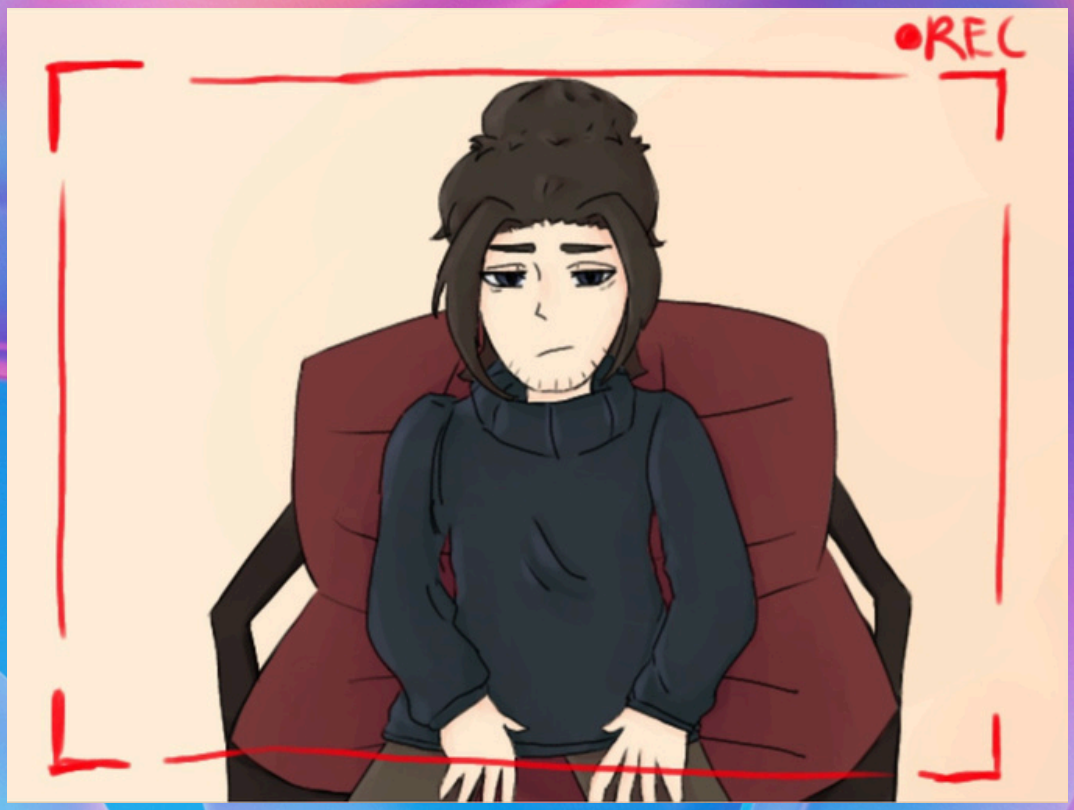
Ket to the Point

Professionals Handbook



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In partnership with:

BARNSLEY Metropolitan Borough Council

BARNSLEY RECOVERY STEPS

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KETAMINE

A Professional Guide For Supporting Young People and Young Adults Under 25

For professionals working across Barnsley

This guide has been developed for professionals working with young people and young adults across education, youth services, health, social care, safeguarding and community settings. It aims to build confidence in recognising ketamine-related concerns, starting open and non-judgemental conversations, reducing harm and connecting people with the right support at the right time.

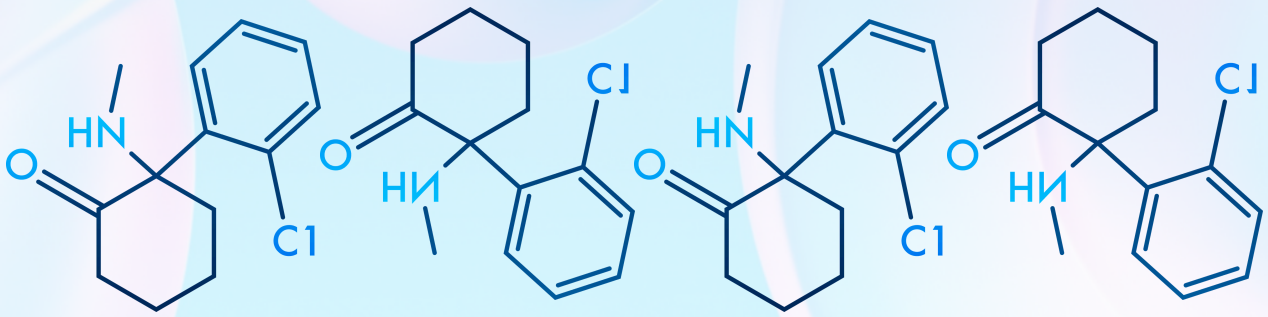
The guide encourages a trauma-informed and professionally curious approach, recognising the person behind the behaviour and considering their individual circumstances, strengths, needs and experiences.

