

# Mental Health Matters

## What is the Role of Medication in Psychiatry?



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For years, people suffering from mental disorders, along with their families, were blamed and stigmatized for the illness. It was thought to be the “fault” of the individual

– due to a weakness in character, lack of self control, or an unhappy childhood. We now know this isn’t the case – or at least not the whole story.

While the brain is an organ like other organs in our body, e.g., the heart, lungs, and liver, it is much more complicated with millions of cells and hundreds of centers that regulate other organs and systems. Today, we know that people suffering from mental illnesses have imbalances in the way their brains metabolize certain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Too much or too little of these chemicals may result in depression, anxiety, or other emotional disorders.

This knowledge has led pharmaceutical companies to develop medicines that can alter the way in which the brain produces, stores, and releases neurotransmitter chemicals, thereby alleviating the symptoms of some mental illnesses. These medicines have successfully and significantly improved the quality of life for people suffering from a wide range of mental illnesses. There are now medications that have been used with great success in treating some of the more common disorders such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder (sometimes referred to as manic-depression). Less common and more devastating mental illnesses such as schizophrenia

have also responded well to medications that only recently have become available to psychiatrists. Even debilitating illnesses like Alzheimer’s Disease have been treated successfully with medications such as Aricept.

In summary, mental illness is a medical disease. You wouldn’t blame somebody for getting a physical illness, like cancer or heart disease. And it’s just as illogical to blame someone with a mental illness. Because like cancer or heart disease, mental illness is a medical illness, not a personal weakness. The role of medication in treating mental illness may, therefore, be likened to the use of insulin in the treatment of diabetes.

There are many types of medications available and still more promising medications that are being developed. Getting the appropriate medication depends upon getting an accurate diagnosis from a qualified professional. It is important to remember that medications can be effective in treating mental illness – provided you know the facts about them and use them wisely.

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