



# What To Ask About Mental Health Medications

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

For a moment, let's get personal. What if your doctor recommends a mental health medication for you or someone in your family? What do you do? How do you decide for yourself if the medication is what you really want, or need?

There have been many recent news stories about whether medication is over-used for mental health problems. I am not going to focus on that social issue right now. That will be the topic of a future column. The focus of this column is more practical. What should you do if you, or a family member, have been told to begin a mental health medication?

Mental health medication may be just what's needed. It can improve your behavior, thoughts, or feelings. It can bring about some positive changes that you couldn't achieve otherwise.

So for those who are in need of mental health medication—or who have loved ones in need—what can you do?

## **Become a Knowledgeable Consumer**

It helps to know everything about your condition and the medication you'll be taking. That means you need to ask questions. By asking good questions and getting factual answers, you can decide if the medication is the best choice for you.

Start asking questions as soon as a doctor has diagnosed you with a mental health disorder and recommended a medication. Also it helps to have someone you trust to talk to the doctor with you. That person can be more objective in asking questions, and may be able to remember the answers better than you. In the case of children and adolescents, a parent needs to be there to get the information.

Take notes and, if needed, ask the doctor to talk slowly and be willing to explain answers.

Here are some key details to go over with your doctor concerning medication:

- What is the name of the medication? Get both the brand name and the generic name.
- How much will you take and when?
- What is the medication for? What symptoms is it supposed to improve? Learn everything about your diagnosis that you can. Learn the symptoms of your diagnosed condition and the best explanation as to why you have this condition. You can do some of this research on the Internet or in the library, or your doctor may have written material that you can keep.
- How long will you need to take the medication?
- What other treatments are available besides medication? Talk with your doctor about all the options. For most people diagnosed with mental health problems, counseling and psychotherapy can help. In fact, psychotherapy should almost always be part of a treatment plan. The best treatment for most disorders includes a combination of

medication and professional counseling. If a child has been diagnosed, it may help for the parents to attend parenting education classes so they can learn to manage or redirect their child's behavior. In addition, ask about stress management techniques. These can help to improve your mental health symptoms.

- What are the potential side effects of the medication? You need to know this because you need to know what to look for. Typically, side effects will fade after a couple weeks. .
- How long will you need to take the medication before you can expect to see some improvement? Some medications, such as anti-anxiety medications, start working as soon as you start taking them. Other medications, such as anti-depressants, can take up to four weeks to start working.
- How often do you need to return to the doctor to discuss how you're doing?
- Do you need any tests to check for invisible side effects? One medication, for example, reduces the white blood cell count in some people so everyone needs to be monitored to ensure that their white blood cell count doesn't drop too low.
- If you are participating in counseling, it will probably be with a psychologist, a social worker, a nurse, or a licensed professional counselor, since physicians rarely do counseling any more. How will your physician and your counselor communicate? It's important for your ongoing care that they work together toward common goals.

When you start taking a mental health medication, it helps to develop a routine for taking it. What reminders will you use? Some people use an alarm watch. Some remember, "every day after breakfast" or "every day after dinner." Some use pillboxes with different slots for different times and days of the week, and load the boxes once a week.

Finally, it's important to note any changes in your behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Look for both positive as well as negative changes. It helps to write them down so you can report accurately to the doctor. Remember too, parents need to monitor the changes in their child. And a responsible son or daughter may need to monitor the changes in an elderly parent.

Recently there has been some controversy as to the social impact of mental health medication. But what would you do if your doctor recommended a mental health medication for you? This article has offered some guidelines that can help.

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