This resource is intended to support professional awareness, early intervention and informed practice. It does not replace clinical assessment, emergency response, local safeguarding procedures, professional judgement or organisational policies.

Understanding Ketamine And Why it Matters in Barnsley?

Ketamine is a dissociative anaesthetic with legitimate medical and veterinary uses. When used non-medically, it can affect perception, awareness, coordination and judgement, with potential consequences for a young person's physical health, emotional wellbeing and safety. Nationally, concerns about ketamine-related harm among young people have increased, and this is also relevant to professional practice in Barnsley, where local services are responding to ketamine-related needs, including bladder and urinary health concerns.

For professionals working across Barnsley, early recognition and a compassionate response matter. Ketamine use should not be viewed in isolation. Professional curiosity can help us understand what may be happening around a young person or young adult, including their mental health, relationships, education, family circumstances, experiences of trauma, exploitation or other vulnerabilities.



Let's Start With Why Someone May Use Ketamine?

- Relaxation, euphoria or social connection
- Dissociation or escape from difficult thoughts, feelings or experiences (trauma)
- Perceived relief from anxiety, low mood or physical pain
- Sensory, cognitive and social regulation reasons, including self-medication
- Curiosity, experimentation, availability, cost or a belief that a pharmaceutical drug is safer

Good Practice snippet. Behaviour can make sense in the context of what has happened to a person and what they are trying to manage. Start with safety, choice, collaboration and curiosity. Avoid shame, confrontation and assumptions.

Try: "What does ketamine do for you?" before "Why don't you stop?" Explore what is helpful about their use, what is becoming difficult, what is happening around the person and which needs may be unmet.

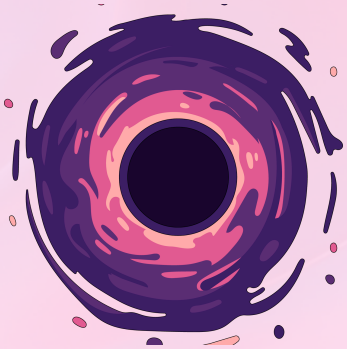
Essential Knowledge

What do I need to know about Ketamine?

Illicit ketamine is often sold as a crystalline powder. Appearance alone cannot establish strength, purity or contents. It can be snorted/sniffed, swallowed or injected. Ketamine can produce dissociation, where someone feels separated from their body, surroundings or reality.

What happens when it's used?

Effects some people seek	Effects that can create risk
Relaxation / Wellbeing	Poor coordination or abnormal movements
Detachment / Altered Perception	Confusion, Agitation or Anxiety
Euphoria / Sensory Changes	Hallucinations or profound dissociation
Reduced awareness of pain	Reduced consciousness / Prolonged sedation



“K-hole”

A colloquial term for profound dissociation. A person may be unable to move or respond normally. Focus on their clinical condition and safety, not the label.

What changes the risk?

- Amount, frequency and duration of use, including tolerance and escalation
- Using other substances at the same time
- Using alone or in environments where reduced awareness creates danger
- Unknown strength or content of illicit products
- Physical health, mental health, neurodiversity, trauma and other vulnerabilities
- Early onset of use or an emerging pattern of increasingly frequent use



UK Legal Position

In January 2026 the ACMD recommended that ketamine remain a Class B controlled drug. Professionals should distinguish prescribed or clinical ketamine from non-medical use, while responding to health and safeguarding concerns.

Good practice snippet: Separate the person from the behaviour. Language matters. Use “a young person who uses ketamine” rather than labels such as “addict” or “drug user”.

Recognising bladder and urinary health concerns

Ketamine can damage the bladder and wider urinary tract. Problems may become severe and can persist even after use stops. Early recognition and medical assessment are important.

