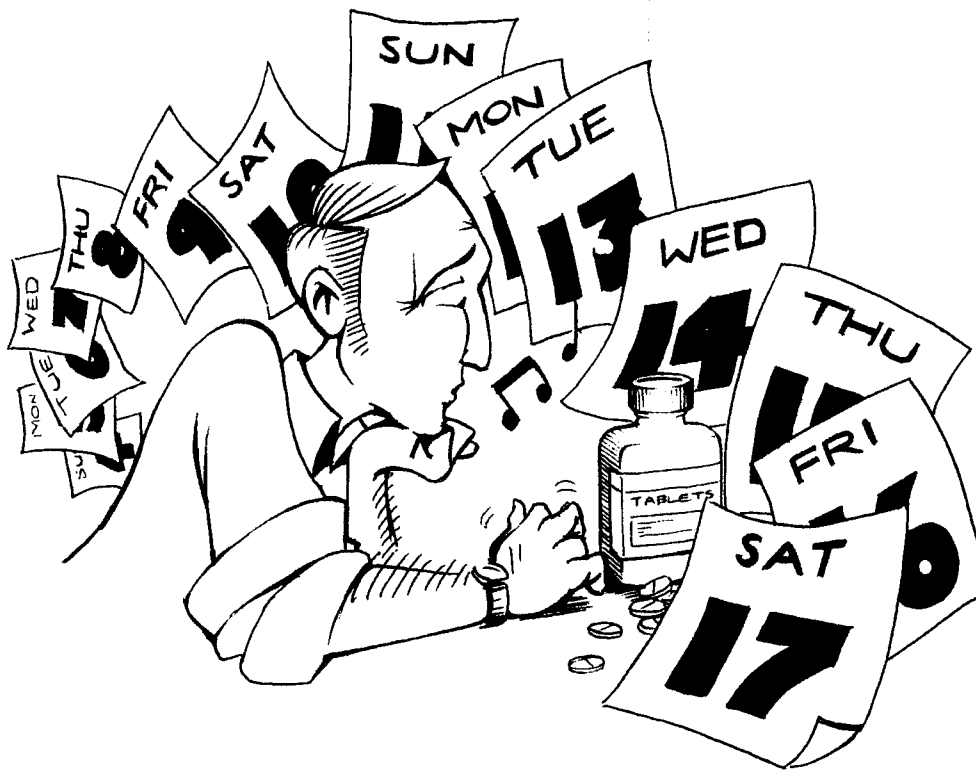

Workbook 9

Understanding and using antidepressant medication

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Overcoming Depression
A Five Areas Approach

Section 1 Introduction

This workbook is designed for anyone who is either taking antidepressant medication or who wishes to find out more about the uses of antidepressant medication.

In this workbook you will learn:

- why antidepressants may be used as a treatment for depression;
- about the advantages and disadvantages of taking antidepressant medication;
- about your own attitudes towards the use of antidepressants;
- ways of using antidepressants more effectively (if you are taking these).

Using antidepressants in the treatment of depression

If you are taking antidepressants:

Q. How long have you taken them for? Years Months
Q. Have they helped improve how you feel?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. Do you ever try to cope without them?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Q. Do you notice any side effects?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

Antidepressants can be an important part of treating all aspects of depression. Because there are links between the altered thinking, feelings, behaviour and physical aspects of depression, the physical treatment offered by an antidepressant can also lead to positive improvements in negative, unhelpful and extreme thinking, low mood and unhelpfully altered behaviour.

The benefits of antidepressants

Who do they work best for?

A large number of different antidepressants exist. They are most often helpful when there is:

- significant depression (*low mood and a lack of enjoyment*);
- several of the physical changes of depression (*low energy, reduced concentration, altered sleep or appetite*);
- significant agitation or the onset or worsening of suspiciousness or panic;
- suicidal ideas: where you can't see a future.

How long do they take to work?

Normally, antidepressants take about two weeks to begin to work and their positive actions may take up to four to six weeks to reach a peak. It is very important therefore to take the tablets regularly and for long enough, even if to begin with they might seem like they are not working. Overall, around two thirds of patients respond to the first antidepressant medication they are prescribed. If there is little or no improvement, often an increase in dose or a change of medication will effectively treat the depression.

Warning: A common problem is that the person stops the antidepressants when they first feel well again. Stopping an antidepressant too early is a common cause of worsening depression. It is usually necessary to take the antidepressant medication for at least six months after feeling better to prevent slipping back into depression.

Do antidepressants have side effects?

All tablets have side effects. The important question is whether the side effects of having untreated depression are worse. Modern antidepressants are often not very sedating and do not cause very great weight gain. Many side effects disappear within a few days of starting the tablets as the body gets used to them. Antidepressants are not addictive however, if a person has taken the tablets for some time it is sensible for the dose of the antidepressant to be reduced slowly over a number of days before being stopped.

