

Taking Medication for Your Mental Health

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Why might someone take or not take medication for their mental health?

There are many reasons why someone might be recommended to take medication for their mental health. Medication can help people manage current mental health symptoms, gain longer-term stability in their mental health or enable someone to engage with other forms of support like psychological therapies.

Similarly, someone may not want to take or stop taking medication for several reasons such as side effects, uncertainty about how medication may help them, or because they want to try other lifestyle changes or support options before trying medication.

Whilst listening to others' experiences with medication can be insightful, *it is important to speak with a doctor, such as a GP or psychiatrist, if you are seeking any personal advice about medication and your mental health.*

I hope that this will provide some insight into some experiences with taking medication! – Tara

Medication has made life feel more manageable

I'm scared I won't feel like me if I take medication

Taking medication makes me able to engage with other forms of support

The side effects of medication are really impactful on my life

My experience with taking medication for my mental health

For some time I was really hesitant to try medication after hearing about others' negative experiences of taking medication and my own fears about adjusting to medication. Despite being strongly recommended to take medication alongside receiving psychological support, I chose to try and manage my mental health via psychological support and counselling alone. At times this type of support met my needs, however most of the time I would find that my mental health would fluctuate rapidly and that I could become distressed very quickly. This meant that for a long time, psychological support became about managing immediate distress rather than working on long-term goals and tackling core issues, which would have helped me independently manage, and even prevent, distress in the long run.

It took me longer than expected to be able to try medication, because I had difficulty accessing an appointment with a psychiatrist. I was quite fortunate that I was able to quickly find medication that worked for me and experienced limited side effects. For some people, the process of finding the right medication that works for them can take some time. Once adjusting to medication I found that I was able to "better" engage with psychological support and was able to apply skills in periods of distress rather than being overwhelmed by emotion. Although I'm glad that I tried managing my mental health without medication initially, in hindsight medication would have been really helpful in the earlier parts of my mental health journey.

Adjusting to taking medication

When people think about adjusting to taking medication, they often think about physical adjustments. Though there can be several different physical adjustments, for me personally, the greatest adjustment to taking medication was changes in my lifestyle and routine. Everyone's body is different and the adjustments to medication can differ for a range of different reasons such as the type of medication you are taking, your routine and your lifestyle. The following are some of the changes I had to consider when starting medication and ways that I managed them.

What I needed to consider	How it affected me	How I manage it
Physical changes	Increases and decreases in my appetite	Trying to eat at regular times and eat foods that will keep me fuelled for longer instead of for example, eating chocolate bars for dinner (which I have done). Keeping snacks on hand to eat, even if I'm not feeling hungry.
Emotional changes	Feeling less emotionally intense, or even emotionally diluted	Reminding myself that even though this change is uncomfortable, it has helped me to better manage my mental health.
Limiting caffeine, alcohol and other drugs	Needing to maintain a roughly stable consumption of caffeine and avoid drinking alcohol	Trying to avoid drinking alcohol when out – which is still something I'm working on. This includes being honest with my GP and psychiatrist when I have had alcohol whilst on my medication.
Interactions with other medication	Before starting medication for my mental health I could go into the chemist and get any 'off the shelf' medicine for a cold or flu. Now I need to check what medicine can interact with my medication	Checking with my doctor or asking a pharmacist at a chemist if I am unsure about any possible interactions. Calling HealthDirect to speak to a registered nurse if I am unable to get to my doctor or a chemist.
Remembering to take medication	Actually remembering to take medication can be a struggle, especially when some medications are recommended to be taken at specific times or under specific conditions (eg. with food).	Setting an alarm for when I need to take medication. Writing down a note to remember to take my medication with me if I am away from home or out later in the evening when I usually take my medication.
Managing medical appointments	I have frequent medical appointments for check-ins, prescription refills and blood tests because of the specific medication I am taking. This means that I sometimes need to take time away from work or study and I feel worried that others will judge me for being absent.	Booking medical appointments in advance and trying to give notice when I have to be away from work or studies. Getting medical certifications or getting my practitioner to fill out any documents I need for absences.