as the medicine itself in shaping a psychedelic journey. Michigan Progressive Health works hard to cultivate private, cozy, and quiet treatment rooms so that your loved one can feel safe to let go and have a healing ketamine experience. As the person in the room most oriented to reality, you can help encourage a peaceful environment with minimal distractions. Try to eliminate sensory input like sounds, smells, or changes in lighting levels that might pull your loved one out of the flow of their experience. For example, mute your cell phones after entering the treatment room, or if you notice talking out in the hallway, you could offer your loved one headphones or turn on the white noise machine. Simple tasks like going to the bathroom or changing the music can be a struggle, so offer to help if your loved one expresses interest in one of these activities.

Stay neutral. People can act silly when they’re undergoing infusions. Patients may stare at their hands or get confused about what’s happening. It’s okay to have a sense of humor, but please avoid being patronizing or poking fun. Talking to your loved one like they’re a child or stupid can send them to a negative place. Try to use the same voice you would normally and remain calm, nonjudgmental, and kind. Don’t openly dismiss anything your loved one says as wrong, dumb, or “just the drugs talking.”

Care for yourself. Attend to your own needs!. Eat if you are hungry and go to the bathroom when needed. It’s important for you to be comfortable, too. A nurse can sit in for you temporarily if you need to use the bathroom and don’t want to leave your loved one alone.

Let the experience unfold. “Holding space” means being present with somebody and allowing them to follow whatever arises during their infusion. It usually looks like sitting in silence or listening without offering unsolicited advice or trying to direct the experience in any way. If your loved one wants to talk, you can listen, smile, nod, and be affirming of their experience. We’re just there to hold space and be a support if somebody needs it.

Don’t ask your loved one if they’re feeling it or probe about how they’re doing too frequently. The goal is to be there and allow your loved one to go through whatever process they need to without unnecessary interference. Consider bringing a book, crossword, or something else peaceful to do. If your loved one does not want to interact, it is okay to read, write, or doodle quietly. Activities to avoid include talking on the phone, activities that produce bright light, working on the computer, or anything noisy. If you have something else you need to be doing, reconsider whether it’s best for your loved one for you to sit in. Note: if your loved one is wearing eye shades and headphones, you may have a little more flexibility with your pastimes.

Utilize the call button. The call button in your room lets us know you need something. Hit the button any time you have a concern or require the attention of a nurse. Please use the call button rather than leaving the room to find a staff member since opening and closing the door can be very distracting. Hit the call button if you’re concerned about something, if you have a medical question, if you or your loved one needs a drink or a snack, or if you just want some additional support.



During Infusions Cont.

Don't let the vitals machine scare you. Ketamine is an extremely safe medicine, but we monitor blood pressure, heart rate, and blood oxygen level out of an abundance of caution. It's normal and expected that blood pressure and heart rate will rise, but if you're concerned about anything, call for a nurse. The blood pressure cuff is automated to go off every 15 minutes. Nausea does sometimes occur and can be addressed with fast acting medications a nurse can provide. Our team is fully trained and well equipped to handle any challenges or anomalies that arise.

Challenging Experiences: Ride the wave. Infusions typically produce feelings of relaxation and calm, but it's not uncommon for patients to have intense emotional experiences during infusions during which difficult memories, images, or distressing emotions arise. It can be difficult to watch your loved one go through a challenging experience, but staying present with these challenges is an important part of the healing process. This is actually a sign that healing is happening! Ketamine helps bring up difficult content so that we can work through it.

Resisting a challenging experience can make the journey even more difficult. Fight the urge to distract, change the subject, or re-direct the experience in any way. For example, if your loved one cries, let it happen. You can remind them you are right there with them, or hold their hand or touch their shoulder if they said they'd be comfortable with this beforehand. You might also encourage them to take deep breaths, and breathe deeply along with them. Once a patient gives in to a challenging experience, they typically find insights or a deep sense of peace on the other side.

Sometimes a patient gets very confused, forgets where they are or what's happening, or thinks they are dying. If this happens, you can remind them they're having a ketamine infusion, that the effects will wear off in a few minutes, and that you're here with them. Using simple language can be helpful, such as "You are safe," "Everything is okay," or "I am here with you." If you are not sure what you're witnessing is normal, call for a nurse! They've seen it all and can help you navigate a challenging situation.

Know your timeline. After being brought back to the infusion room and having their IV placed, patients meet with a medical provider to talk about progress and to decide on a dose. Once all questions have been answered, the nurse will come back to administer the medicine. Most infusions last 50 minutes. On average, it takes about ten minutes for the medicine to take full effect. Once the medicine stops at the 50-minute mark, it takes most people about 15-20 minutes to come back to their usual thinking mind and to be ready to move about. Good work can be done as the patient returns to sobriety, so our RNs typically wait about 15 minutes before taking out the IV. You'll be able to tell when the medicine is wearing off, but even once your loved one seems "back to normal," they may still be in a more sensitive, confused, or vulnerable place. Try to remain as kind and unrushed as possible.



