



Are Mental Health Medications Right For You?

Should I take mental health medications? If you are asking this question then you are or have probably experienced some degree of depression, anxiety, or other persistent negative emotion or mental health issue. Maybe you have heard horror stories from others about mental health medications, or maybe you've heard that an antidepressant has saved someone's life. Maybe you've heard how someone has tried therapy and prayer but did not overcome depression until they tried a medication. Or maybe you've heard how medications did nothing to help someone's depression and anxiety and it was therapy or maybe prayer and faith that helped them overcome their mental health issues. So which is better? Prayer? Therapy? Medications? Perhaps a combination of all? The answer... well, it's complicated. As you read this article you may feel that I am trying to persuade some to strongly consider taking mental health medications... I am. But only those that would very likely greatly benefit from medications. Or you may also feel that I am trying to discourage some from taking mental health medications... I am. But only those that would not likely greatly benefit from medications. So who would most likely greatly benefit from medications and who would not? My hope is that the remainder of this article will answer that question for you.

First off, because of the stigma that is often associated with mental health disorders, let's imagine you have a solely physical illness. Let's say you have developed diabetes: Diabetes Mellitus Type-2 to be exact. Your genetics played a small role in the development of this disease. However, the main reason why you contracted the disease is because of unhealthy diet and lifestyle choices. The disease has now gotten to the point where it is causing a very significant negative effect on your life. You're experiencing severe pain in your feet, your eyesight is now blurry, you're experiencing lightheadedness from hypoglycemia, and you now have a very high risk of premature death from cardiovascular disease. To treat this disease, you could focus solely on making the necessary diet and lifestyle changes to reverse the diabetes and improve the symptoms, but as severe as the symptoms have gotten you would probably strongly consider, and reasonably so, a medication to help improve the symptoms. It would not be wise to only take the medications without making significant changes to your diet and lifestyle as your diet and lifestyle are, in large part, the cause of the disease. So it only makes sense that correcting your diet and lifestyle is the key to true healing from the disease and its symptoms. But do you even need the medication at all? Well, because the diabetes has gotten to such a severe state it is reasonable, and probably wise, to take the diabetes medications to more quickly and effectively reduce your symptoms and your risk of premature death than diet and lifestyle changes alone.

And what if you had Diabetes Mellitus Type-1? This is the type of diabetes that often begins at a younger age and the only treatment option is medication—insulin, to be exact. This disease is, to our current understanding, caused almost solely by your genetics and there is little to nothing you can do to prevent or cure the disease. Insulin is not a cure for Type-1 diabetes but is required to maintain healthy blood sugar levels and to prevent or reduce negative symptoms caused by the disease. If you have Type-1 diabetes you probably wouldn't think twice about using insulin to manage your blood glucose to prevent serious complications and premature death from uncontrolled blood sugar.

Medications OR Therapy

So how do the treatments of these physical diseases compare with mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, OCD, and others? Quite closely, actually. As with Diabetes Mellitus Type-2, there is often a genetic propensity toward a mental health disorder but other factors such as divorce, abuse, job loss, experiencing trauma, losing a loved one, or even constant high levels of stress are often the factors that eventually push someone into a

mental health disorder. When this occurs, the answer of how to treat the disorder is, like Type-2 diabetes, often based on what caused the disorder and how severe it is. If the root cause of your anxiety and panic attacks are constant high levels of stress caused by frequent conflict within your home then seeing a therapist to help you with conflict resolution is the most appropriate treatment. If the root cause of your depression is a failing marital relationship then couples counseling is likely the most appropriate treatment. If your symptoms are minor or they are caused by correctable circumstances then I encourage you to consider therapy and lifestyle changes before considering medications. However, much like the Type-2 Diabetes scenario above, if your depression or anxiety symptoms are very bothersome or debilitating, regardless of the cause, then it would be reasonable, and probably wise, to begin medical treatment to more quickly improve symptoms while also receiving therapy and making lifestyle changes to correct the potential causes.

And just like Diabetes Mellitus type-1, the kind that is solely caused by genetics and requires insulin, there are mental health disorders that are not necessarily caused, in any large degree, by anything you've done or experienced but, instead, are primarily inherited genetically. In these disorders, medical treatment becomes a bit more important or necessary in order to significantly improve the symptoms and without the medical treatment the symptoms can often lead to a far less functional life and even to premature death. Two examples of disorders that most often require medical treatment in order to successfully manage symptoms are Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder.

Medications AND Therapy

What about therapy AND medications in combination? Should you do both? While many studies have shown that therapy and mental health medications most often have similar results in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, the combination of therapy and medications have been shown to be more effective than either treatment alone. So, yes, we recommend that you receive therapy whether or not you choose to take mental health medications.

Medications and Therapy and Prayer

What about prayer and faith? Where do they fit in? Does taking mental health medications mean you lack faith in God? Should you just pray for healing from depression or anxiety or panic attacks or suicidal thoughts instead of taking medications? As a former minister (former minister as a profession, that is, as I will always be a minister of the good news of Jesus Christ) and a current mental health medical provider, I would like to give my opinion on the intersection of faith and mental health medications. But first, a personal story: My son was diagnosed with epilepsy around a year ago after experiencing multiple seizures. He was prescribed an anti-epileptic medication. At first, before my wife and I decided to begin giving it to him, we prayed for healing and guidance. We prayed... and we prayed... and we prayed. Eventually, as signs of nocturnal seizures continued, despite our prayers, we decided to begin the medication but we continued to pray. And God brought healing. He brought healing through the medication. And now we praise God from whom ALL blessings flow. Healing, though it may come in various forms, is always from God as "every good and perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). Could God heal my son without medications? Yes. I believe that without a doubt. Does God choose to heal some directly and miraculously? Yes. I believe that without a doubt. I've witnessed it. But God doesn't always heal miraculously. Sometimes, instead, he heals through therapists and medical providers—through therapy and medicine. If you are battling depression or anxiety or any other mental health illness, prayer to and faith in God should always be a part of your treatment plan. Sometimes prayer to and faith in God is the only treatment necessary as healing comes directly from God. Sometimes prayer to and faith in God coupled with behavioral therapy is appropriate and God heals through the therapist. Sometimes prayer to and

faith in God along with medications brings healing as God heals through medications. And when He heals through therapy and/or medications He is still the God “who comforts and encourages and refreshes and cheers the depressed” (2 Corinthians 7:6).

To summarize:

- medications are usually not as appropriate as therapy for those with minor and appropriate emotions caused by identifiable factors
- medications can be appropriate if circumstances don’t seem to have caused or effect the depression or anxiety or if the depression or anxiety is moderate to severe, regardless of the cause
- therapy is often appropriate and helpful in any situation
- therapy and medications, in combination, is usually more effective than either alone
- prayer to and faith in God is always appropriate with or without therapy and medications because God “comforts and encourages and refreshes and cheers the depressed”