



Sexual Side Effects of Mental Health Medications

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Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common mental health problems, they affect 1 in 10 Canadians

Suffering from Anxiety Disorders

People who suffer from anxiety disorders have long periods of intense feelings of fear or distress, out of proportion with real events. Their brains interpret real or imagined events to be much more risky or dangerous than they really are.

If you feel that you could be suffering from anxiety or depression the first step is to get a proper diagnosis from a specialist. Many people suffer for years before getting the right treatment. The most common form of treatment is a combination of drug therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT helps people to develop skills and strategies for becoming and staying healthy.

The most commonly prescribed antidepressants are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's). Common SSRI's are Prozac, Paxil, Celexa, Lexapro and Zoloft. These drugs work best when combined with talk therapy, support from family and friends and self-care. SSRI's take several weeks to become fully effective. Early signs that they are working include:

- Improved sleep
- Increased appetite
- More energy
- Improvement in mood usually comes later

Mental Illness & Sex



“One of the best things you can do for yourself and your relationship when struggling with mental well-being and its impact on your sex life is to get educated about sexuality.”

- Check out online resources
- Talk with your doctor
- See a sex positive counsellor or psychologist

“We all have a right to enjoy and appreciate our sexuality. Do your best to not let mental illness steal that away from you and the ones you love!”



40% of patients will experience some disturbance of sexual function when taking antidepressants, this is the main cause of treatment discontinuation

Side Effects of Medication

Adults 65 and over have increased sensitivity of their bodies. Therefore older adults are more vulnerable to side effects from medication. Those who take multiple medications, become more vulnerable to drug interactions.

Ask your Doctor about potential drug interactions. Other drugs may interfere with effectiveness or worsen side effects, including marijuana. This means it is important to let your doctor know about other prescriptions and recreational drug use.

By raising serotonin in the body, the person taking the drugs experiences a feeling of calm and less anxiety. However, that same sense of calm and stability can lower the libido. It prevents the hormones that cause our bodies to respond to sex from transmitting their message to our brains. In other words, antidepressants can turn down the dial on our sex drive.

Sexual Side effects of SSRI's:

For bodies that produce more estrogen

- Delayed lubrication
- Delayed or blocked orgasm
- Lack of desire for sex

For bodies that produce more testosterone

- Decreased libido
- Difficulty getting or keeping an erection
- Delayed or blocked orgasm

What are Side Effects?



- A **side effect** is an unwanted response to a medication when it is taken in a normal dose
- Side effects can be mild or severe, temporary, or permanent

What do you do if you have Side Effects?



- If side effects are not tolerable it is best to continue taking your medication as prescribed but let your Doctor know as soon as possible
- Your pharmacist is a great resource and they may also be able to advise you on managing side effects



Only 20 % of prescribers discuss with their patients the management strategies for adverse sexual effects related to antidepressant medication

What to Expect When Starting Medication

Within 1 to 3 weeks of starting your treatment you may notice side effects. The positive antidepressant effects will not start to appear until 2 to 4 weeks after starting medication. Getting help to navigate this crucial window will considerably improve long term treatment adherence and prevent premature discontinuation of medication. When antidepressants bring relief from the distress of depression or anxiety this may help you to focus more on your partner and to feel more desire.

Full remission is usually seen between 6 to 12 weeks after treatment begins. If the medication does work for you, your Doctor will advise you to continue taking it for at least 6 to 9 months. People who stop taking antidepressants too soon risk having the symptoms of their anxiety or depression return. People who experience depression that keeps coming back may need to take medication longer. The success rate of antidepressants is higher when people who do not get relief with one type of antidepressant try another.

In most cases side effects reduce as treatment continues. These side effects can be difficult for people to talk about. However, the comfort you develop talking to your Doctor about these things that are embarrassing as well as the skills you develop talking to your partner about your needs, will serve you well in life.

Struggling with Sexual Side Effects?



- Talk to your partner, do not wait to get turned on
- Use a lubricant
- Try 30 minutes of moderately intense exercise 3 times a week, scheduled right before sexual activity
- Schedule sexual activity *If side effects are worse after taking medication, try scheduling sex just before you take your dose
- Switch it up, is one position more painful than another?
- Try toys, vibratory stimulation may help



Up to 50% of people with untreated major depression experience some type of sexual dysfunction before they seek help

Psychological Side

A fulfilling relationship does not rely solely on orgasms. A positive healthy relationship succeeds when partners can have an honest, open conversation about their needs and struggles. That can happen with or without an orgasm, it can happen with or without intercourse.

Sometimes sexual difficulties may be a result of your anxiety or depression and not a side effect of your medication. If medication is the problem sexual side effects sometimes subside with time, it is worth waiting to see if side effects gradually fade. This is particularly important to try if your medication is helping your anxiety or depression.

Even when physical issues or medications are at the root of sexual problems, psychological issues often become interwoven. For example, if a person were to experience erectile dysfunction, they might feel rejected and it could lead the couple to retreating further from intimacy. Working with a therapist can help couples explore their sexual relationship including its activities.

Before starting treatment prepare for the possibility of feeling worse before you feel better. Knowing what supports are available to you and who you can call is particularly important. It is also a great idea to monitor your side effects when you start a new medication.

Options your Doctor May Try



- Changing your dose
*This is the least disruptive approach and should be considered first
- Switching medications
- Switching treatment
- Adding other medications
- Encouraging you to wait to see if side effects decrease
- Meeting with a therapist



References

Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School - <https://www.health.harvard.edu/womens-health/when-an-ssri-medication-impacts-your-sex-life>

Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School - https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/dealing_with_sexual_side_effects

Healthline - <https://www.healthline.com/health/erectile-dysfunction/antidepressant-sexual-side-effects#management>

Here to Help - <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sex-intimacy-and-mental-well-being>

Mayo Clinic - [https://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196\(16\)30302-0/pdf](https://www.mayoclinicproceedings.org/article/S0025-6196(16)30302-0/pdf)

Mayo Clinic - <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/expert-answers/antidepressants/faq-20058104>

Resources

The Center for Addiction and Mental Health – camh.ca

Government of Canada Health Services - <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/topics/mental-illness.html>