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Ketamine for anxiety saved my life. As a widow and single mom at 37, nothing helped except the infusions.

Kelly Burch | July 26, 2023



Courtesy of Suzy Hanson

This as-told-to essay is based on a conversation with Suzy Hanson. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

I've struggled with anxiety my whole life. I even had panic attacks now and then, but I knew how to handle them. I would talk to my doctor, get medication and then just keep trucking. I was a wife and mom enrolled in nursing school — I had to keep going.

But when my husband Erick died unexpectedly five years ago, I couldn't just push through. At first, I was surviving: in the first year after a loss, you're just in shock. The second year was when it really hit me. You may have heard about the fight, flight, or freeze response. Well, I was frozen, unable to get out of bed. I had a racing heart, tight chest, and panicky feeling all the time.

I had been doing EMDR treatments to address childhood trauma even before Erick died, but those sessions weren't enough to help me with this new overwhelming anxiety. Then, one day I saw a sign for a ketamine clinic.



As a nurse, I knew that we sometimes used ketamine as an anesthetic in the emergency room to block pain and calm patients. I'd heard it could be used to treat depression in patients who didn't get relief from antidepressants. Now, I wondered if this hallucinogenic that makes you temporarily disconnected from reality could help me start living again after my husband's death.

Going to the clinic was like going to a spa

I called the clinic to get information and quickly signed up for ketamine infusions. I needed to try anything that would help as I approached the second anniversary of Erick's death.

A ketamine clinic feels sort of like a spa. You get a warm blanket, a pillow, a mask, and noise-canceling headphones. Those extra touches are comforting and help you go deeper. When the IV ketamine hits your system, you dissociate from yourself. Simple put, you're having a psychedelic trip. **Dr. David Mahjoubi**, who runs the clinic I go to, explained that doctors aren't really sure why this facilitates healing, but it does in many patients.

Having a psychedelic trip sounds scary to a lot of people because they think it means you lose control. But I've always felt deeply relaxed, aware of what's happening, and safe. If something feels scary or my brain wanders in a direction I don't want to go in, I just open my eyes.

I use ketamine when I feel psychologically stuck

I immediately felt better after that first treatment. But most doctors recommend doing a set of five to six infusions initially to get the most help from ketamine. So, that's what I did. The results were amazing. I started infusions in January 2020, just before the pandemic shut down the world. Despite COVID and the second anniversary of Erick's death, I felt so much better that summer.

In the fall, I started feeling my anxiety creeping back in. I went for a booster infusion. Since then, I've used ketamine infusions a few times a year. They're helpful when I feel stuck or like I need to go deeper into healing.

I never stopped doing therapy or EMDR treatments. Recently, I began processing repressed memories of childhood trauma. I wasn't making much progress with EMDR, so I did a ketamine infusion. I came out of that session with a strong sense of being safe and a sort of permission to remember these events.

Using ketamine has made me a firm believer in the mind-body connection and the ways that our bodies store trauma. EMDR helps the body release stuck traumatic memories, but for me, ketamine does that even faster.

I've paid about \$3,000 for treatments

Ketamine has been used as an anesthetic since the 1970s, and in 2019 federal regulators approved a nasal spray form of ketamine for treating some depression. But ketamine infusions to treat mental health conditions are considered an off-label use of the drug. As a nurse, I'm comfortable with that since I had seen ketamine safely used in the hospital. But it means that insurance wouldn't cover the cost of infusions.



Each infusion costs about \$500. I've spent about \$3,000 on ketamine treatments. That sounds like a lot, and it is. But when you compare it to the price of years of therapy sessions, it seems like good value. With my anxiety, I wasn't able to work, so ketamine protects my ability to make money. I really hope that insurers start covering this treatment so more people can access it.

I want to thrive in this world — to really show up with my whole self. Ketamine has allowed me to do that.

<https://www.insider.com/ketamine-for-anxiety-how-it-helped-me-2023-7>