

A Student's Guide to Considering Medication for Depression or Anxiety

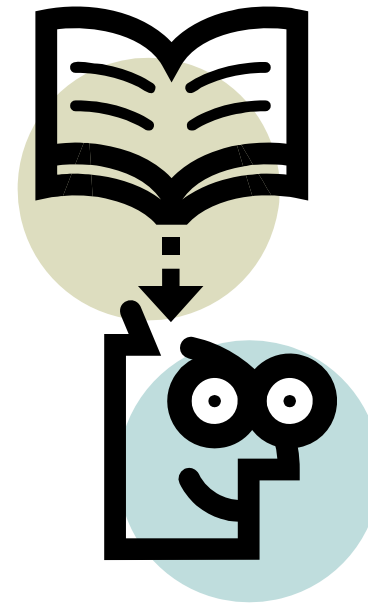
*Real answers to your
most important questions*

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Dear Students:

This brochure is designed to answer some of the most common questions that people have when they think about going on a medication for depression or anxiety. Although this brochure certainly does not cover everything, we hope you will find it informative if you are considering trying a medication. The information provided here is general, so you should find out how medications will work in your specific circumstances before making your decision. We are glad you are taking these important steps toward improving your well-being!



How do I know if I need to be on medication?

Sometimes, when a person is dealing with depression or anxiety, taking medication can be helpful in managing the symptoms. Here are some signs that you might be experiencing depression or anxiety:

Symptoms of depression

- ✓ Feeling sad or irritable most of the day, nearly every day
- ✓ Loss of pleasure in usual activities
- ✓ Significant weight loss OR gain
- ✓ Difficulty falling or staying asleep OR sleeping much more than usual
- ✓ Feeling physically restless OR very slowed down
- ✓ Fatigue or loss of energy
- ✓ Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- ✓ Difficulty thinking, concentrating, or making decisions
- ✓ Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide



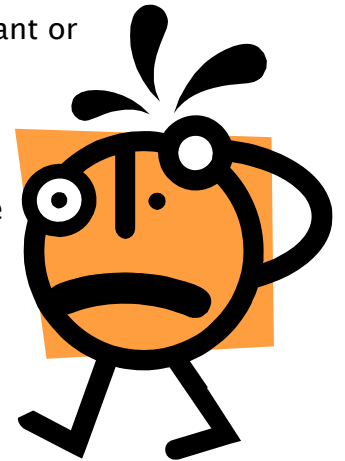
Symptoms of anxiety

- ✓ Excessive, uncontrollable worry or apprehension about a number of activities
- ✓ Fear of social or performance situations, leading to avoidance of such settings
- ✓ Pounding or racing heart, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, chest pain/discomfort, feeling of

choking, numbness/tingling, chills/hot flashes, abdominal pain/nausea, dizziness, fear of losing control or going crazy, feeling like you might die

- ✓ Fear of being in places it might be difficult to get out of if panic symptoms arise
- ✓ Unreasonable fear of a specific object or situation, such as insects, snakes, blood, heights, flying
- ✓ Flashbacks, dreams, or intrusive thoughts about unpleasant memories or events
- ✓ Repetitive behaviors (such as checking or hand washing) that you feel driven to perform

If you are experiencing some of these symptoms (or ones similar to them), and they are interfering with your ability to function on a daily basis, you should talk with your counselor about whether medication might be helpful for you. For some people, counseling by itself is effective; for others, an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication is helpful in addition to counseling. Although your counselor cannot prescribe medication, s/he can help you decide whether seeking medication makes sense for you, and can help you figure out where you can go for a medication evaluation.

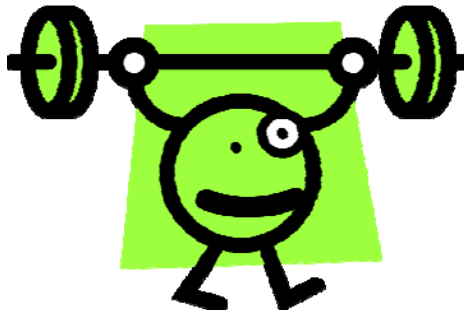


Will medication change my personality?

