

Medication

Even though medications may offer relief from anxiety, they can interfere with lasting improvement. Research suggests that this is probably because medications often reduce opportunities to learn, practice, and develop new skills, such as those taught in this book. In addition, when people approach their fears while they are on medications, they tend to think that the drugs are the reason for their success. For example, imagine you succeed in staying for a long time on one of the steps of your Fear Ladder. If you do this while you are on a medication, you might think your success is due to the drug and not to your skills and coping practice.

An important part of overcoming anxiety is learning to tolerate feeling anxious. If medications reduce your feelings of anxiety, then you don't have the chance to learn that you are able to tolerate and manage these feelings. To develop skills to manage anxiety, you need to feel anxious and learn how to reduce and/or tolerate it. You cannot fully appreciate the effects of mindfulness and acceptance, breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery, changing anxious thoughts, and overcoming avoidance if you are taking medication. One benefit of an initial high level of anxiety is that this increases our motivation to learn and practice coping skills. When we are very anxious, our desire to learn new methods to manage anxiety is very high.

The effectiveness of any intervention, including medication, is measured by relapse rates as well as by immediate effect. Relapse rates record the number of people helped by an intervention who re-experience the same symptoms when the treatment ends. People who have been successfully treated for their anxiety disorders with only medication experience high rates of relapse. That is, the majority of people who benefit from medication as their only treatment for anxiety have a return of anxiety within a year after they stop taking the medication. In contrast, studies show that most people treated successfully with CBT for anxiety are still anxiety-free up to one year after the end of treatment. CBT teaches skills for managing anxiety that lead to long-lasting improvement. In other words, once you get better with CBT, you are likely to stay better. The same cannot be said of medication.

One additional caution regarding antianxiety medications is to be aware of their addiction potential. Many of the medications recommended to treat anxiety are tranquilizers. Tranquilizers have addiction potential. People who take tranquilizers for an extended period of time may develop tolerance, which means that it takes greater and greater amounts of the tranquilizer to produce a relaxed effect. In addition, after taking tranquilizers for an extended period of time, many people experience withdrawal symptoms if they suddenly stop taking the medication. Withdrawal symptoms include nausea, sweating, jitteriness, and an intense craving for the medication. Withdrawal and tolerance are two of the primary characteristics of addiction. This is why your physician will monitor you closely if you are on any of these medications. This is also why your physician may recommend this book to help you learn other methods to cope with your anxiety.

This does not mean that medication should never be used in the treatment of anxiety. However, most research suggests that when antianxiety medication is used, it should be used on a short-term basis only — for weeks instead of years. Also, research indicates that medication will rarely be enough to create enduring improvement. Learning anxiety management skills in CBT should be part of a treatment plan to maximize the likelihood of long-lasting results.