Ask directly and sensitively about:

- Passing urine much more often than usual or waking repeatedly at night
- Sudden urgency or leaking urine
- Burning or pain when passing urine
- Blood in the urine
- Bladder, pelvic or lower abdominal pain
- How symptoms are affecting sleep, school, work, travel and ability to attend appointments

Early medical assessment matters. Urinary symptoms alongside ketamine use warrant timely healthcare assessment. Support the young person to access a GP or relevant clinical service. Severe or rapidly worsening symptoms should be clinically triaged according to local pathways.

The pain-use-pain cycle

Some people may use more ketamine because its pain-relieving effects temporarily mask discomfort that may itself be linked to ketamine-related harm. Explore this gently. Do not frame symptoms as a consequence they "deserve". Encourage medical review and specialist substance-use support at SPACE or Barnsley Recovery Steps.

Make services easier to reach

- Offer easy toilet access and explain facilities in advance
- Consider flexible times, shorter contacts, outreach or alternative venues.
- Make a clear plan for re-engagement after missed appointments
- Ask what adjustment would make attendance manageable rather than assuming disengagement

Good practice snippet

Try: "These symptoms can be difficult or embarrassing to talk about. I ask everyone because getting help early matters. Would it be okay if I ask a few bladder-health questions?"

Longer-term harm and dependence

Frequent or prolonged non-medical use can be associated with tolerance, dependence and physical, psychological and social harm. Difficulty reducing or stopping is a reason for support, not a reason for blame.

Physical health

- Bladder, urinary-tract and kidney harm
- Loss of bladder control and possible incontinence
- Persistent abdominal pain, sometimes described as "K-cramps"
- Liver and bile-duct injury associated with regular use in some people
- Injuries that may be less noticeable while pain perception is reduced

Cognition and emotional wellbeing

- Changes in memory, concentration and everyday functioning
- Anxiety, low mood, isolation or distress that may pre-date use, follow use, or interact with it
- Using ketamine to manage trauma, pain, sleep or difficult emotions can create a reinforcing cycle

Signs a pattern may be becoming more concerning

- Needing more for the same effect or use becoming more frequent
- Using alone, earlier in the day or outside previous social contexts
- Continuing despite urinary pain, abdominal pain or other harms
- Difficulty cutting down, repeated unsuccessful attempts, or daily life increasingly organised around use
- Education, employment, relationships, finances or safety becoming affected

Think wider than the drug. Explore housing, family relationships, mental health, neurodiversity, exclusion or non-attendance, exploitation and social connection. Work with the person's strengths and goals as well as risks.

Good practice snippet

Ask “What would you notice first if things were getting better?” This supports hope and gives the person a meaningful outcome to work towards.



Acute Risk, Mixing and Emergencies

Acute Risks

Acute effects can reduce coordination, awareness, judgement and the ability to respond to danger. Risk can include falls, road injury, drowning and vulnerability to exploitation or harm.

Mixing matters

Higher-risk combinations. Combining ketamine with alcohol, opioids or benzodiazepines can increase sedation and overdose risk. Other combinations may also be unpredictable. Stimulants do not restore safe judgement or reverse intoxication.

Call 999 for an immediate life-threatening concern

- The person is unconscious or cannot be woken
- There is serious breathing difficulty
- They have a seizure or convulsion
- You believe they are seriously unwell or in immediate danger

Stay with the person, follow emergency-service advice, share honest information about known or suspected substances, and use your organisation’s first-aid and emergency procedures.

After the immediate crisis...

A non-fatal emergency is an opportunity for a compassionate follow-up. Review what happened, physical and emotional wellbeing, safeguarding, patterns of use and whether the person would accept specialist support. Avoid using the incident as leverage or punishment.

Consent, vulnerability and safeguarding

Intoxication and dissociation may impair decision-making and the ability to consent. Consider coercion, exploitation, sexual harm, missing episodes, unsafe settings, supply, money and drug debt. Follow safeguarding procedures where indicated.

Good practice snippet

Ask: “Do you ever feel unable to make decisions or keep yourself safe when you have used?” “Who are you usually with?” “Does anyone expect something from you in return for ketamine, money or a place to stay?”

Harm Reduction and Supportive Messages to Share

The lowest-risk option is not to use non-medical ketamine. However, if someone is continuing to use, harm-reduction conversations can help reduce immediate risks, identify emerging health concerns and maintain opportunities for support and positive change. Harm reduction is not an endorsement of drug use.

