

Medications for Mental Illness

The decision to use medication—or any other treatment—is an ongoing conversation between you and your doctor. Since you are the most important part of your treatment plan, your choices and your questions are an important part of that discussion. When you have accurate information about medication and you can see how it might apply to your situation, you can make decisions that will give you the best chance of feeling better.

Medications Are One Tool

Most people in recovery from a mental illness use more than one tool in their recovery. Medications can be one of those tools. Research shows that medications for mental illnesses may help many people feel better, but that doesn't mean every medication will work, or work the same way, on every person. Other tools may include talk therapies like psychotherapy or counselling, supports at school or at work, treatments in hospital, support groups, or skills you can practice on your own. The tools available to you will depend on your diagnosis, your own situation, the resources in your area, and your own values. For some people, medications will be an important part of their long-term treatment plan. For other people, medications might help them feel well enough to start using other tools. Still other people may try other approaches before they consider medication. Medications can help people manage many symptoms, but they can't fix all problems. For example, they won't remove an outside source of stress that contributes to your problems. What medications can do is help you manage symptoms affecting thoughts, feelings, and physical symptoms so you are better able to benefit from other kinds of support.

You Are an Active Participant In Your Care

When you receive treatment for any health concern, you need to make choices that fit your needs and your values. Your doctor, pharmacist, and other health care providers can guide you through different options and help you understand the risks and benefits, but in most cases, the final decision is up to you. You are also the person who will be following your treatment plan, so whatever your doctor prescribes must be something that you are willing and able to try. Many people have a harder time sticking with treatments like medications when they are concerned about possible side effects, financial costs, loved ones' reactions, or challenges taking medications as prescribed. It's also hard to follow a treatment plan if it doesn't match your goals. In these situations, some people may decide it's not for them and stop treatment without looking for a new option, which means they aren't getting the help they need. It's best to be upfront about challenges so you and your doctor can look for solutions. You can make the most of treatment decisions by being an active partner in your care. A big part of being an active partner is communication. You communicate your needs and concerns to your doctor, and you use your doctor's knowledge and guidance to help you make decisions. If you don't have a good relationship with your doctor, it can be hard to get the support you need to follow a treatment plan. You have the right to find a new doctor or get a second opinion.

Starting Your Medication

If you've decided to try a medication, it's important to take the medication correctly. If you're starting a new medication, the pharmacist will give you information to take home. This information isn't always easy to understand, so be sure to ask questions if anything is unclear. Once you start your medication, it's helpful to monitor your progress and any side effects so you can track how well it's working for you. You can keep a journal or try an app to help you keep track. Share your notes with your doctor regularly.

Common Concerns about Medications

Many people have concerns about medications, especially when it comes to medications for mental illnesses.

“Medications will change who I am.”

When medications work like they're supposed to, they can help you feel and think like you – the way you feel and think when you're well. Most common medications like antidepressants and antipsychotics are thought to have an effect on messenger chemicals in the brain (and throughout the nervous system) called neurotransmitters. The medications make neurotransmitters that are already in your body more available or more effective.

“I tried a medication before and it didn't work.”

There are many different kinds of medications, and they each work in slightly different ways. Many people who choose to use medication find that they have to try a few different options in order to find the medication that works best for them. It can be frustrating, especially when you just want to feel better, but it's difficult for doctors to predict how a medication might affect you without giving it a try.

“I should be able to deal with this on my own.”

When someone has a physical health problem, they typically seek help from a doctor or other health professional. Mental illnesses are no different. Medications are simply one tool that you might use as you take care of your health.

“I'll have to take medications for the rest of my life.”

In some cases – and with the support of your doctor – you might be able to stop using medication after you've been well for a period of time. In other cases, you might continue to take medications even when you feel well to prevent symptoms from coming back. In any situation, it's important to talk to your doctor so you understand what to expect in treatment and recovery.

“Medications are addictive.”

Most medications for mental illnesses are not addictive or habit-forming, including antidepressants, antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, anticonvulsants, and stimulants. Even though they are not addictive, you should never suddenly stop taking a medication without talking to your doctor. One group of anti-anxiety medications, benzodiazepines, can cause

dependence if they aren't used properly. While there are risks to these medications, they may also be helpful. If you're considering benzodiazepines, talk to your doctor to learn how you can get the most benefits while reducing some of the risks.