

Q & A Mindline



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Q I suffered depression in October 2015 and it was successfully treated by a course of antidepressants. It was the first time I experienced emotional problems and I have been well for over four months now. Should I stop the medication?

There are no set rules for the duration of antidepressant therapy. It all depends on the nature, degree and number of depressive episode (s). Importantly, what brought on the depressive episode and whether that stressor has been resolved is the main concern. Equally, it depends on an individual's personality, coping methods and family history of depression, which adds to the vulnerability of the illness or reoccurrence of further episodes. For one episode, meds can be discontinued if someone is well and stable for three-four months and other factors have been dealt with. When someone has experienced two or more episodes of depression, it is advisable to take the medicine between 12-24 months and discontinue thereafter, if they remain symptom-free for the above duration, by firstly tapering the dose. In all cases, the minimal required dose must be considered during the

maintenance phase and discontinuation should be considered after careful informed consultation.

Be informed that antidepressant offers protection against reoccurrence of depression but does not guarantee it. Self-awareness, understanding your stressors and lifestyle choices including fitness/exercise plays a key role in wellness. I think exercise is one of the most effective and under-utilized antidepressants. A healthy body equates to a healthy mind and vice versa.

During your next consultation, discuss the above and take a decision. At the end of the day, you will only know the ongoing need for tablets by stopping them under a specialist's supervision. Wish you all the best.

Q Does treatment for phobia require medication? I have been on antidepressant therapy for over two years, as I suffered from a phobia of crowded places. Please advise.

The phobia of crowded places is a form of anxiety disorder, where fear and apprehension is triggered by specific situations and where the sufferer perceives the environment to be dangerous, uncomfortable, or unsafe. Here, the person experiences a severe anxiety attack also known as panic and therefore makes an effort to escape the situation to reduce the fear, or avoids it altogether. Consequently, their lifestyle is restricted and in some cases they can become house bound to avert an anxiety attack.

In severe initial anxiety states, a short course of anxiolytic like diazepam or antidepressant may be warranted. But long-term effective treatment is best done with 'exposure based behavior therapy,' whereby a person is gradually exposed to the feared situations or objects under clinical supervision in order to get him/her desensitized and

habituated to anxiety. Such therapy enables awareness of unhelpful previous responses and relearning about the benign nature of the feared situation.

Q Do you see and treat internet addiction and if so, how do you address it?

This depends on the nature of internet addiction which has wide subcategories, such as chatting, pornography, gaming, surfing, shopping and online gambling addiction. Here in, one notices repetitive behavior with three principal features. I call it the Three C's - Compulsion (to indulge), Craving (of the said activity) and loss of Control (on time spent). It affects individual work, relations, and finances, besides ignoring his/her commitment to fitness, leisure and other aspirations.

Overtime, one loses control of time committed to online activity and drifts to irrelevance losing track of activity or by clicking on 'pop ups.' All in all, you get hooked! An activity which is repeated several times gets imprinted in your mind and is followed by automation. Which means the person engages in the activity without awareness.

Internet is designed to give you unlimited access and control. You go where you want to go, be what you want to be (on chatroom and social network) and access what you fancy. This is a potent recipe for addiction.

I recommend you seek one-to-one professional consultation, for a detailed evaluation to shed light on the nature of the problems and best ways forward. Do consider reducing time online, avoid online reading, minimize involvement on social media, avoid regular updates on social networks and reduce the number of social media applications. Switching off and unplugging for some days of the weeks, will give you firsthand experience of the benefits of returning to the real world!