Safer choices to explore



- **Avoid using alone.** Encourage the person, where possible, to be around people they know and trust and in an environment where help can be accessed if something goes wrong.

- **Avoid mixing substances.** In particular, combining ketamine with alcohol, opioids or benzodiazepines can increase sedation and other serious risks.



- **Explore frequency and patterns of use**. If use is becoming more frequent, discuss whether the person feels able to use less often or have longer periods without ketamine. Frequent and chronic use is associated with increased risk of dependence and significant physical harms.

- **Remember that illicit substances are unpredictable.** Appearance alone cannot confirm the strength, purity or contents of a substance sold as ketamine.



- **Think about the environment.** Encourage the person to avoid driving, cycling, swimming, roads, heights or other situations where reduced coordination, awareness or judgement could place them or others at risk.

- **Avoid sharing drug-use equipment.** Sharing equipment used for snorting or injecting can introduce additional health risks. Injecting carries particular infection and blood-borne-virus risks, and specialist harm-reduction advice should be offered where appropriate.

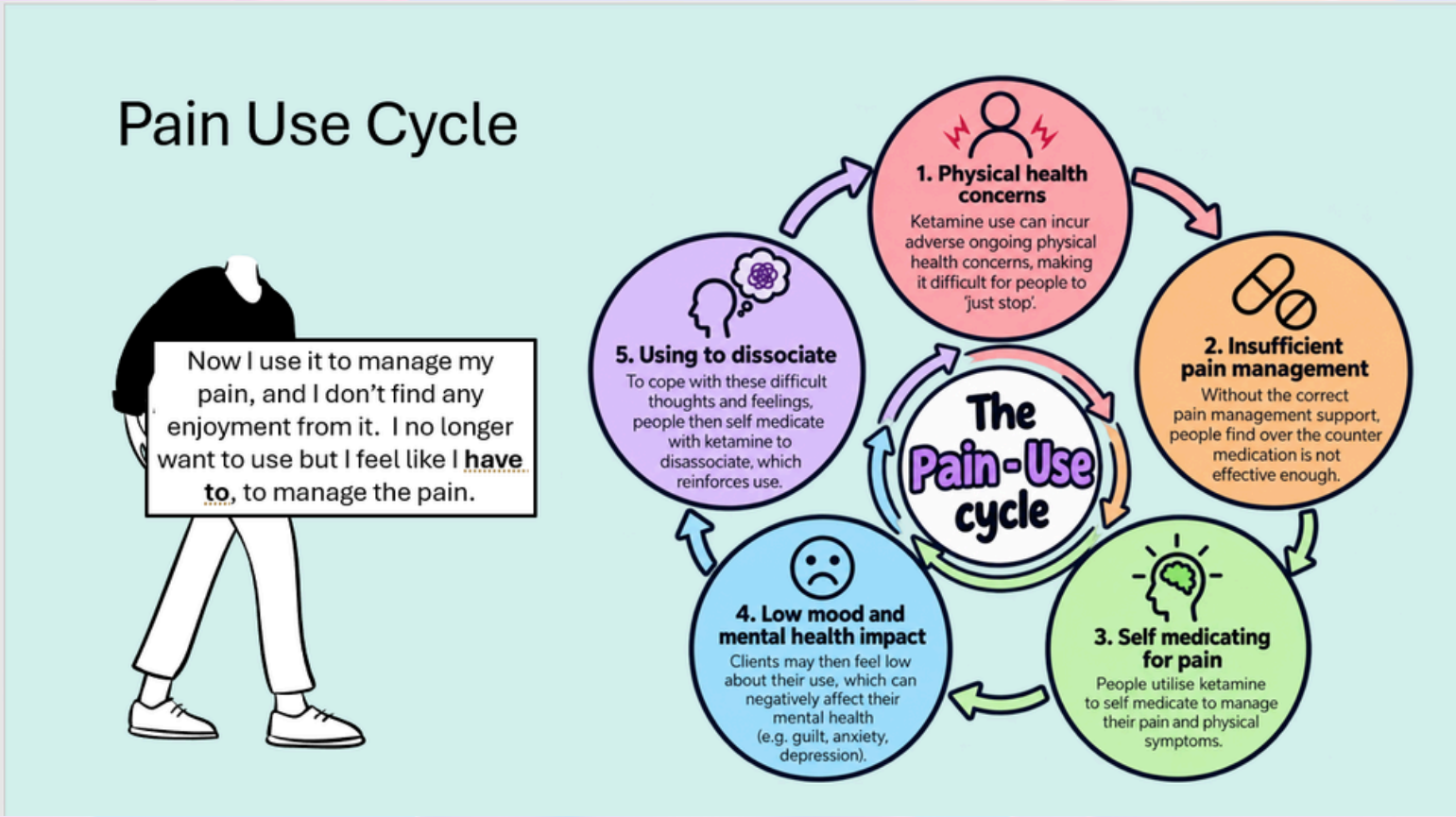


- **Look after nasal health.** If someone who snorts ketamine develops persistent soreness, bleeding or other nasal problems, encourage them to discuss this with a healthcare professional or SPACE / Barnsley Recovery Steps.

- **Ask regularly about bladder and urinary health.** Urgency, needing to urinate more frequently, pain when passing urine, pelvic or bladder pain, incontinence or blood in the urine should prompt healthcare assessment. Ketamine-related urinary damage can become severe, particularly with continued use.

- **Take abdominal pain seriously.** Recurrent or significant abdominal pain in someone using ketamine should not simply be assumed to be an expected effect of use. Encourage appropriate healthcare assessment.

- **Be aware of the pain-use-pain cycle.** Ketamine's pain-relieving effects can lead some people to use further ketamine to manage pain that may itself be related to ketamine-associated harm. Encourage medical assessment rather than relying on further ketamine or unprescribed substances to manage symptoms.



Good practice snippet

Keep the conversation open. Harm reduction is most effective when it is collaborative rather than instructive. Ask:"What feels realistic for you?" "Have you noticed any changes in your health?" and "Is there one thing that might make things a little safer?"

What Do I need To Do As a Professional?

Use professional curiosity to recognise, respond and connect. Be clear about confidentiality and safeguarding, especially with children and young people.

1. Recognise

