

Myth Busters: Psych Meds Edition

It is sad to see the person looking for a chemical fix to all their problems. Equally discouraging is seeing marriages torn apart, lost dreams, and lives ended early- when psychiatric medication might have made a difference in the big picture. Not “pro-meds” or “anti-meds,” as a mental health clinician I am “what is your situation, and could psychiatric medications possibly be a better option to what you are facing?”

Is it better if you don't have to take medications? Of course! Why add anything to your body that's not needed?! But the question really is, do the possible benefits outweigh the *likely* risks I run in not taking medications? Does the *likely* negative impact on myself and/or others suggest I would want to consider medications? Suicidal thoughts can lead to suicide, manic episodes can lead to marital unfaithfulness, addiction can lead to prison, anxiety can lead to ruined relationships, and ADHD can lead to job loss.

My paradigm on taking psychiatric medications comes from a framework that sees it as more of a philosophical and psychological decision in nature than it is about finding the “right scientific argument.” There's no perfection in science, and even the medical treatments we know and love involve a lot of guesswork and uncertainty. We can't know all possible interactions, side effects, and possibilities for every person. What it often comes down to is *risk* and *trust*. Taking Advil for a headache is a fairly low risk, with fairly certain outcomes- for some people. Taking Abilify for Bipolar is less certain. But if it works, is it worth the risks?

I submit to you that deciding to take medications really comes down to two questions: **1) Is what you are facing worth considering the cost/benefit of medication? 2) Are you willing to try something different?**

Top Myths On Taking Psychiatric Medications

If I take medication, it means I am crazy.

First of all, what is meant by crazy? Most folks I talk with say ‘crazy’ is something along the lines of becoming “controlled” and losing their choice. With psychiatric medications, this is a phenomenon mostly relegated to the movies. Seeking a trained professional to affect biological changes in order to help a person with outcomes they desire isn't crazy; it *might* be wise.

Also, the opposite of this myth may actually mean a person is in WORSE shape. It is usually those who seek help who are healthiest; those who leave their problems to chance are most likely to be overcome by them.

I will become a drooling vegetable.

This is a movie concept, not a real world reality of Psychiatry (unless if there are illegal, wholesale abuses/uses occurring).



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Psychotropic meds need to be taken if you are depressed.

This is the opposite, yet equally erroneous view that medications are always beneficial. Sometimes they are not.

We really don't know exactly how psychiatric medications work.

True. This is absolutely true. However, if we are to get honest about the process of research (and for that matter, science), we don't know a lot about a lot of things. Even in cardiovascular science and treatment, there are many unknowns. Even in the treatment of heart disease, that formidable foe of American health, there are *many* treatments that have uncertainties as to how/if they will work on the individual. But remember, the business we are talking about is saving lives. And so it is with Psychiatric medication. Saving and/or improving lives is the question. If you know with certainty that taking medications will do neither, then there is no reason to take them!

When I am in session with clients, I don't seek to win this (or really any) arguments by sheer data. Most often, it comes down to our a) belief in what makes change possible and b) our willingness to change. These choices we make are based on values, goals, perceived risk, and the beliefs we hold. And each of us must decide for ourselves.

If I go to a Psychiatrist, they are just going to give me a pill.

To be fair, this does happen a fair amount. But also to be fair, Psychiatrists have to gather a reasonable clinical rationale to prescribe, and there are many who do not recommend medications in every situation. You have choice whether or not to follow the suggestions given and/or to get a second and third opinion. To increase confidence in the process, bring up your concerns and ask around for the best Psychiatrists.

Medications will change who I am.

At their best, medications help address what is dysfunctional, not the enduring qualities of a person. The prescribing doctor can track your symptom profile to determine- with you- whether or not a prescription leads to positive or negative changes. Please remember that ANY medication used in medicine can cause unwanted effects- this is why it must be tracked and monitored, especially initially.

I will go crazy if I take medication.

Psychotropic medications are meant to help correct problems. The higher risk of problems is when a person doesn't take medications when they could help prevent or intervene with major issues. If you are concerned about having a very negative reaction to a medication (whether due to Drug Allergies, past experience, or fear), consider setting up some supports such as



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regular follow-up with your psychiatrist, blood tests, and having friends/family monitor how you are doing when first starting on a medication.

There will be nasty side-effects.

Due to regulations, drugs used by Psychiatrists in the U.S. are highly researched to ensure that they do not create public health concerns. That being said, there are certainly bad experiences and side effects that can occur. In the end, it's not a perfect science, and it comes back to those two questions of whether 1) what you are facing is worth considering the cost/benefit of medication, and 2) having willingness to try something different

I will become addicted.

If this is a concern, please raise it with your doctor, especially if you have a history of addiction. There are MANY meds prescribed that are non-addictive. However, it is true that benzodiazepines, sedatives, etc., have addiction risks. Many patients can use these medications without becoming addicted, with a substantial improvement in their quality of life even short-term (e.g., through better sleep or less anxiety).

Psychiatrists force medication on their patients.

A respectable doctor will not force medication on you. Unique, individual focus is made by seasoned professionals, including your involvement with the process. The concept of against-your-will medication is mostly made up for entertainment/story purposes and rarely exists in the realm of actuality (even in the EXTREME situations where medication is forced, it is to guard a person from being a threat to human life, but this is not the usual we are discussing here).

Medications are a quick fix.

Some medications are only indicated for short-term use and all but do away with presenting symptoms when they are taken (e.g., panic). However, medications do not change the environmental and personal factors that interact with your overall well-being, so those areas must be addressed for holistic improvement. However, sometimes meds can help to get a person to a better spot as a co-treatment so other areas of life can also be improved. Therefore, involving medications, personal work and change, spiritual growth, environmental adaptations, and so forth, a person will usually secure a greater likelihood of improvement.

I'll have to take medication forever.

Many medications are meant to be taken only for a time. However, just like with other medical treatments, some clients will find that maintenance on medication really is the best approach. This is usually only recommended when the cost of not taking the medication consistently is too high or risky because of the condition or problem being faced.



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If certain prescriptions work for my friend, they'll work for me.

CONVERSELY: If prescriptions didn't work for my friend, they won't work for me.

Each person is incredibly unique. Whether through diet or exercise or blood pressure, people have to have different approaches and combinations to make their health the best. Patience in the process is called for.

Caveats and Disclaimer:

Some of my readers are inevitably asking, "What about the wholesale problems with Big Pharma?" "What about all the abuses with medications?" That is another topic for another day; I do not deny there are some MAJOR issues and concerns to be addressed related to greed, regulations, and abuses. But consider this article as a thought-provoker and encourager in the realm of appropriately administered and utilized psychiatric medications.

I am not an MD, nor do I give medical advice. I offer feedback based on counseling experience and research. Medical questions are to be handled by a medical provider.

Thanks for reading!

Yours truly,

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