Antidepressants are the fastest and most effective way of improving depression in the short term if there is a significant physical aspect to your depression. If you are feeling very depressed, they can help you get to a stage where you are then able to look at making changes in your life to help prevent the depression occurring again. If you are taking an antidepressant, or wish to discuss whether taking one is likely to be helpful for you, you should discuss how your depression is best treated and whether you should take an antidepressant with your doctor. **Please do not stop taking antidepressants without the agreement of your doctor.**

Remembering to take antidepressants

For almost any medication, it may be difficult to remember to take them on a regular basis. This is particularly the case in depression because of the poor concentration and forgetfulness that can often occur.

Q. Do you sometimes forget to take your medication?

Yes No

Helpful hints:

The following may help you to remember to take your tablets:

- 1 Get into a **routine**: take the tablets at a set time each day.
- 2 **Place the tablets somewhere where you will see them** when you get up or go to bed (e.g. by your toothbrush). Avoid doing this if they may be taken by young children.
- 3 Write **little notes** to yourself saying *Medication* (or any other word to help remind you if you don't want others to read them). Stick them on the fridge, oven and back door so that you are reminded throughout the day).

Q. Do you ever get confused as to whether you have taken the medication?

Yes No

Helpful hints:

The following may help you be clear when you have taken your medication:

- 1 Tick off the doses you have taken in a **diary** or calendar.
- 2 If you are taking lots of tablets at different times each day, a **dosette box** can help. These have different compartments for each time of day so that you, or a friend, neighbour or health care practitioner can fill the box up in advance for the whole week. Ask your health care practitioner or pharmacist how to get one.

Q. Do you ever take a higher dose than is prescribed?

Yes No

KEY POINT

It is very important **not** to take a higher dose of antidepressant than your doctor prescribes. Antidepressant tablets work over a number of weeks. Taking more on one particular day will have **no** impact on your depression. It is the longer term taking them day in and day out at the correct dose that will lead to improvement. Tablets taken at higher than recommended doses may cause unpleasant side effects, or **potentially are dangerous**. Please do not do this. If you are concerned that an antidepressant is not working (remember they take at least two weeks to begin to work), please discuss this with your doctor.

My attitudes towards antidepressants

Antidepressant medications are sometimes viewed with suspicion. The following questions address some commonly held fears about antidepressant medication. Do you have any of these concerns?

Antidepressants are addictive

Yes No

Useful information: It is not possible to become addicted to modern antidepressants in the same way as alcohol or tablets like diazepam. Antidepressants do need to be taken sensibly and as recommended by your doctor. If tablets are started at too high an initial dose, side effects are more common; similarly if a tablet taken at a high dose is stopped suddenly, some short-lived discontinuation symptoms may occur. To prevent this, many tablets are first started by slowly increasing the dose, and then later stopped by tapering down their dose over several days.

I should get better on my own without taking tablets

Yes No

Antidepressants are often one of a number of ways of getting better. They work by treating some of the physical changes that occur in depression. They do not replace the need for you to identify and work at changing extreme or unhelpful thoughts and behaviours or the different practical problems you face. They can however be a useful additional way of improving how you feel. Your body, thoughts, and emotional feelings are all part of you – they are not in separate boxes. If you had broken a leg, you are unlikely to say 'I want to get better by myself without medical treatment'. Why do the same in depression? If your doctor is recommending antidepressants, talk to him or her and discuss why they suggest this so that you can jointly make the decision about whether it is the right thing for you at the moment.

They cause side effects

Yes No

All tablets cause side effects. The question is whether the **benefits** of taking the tablets outweigh the **costs**. Often side effects improve over the first few days of taking an antidepressant. Sometimes the dose of antidepressant can be reduced, or a different antidepressant with a different range of side effects can be prescribed. Please discuss this with your doctor.

On balance, have the antidepressants helped or hindered me?

If your answer to this is that they have helped, keep taking them as advised by your doctor. If you feel they have not helped you, please do not stop them yourself. Instead go and discuss this with your doctor. Perhaps the dose of the medication can be altered, or another medication may be more suitable. Whatever your decision, please do not decide to stop your medication without discussing it with your doctor.

- Antidepressants may have an important role in helping people with depression get better.
- Antidepressants are not addictive, however in stopping higher doses, it is sensible to slowly reduce the dose over a period of time.
- Taking the tablets on a regular basis is essential for them to work.
- All tablets have side effects; however for most people the benefits of antidepressants far outweigh the costs.

Summary

In this workbook you have learned about:

- why antidepressants may be used as a treatment for depression;
- the advantages and disadvantages of taking antidepressant medication;
- your own attitudes towards the use of antidepressants;
- ways of using antidepressants more effectively (if you are taking these).

Putting into practice what you have learned

Think about what you have learned during the next week. If you want to find out more about the use of antidepressants, or if you are having difficulties with your antidepressants (for example you are troubled by side effects, or they just don't seem to be working) please discuss this with your doctor or health care practitioner. If you have found any aspects of this workbook unhelpful, upsetting or confusing, please can you discuss this with your doctor or health care practitioner.

My notes

A series of 25 horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.