Notice patterns rather than stereotypes: urinary or abdominal symptoms, intoxication, escalating use, changes in attendance or relationships, isolation, debt, emotional wellbeing or safeguarding concerns. One indicator alone does not prove ketamine-related harm.

2. Respond

- Find a calm, private opportunity to talk
- Ask permission and explain why you are asking
- Listen to what ketamine does for the person as well as concerns
- Ask about physical health, emotional wellbeing, mixing, use alone and changes in pattern
- Explore family context, education or employment, neurodiversity, relationships and safety where relevant
- Act promptly on medical emergencies and safeguarding concerns
- Record factually, using the person's own words where useful, and avoid judgemental descriptions

3. Connect and coordinate

- Offer an introduction to specialist support rather than simply handing over a phone number
- With consent, make the first enquiry or referral together
- Continue your professional role alongside specialist treatment where appropriate
- Seek professional consultation if the person is not yet ready to engage
- Use a joined-up plan when health, mental health, safeguarding and substance-use needs overlap

Good practice snippet

"I'm not here to catch you out. I'm asking because I want to understand what is happening and what might make things safer."

BE CURIOUS: Ask what is happening for the person and what role ketamine has in their life.

NOTICE HEALTH CONCERNS: Create opportunities to talk sensitively about bladder, urinary and other physical-health symptoms.

THINK ABOUT SAFETY: Explore whether there are times when the person feels less able to make decisions, give consent or keep themselves safe.

CREATE A SAFE SPACE TO TALK: A calm, compassionate and non-judgemental approach can encourage honesty and help-seeking.

CONNECT WITH SUPPORT: Explore together what support might be helpful, when the person feels ready to take that next step.



Treatment Journey: Adults Aged 18+

Barnsley Recovery Steps provides free, confidential and non-judgemental support for adults affected by any drug, including ketamine.

There is no single route through treatment. Support starts with the individual, what is happening for them now and what they would like to be different. They do not need to be ready to stop using ketamine before accessing support.

1. Making it easier to engage

Barnsley Recovery Steps will take time to build trust and understand what matters to the individual. Support can begin with a conversation about their ketamine use, concerns, goals and the options available to them.

As a professional, you can help by having an open conversation, explaining that support is available without judgement and, with the person's agreement, helping them make contact or complete a referral.

Try asking: "What would you like some help or support with at the moment?"