The Rest of the Day After an Infusion

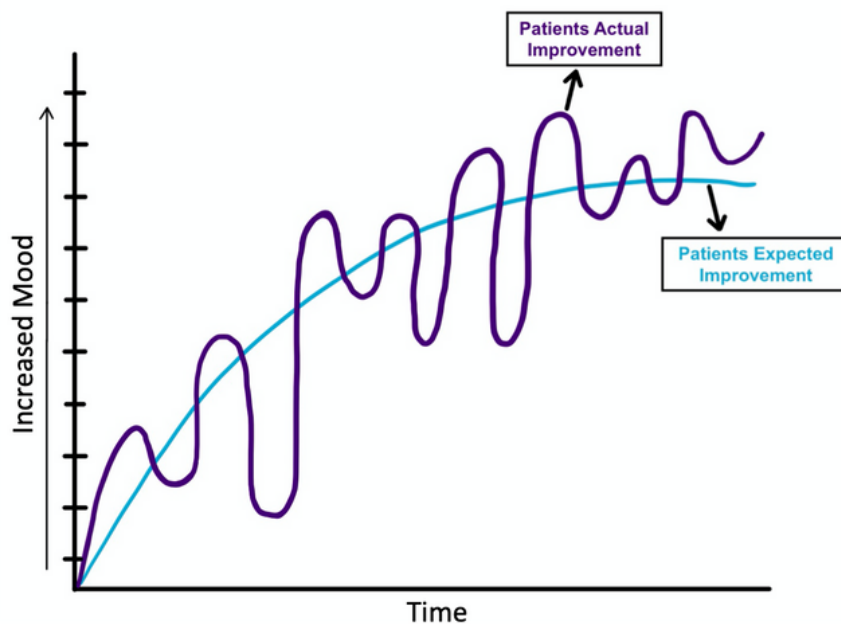
Allow your loved one to rest. Fatigue is common after an infusion. If you have some time once you get your loved one home, you could help them prepare or order some food, tuck them into bed to rest, or get them settled into a relaxing activity.

Follow their lead. Some patients like to talk about their infusions, others might not be ready right away. If you're open to it, you may invite your loved one to talk about their infusion if they'd like. Some patients don't want to process their infusion right away, and that's okay too.

Between Infusions

Be patient. Ketamine often produces rapid and profound reductions in symptoms, but meaningful long-term change occurs over time with ups and downs along the way (see graph below). Healing can be a messy and difficult process. Ketamine sessions and their afterglow can be an emotional workout. It's normal for patients to feel raw between ketamine sessions, and for things to get more difficult initially before they start to get better.

When your loved one starts to feel better, it can be tempting to expect them to fulfill the goals you know they are capable of achieving. While you just want what's best for your loved one, external pressure to change often has the opposite effect than intended, making an individual feel worse, defensive, or inadequate. It is helpful to make space and time for your loved one to take steps as they are emotionally ready. Continuing the respect, compassion, and care you demonstrated during the infusion will help support that process.



Between Infusions Cont.

Give yourself a break. If you're experiencing fatigue, resentment, or burnout, often the most loving thing you can do is take some space. It's important to check in with your own mental health, maintain a sense of self by socializing and engaging in hobbies, and to practice self care. Some caregivers and family members benefit greatly from engaging in their own therapy work.

Accept and Support Change. Many patients experience large changes in the way they think, feel and act- that is often a goal for treatment! New ways of understanding themselves or the world can emerge, as well as new or returning passions and ways of engaging with their loved ones. Some ketamine experiences might be challenging to fit into their old way of thinking, and they might seek new spiritual or religious practices, or seek to make meaning of their experiences through creative expression. It is important to accept and support your loved ones as they go through this process. Some of these changes may or may not be long-lasting, but they will learn more from exploring them without judgment or pressure.

Ask for support. YOU ARE NOT ALONE! Let us know if sitting for your loved one's infusions or supporting your loved one on their journey is hard for you to handle. If you don't know how, don't want to, or don't feel capable of sitting during infusions or processing through what comes up afterward, encourage them to talk with one of our medical providers or therapists. Our therapy team can meet with you and/or your loved one to normalize the healing process, provide support, and share additional tools and resources. There are many additional supports your loved one can benefit from- our therapy team can provide individual therapy, we have three weekly free support groups, and can give referrals for other support groups or healing activities that can support your loved one. Encouraging them to reach out to other friends and family for support can help ensure you have enough energy for yourself as you continue to care for your loved one.

Additional Resources for Caregivers

- [Families for Depression Awareness](#) provides an array of resources, such as how-to videos, a family action plan template, and downloadable fact sheets.
- National Alliance on Mental Illness holds peer-led support groups for family members, caregivers and loved ones of individuals living with mental illness. Groups take place monthly in Royal Oak, Novi, and Detroit. Check out the calendar at [this link](#). NAMI of Washtenaw County holds several virtual and in person caregiver support groups.
- [How To Support Your Partner When You're Hurting Too](#) - This article outlines 8 ways to support your partner when you need support as well.
- Tara Brach Podcast - Radical Compassion Part I [Apple Podcasts](#) [Spotify](#)
- [Double Blind Magazine - How to Trip Sit Someone on Psychedelics](#)



The Dos and Don'ts of Supporting Your Loved One

Do	Don't
Stay calm, positive, and present	Express boredom, annoyance, or frustration
Smile when you make eye contact	Ignore or leave without notice
Be supportive	Bring up tough topics
Support, empathize, and approach with non-judgmental curiosity	Try to direct the experience
Be understanding and kind	Be condescending or confrontative
Be willing to help change music or lighting	Be pushy about music or lighting
Respect the requests of your loved one	Make a big deal if crying or big emotions emerge
Call for a nurse if you need support	Panic or freak out