No, but depression and anxiety can change how you behave and relate. Medication will allow your personality to come through without being affected by your symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Isn't it better to try to fix the problem without medication?

It is certainly a good idea to try to address your symptoms without using medication. However, you may find that your symptoms are severe enough that they keep you from implementing changes or even understanding what caused your condition. In these cases, medication can help clear your thinking, increase your energy level, and improve your overall psychological well-being – all of which will help you get to the root of the issue more easily.



Do a lot of other students take medication, or am I alone?

You are not alone. Many other students as well as people in general population use medication to help with psychological conditions.

Don't some people go crazy on these drugs (i.e., Prozac)?

Research has not shown that medications for psychological problems cause people to “go crazy” or become suicidal.

The typical effect is to restore the person to their normal level of functioning, and ongoing care by the prescribing doctor will help manage any unpleasant effects of medication.

How can I tell if my problem is just a chemical imbalance?

There's really no such thing as “just a chemical imbalance.” Our brain chemicals affect our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions – and our behaviors, thoughts, and emotions affect our brain chemicals. So, if you are feeling anxious or depressed, your brain chemistry is off-balance – regardless of “why” you are depressed or anxious. Thus, if you take a medication and start to feel better, it does not mean that it was “just a chemical imbalance.”

How does the medication work?

Medications for depression and anxiety work by affecting the chemicals in your brain that are related to your emotions. Some of the most common and effective modern medications work by allowing these chemicals to stay active in your brain for longer than they would on their own. Other classes of medication work in the brain differently.

How long will it take to work?

Most medications for depression and anxiety take at least two weeks to take effect, and some do not reach their full effects for 4–6 weeks. During this time, you should not stop taking the medication or change your dose without first talking with your physician.

If I talk to a psychiatrist, will s/he push me into taking medication?

Your provider will not push you into taking medication. He or she will only offer you treatment options and recommendations. The decision whether or not to use medication is ultimately yours.

Do I need to be in counseling, too? Why do I need to be in counseling if I'm on medication?

Medication helps your symptoms feel less severe, but does not address whatever caused the symptoms to emerge in the first place. Counseling can help you understand what led up to your symptoms, what you can do to help yourself feel better, and how you can prevent your symptoms from returning in the future.

Does medication work better than counseling?

Research shows that for some problems, including depression, counseling works as well as or better than medication alone. For many people, a combination of the right medication and the right kind of counseling is the best way to treat symptoms.

If I'm feeling better, should I stop coming to counseling?

You should always discuss your decision to leave counseling with your counselor before you stop coming. Often, your symptoms will show improvement when you start taking medication – and that is good! However, this should be a way for you get even more out of counseling, to address any underlying issues that led to your symptoms in the first place, to prevent symptom relapse,

and to help you get to a point where medication is not required.

Is it a sign of weakness to take medication? Am I just running away from my problems if I take medication?

No more so than if you had diabetes and took insulin. By taking medication for depression or anxiety, you are using a proven treatment for a real condition. In fact, you are facing your problems head-on by using medication and counseling to treat your symptoms.

Do I have to take it every day, or can I just take it when I need it?

Most medications are taken every day. Your doctor will talk with you about how a particular medication is to be taken. It is important to use the medication as your doctor directs in order to receive the full benefit and to avoid serious health problems.

Will I need to be on it for the rest of my life?

Probably not, but it is possible. Most people who suffer from depression or anxiety find that medication and counseling help them recover, and then they can stop treatment. Some people with more severe symptoms or who have a genetic predisposition may find that long-term use of medication and/or counseling is necessary.

Is the medication addictive?

Most medications prescribed today for anxiety and depression are not addictive. Some older medications, or those used in special circumstances or for extreme

symptoms, have either addictive or dependency effects. Your doctor will tell you about these before prescribing such a medication.

What side effects will I experience?