2. Looking at the whole picture

An assessment will explore ketamine use alongside the person's physical health, mental health and emotional wellbeing, safety, relationships, housing and wider circumstances. Treatment can then be shaped around their individual needs and goals.

Where appropriate, support can include harm reduction, health interventions and needle and syringe provision, alongside help to access other services. Barnsley Recovery Steps' needle and syringe provision offers sterile injecting equipment alongside harm-reduction advice, BBV testing and support into treatment.

As a professional, you can help by sharing relevant information, with appropriate consent, and highlighting physical or mental health concerns, changes in ketamine use, safeguarding concerns and other factors that may affect treatment.

3. Ketamine-specific health support

Ketamine can have significant physical health consequences, so treatment is not only about reducing or stopping use.

Barnsley Recovery Steps works in partnership with Barnsley Hospital's Urology Department, providing joint clinics for people experiencing problems associated with ketamine use, including ketamine-related bladder problems. The pathway offers tailored harm-reduction advice, fast-tracked support, group work and peer support.

As a professional, you can help by asking about physical health as well as ketamine use and encouraging people to seek appropriate medical support when they have health concerns. Avoid assuming that somebody has to stop using before their wider health needs can be addressed.

4. Personalised treatment and recovery support

Together with the individual, Barnsley Recovery Steps will develop support around the changes that are important to them. This might include:

- Reducing the risks associated with ketamine use
- Reducing or stopping ketamine
- Understanding patterns, triggers and cravings
- One-to-one recovery interventions
- Ketamine specific support groups and peer support: Ketamine Anonymous at the Recovery Hub, plus two ketamine support groups at Burleigh Court and online
- Support with physical and emotional wellbeing
- Support where mental health and substance use needs overlap
- Building routines, relationships and a recovery network
- Support with wider needs such as housing, education and employment.

The service has developed dedicated ketamine support in response to local people's experiences and feedback, including two specific ketamine support groups and its joint work with Urology. Barnsley Recovery Steps also has a specific treatment pathway for people experiencing both substance use and mental health difficulties.

As a professional, you can help by remaining involved where appropriate. Notice progress in whatever form it takes. Reducing risk, attending a group, seeking medical help, talking more openly or reducing ketamine use can all be meaningful steps.



5. Detox, residential rehabilitation and additional support

For adults who require more intensive treatment, we offer a clinical assessment of the person's needs and suitability to determine whether detoxification is needed and explore community and residential rehabilitation options to form part of the wider Barnsley Recovery Steps treatment offer.

These options should sit within a wider personalised plan rather than being presented as the only route to recovery.

Where ketamine use is connected with mental health difficulties, Barnsley Recovery Steps can also support people through its integrated approach to mental health and substance use, so that these needs can be considered together.

6. Staying connected

Recovery is rarely a straight line. Goals can change, people can have setbacks and engagement may fluctuate. Barnsley Recovery Steps can continue to review and adapt support with the individual.

Barnsley Recovery Connections is a lived experience recovery organisation based at the McLintocks site. They provide a welcoming and supportive recovery community for people affected by substance use. Individuals can access therapeutic groupwork programmes, activities and recovery groups, offering opportunities to connect with others, build supportive relationships and strengthen their recovery journey. This along with one to one support from Barnsley Recovery Steps builds and enables people to receive a wrap around service.

As a professional, don't step away simply because specialist treatment has started. A trusted relationship can remain an important source of support.

If somebody misses an appointment or their ketamine use increases, approach the conversation with curiosity.

Your role alongside Barnsley Recovery Steps

You don't need to be a ketamine specialist to make a difference.

Listen, stay curious and keep the conversation open. Help the person connect to specialist support and continue to consider their physical health, mental health, safety and wider circumstances alongside their ketamine use.

Most importantly, ask what matters to them rather than assuming what recovery should look like.

Good practice snippet

Someone does not have to be ready to stop ketamine to benefit from support. For one person, the goal may be abstinence. For another, the first step may be reducing harm, attending the Urology clinic, talking about their mental health or coming to a ketamine support group.

Start where the person is, agree what matters to them and build from there.

Barnsley Recovery Steps | Adults 18+

Free and confidential drug and alcohol support for adults living in Barnsley

Phone: 01226 779066
Email: brs.referrals@waythrough.org.uk
Website: barnsleyrecoverysteps.org.uk
Facebook: barnsleyrecoverysteps
Instagram: barnsley_recover
LinkedIn: barnsley-recovery-steps



Young People Under 18: What SPACE Will Do

SPACE provides free, confidential and non-judgemental Drug and Alcohol Support for Young People Under 18 in Barnsley. Support is flexible and led by the young person's needs and goals. Young people do not need to be ready to stop using ketamine to work with SPACE.

Engaging with the Young Person

SPACE will take time to build a trusting relationship and understand what is happening for the young person, without judgement or pressure. They can meet young people in a setting that feels appropriate for them, including school, college, home or other community setting.

If a young person is unsure about support, we will work at their pace and keep the door open.

Assessment, Risk and Safety Planning

SPACE will complete a holistic assessment with the young person, looking at their ketamine use as part of the wider picture of their life. This includes their physical and emotional health, relationships, education, family circumstances, peers, safety and support networks.

We will assess risks and protective factors, build on their strengths and develop a safety plan with the young person where needed.

Early and Ongoing Intervention

Support will be matched to the young person's needs. This may range from early intervention or brief interventions through to more structured one-to-one support. SPACE can work with young people who want information, wants to reduce harms, are considering changing their ketamine use, or want to stop.



Interventions may include:

- Harm-reduction advice and staying safer
- Brief and early interventions
- Exploring ketamine use, patterns and triggers
- Developing coping strategies
- Supporting physical and emotional wellbeing
- Reducing use or working towards stopping
- Working alongside family and other services where appropriate

SPACE's approach is personalised, with individual support plans developed alongside the young person.

What about residential rehabilitation?

Residential rehabilitation is not part of the offer for under-18 ketamine users as the pathway doesn't currently exist. SPACE will instead provide coordinated age-appropriate community-based support around the young person's individual needs.

How professionals Can Help



You can support the young person by staying connected. You don't need to have all the answers or become their drug and alcohol worker. You can contact the service for advice, guidance and case consultation.

You can:

- Listen without judgement and remain curious
- Talk positively and openly about SPACE
- Help them make the referral or first contact
- Share relevant concerns and strengths with SPACE, within appropriate safeguarding and information-sharing arrangements
- Help reduce practical barriers to attending
- Continue to check in and notice progress
- Respond to missed appointments with curiosity rather than seeing them as a lack of motivation.

Good practice snippet. Connection before correction.

A young person may not be ready to change their ketamine use straight away. A consistent, trusted professional who keeps listening and keeps the door open can be an important part of their treatment journey.

SPACE | Young People Under 18

Dedicated young people's drug and alcohol support



Phone: 01226 779066, ask for the Young People's Service
SPACE duty worker: 07483 367805
Email: brs.referrals@waythrough.org.uk
Website: barnsleyrecoverysteps.org.uk

Facebook: barnsleyrecoverysteps
Instagram: spacebarnsley
LinkedIn: barnsley-recovery-steps
YouTube: Barnsley Recovery Steps

Work Supporting 'Ketamine Recovery' in Barnsley Recovery Steps, What Does That Look Like?

Kia, a Recovery Navigator in Barnsley Recovery Steps' HOPE team, works closely with the Urology Clinic to support people experiencing ketamine related health problems. Her role focuses on encouraging engagement with physical health treatment, reducing ketamine use and supporting people to work towards their own recovery goals.

Kia provides one to one support, helping people explore harm reduction strategies and access support for their physical and mental health needs. She also facilitates a twice weekly ketamine support group and acts as a hospital liaison, supporting people who attend A&E or are admitted to hospital with ketamine related health concerns.

The support group has grown into a strong recovery network, with around 12 regular members and approximately 60% currently abstinent from ketamine. What began as a staff facilitated group has developed into a peer led community where members share experiences, celebrate progress and support one another through difficult times, both inside and outside sessions.

Through her work, Kia has also supported people to significantly reduce or stop their ketamine use, rebuild family relationships, address trauma and mental health difficulties, and engage with ongoing physical health treatment. Some have even gone on to pursue careers supporting other people in recovery.

Kia believes that listening without judgement and seeing the person beyond their ketamine use is essential. By working collaboratively with specialist services and recognising each person's individual circumstances, professionals can provide more effective and person centred support.

Her work demonstrates the importance of combining physical health treatment with recovery support and peer connection, helping people make positive changes and build a future that works for them.