It really depends on what medication you are taking. However, medications from the same drug family often have similar side effects. Some possible side effects of the most popular anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications are:

- ✓ Nausea, diarrhea, or constipation
- ✓ Dry mouth
- ✓ Dizziness
- ✓ Drowsiness
- ✓ Nervousness
- ✓ Sleep changes
- ✓ Headache
- ✓ Blurred vision
- ✓ Change in sexual interest or functioning

Not everyone experiences these side effects, and some don't have any. Also, you are most likely to experience side effects in the first three weeks of using a new medication. Usually, these symptoms are mild and tend to fade as your body gets used to being on the medication. However, if you experience side effects that are unpleasant or last more than a few weeks, you should talk with your physician about this. It may be that a different medication or dosage would work better for you.

I was on a medication before and it made me feel worse. Why should I considering going on medication again?

Everyone's brain chemistry is somewhat different, and there are different "types" of depression and anxiety. It could be that the medication you took before was not the best choice for you at that time, or that your body did not have time to adjust to mild side effects. You should discuss this with your doctor, and s/he may be able to choose a different medicine that will be more effective and with fewer unpleasant side effects.

Are there any reasons why I should not use medication?

If you are pregnant, planning to become pregnant, or nursing, you should not use medications. If you are taking any other prescription, herbal, or over-the-counter drug, or if you have any other medical conditions, your physician should know about these before prescribing an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety drug. Otherwise, medication may not work as intended if you are taking other medications.

What other changes will I have to make in my life if I go on medication?

While you are using an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety drug, you should not drink alcohol or use any other drugs. Your doctor should know about any other medications that you are taking. You should plan to take the medicine at the same time every day, and you may find that you have to make adjustments to your schedule to accommodate minor side effects (such as drowsiness).

How long will I have to take it?

It depends – on how severe your symptoms are, whether you are in counseling, the type of medication you are taking, and what else is going on in your life. For depression, a minimum of six months is recommended. Most people find that they are feeling much better after a few months, and can discuss tapering off the medication. You should have regular check-ups while you are on the medication to evaluate its effectiveness and discuss the duration of treatment.



Who can prescribe medication?

Generally speaking, medical professionals are able to prescribe medication. This includes any M.D. or D.O. (such as your family physician or a psychiatrist), or Nurse Practitioners with pertinent education. In general, psychologists and counselors CANNOT prescribe medication.

Where can I get medication?

UMKC students have several options. You may make an appointment with a nurse practitioner at Student Health & Wellness (816-235-6133). Students who are Counseling Center clients may be eligible to see our consulting psychiatrist. You may also visit your family or personal physician, or an outside psychiatrist, to discuss these issues. Your counselor can talk with you about other options that would work in your particular circumstances.

How much does it cost?

Medications can be costly, but there are ways to limit the expense. The cost depends on several factors, including which medicine is being used and your health insurance's prescription drug coverage. Before making a decision to go on a medication, you should find out how much your prescription co-pay is, and whether this differs based on the specific medication you are prescribed. Some medicines for psychological problems are available as generic drugs, which helps reduce the cost for you. Most people find that their health insurance covers a large part of the cost of these medications. If you have concerns about cost, you should talk with your doctor about these. In addition, you can go to www.needymeds.com for more information on managing your medication costs.

Where can I get more information about specific medications?

Information about specific medications is available from your pharmacist and can be researched at the library or on the web. Your library has a book called *Physician's Desk Reference* which has extensive information on all medications. This information can also be found on the web at www.drugs.com/pdr/.

Whom should I talk with if I have more questions?

Your counselor can talk with you about other questions you have about how medication may fit into your overall counseling plan, as well as concerns you have about going on medication. Your medical doctor or pharmacist can discuss specific side effects of medications and other health-related concerns with you. Also, the following web sites can help you can learn more about anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns:

www.umkc.edu/cthc

www.mentalhealth.com

www.ulifeline.org

www.mentalhelp.net

www.nimh.nih.gov

www.depression.com

www.apa.org

www.anxietynetwork.com



Educating yourself about the benefits and risks of taking an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication is a critical step in improving your psychological well-being. Be sure you have all the information you need before making this important decision.