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Using Anti Anxiety Medication

A number of anti-anxiety medications have licences for the treatment of anxiety. They are used for a range of different anxiety problems such as:

- > Generalised anxiety where there is anxious worrying about lots of different things. It may even include worry about being worried. The worry causes physical symptoms of anxiety. It also has an impact on the person's behaviour or activity.
- > Panic attacks/disorder where levels of anxiety reach such a high peak that the person fears something terrible will occur. This causes the person to stop what they are doing and hurry away.
- > Phobic disorders. Medication is available to help treat *social phobia*. This describes a situation where there is very severe and excessive shyness. Medication can also be used to help treat *agoraphobia*. This describes a situation where there is a fear of being trapped, especially in crowded places such as large shops or buses.
- > Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Here the person is plagued by recurrent intrusive thoughts, impulses or images. They find these distressing and try hard to avoid thinking like this. Obsessive-compulsive disorder often leads to various actions designed to prevent harm occurring. This includes checking or cleaning things again and again, or doing things in a very ritualised way.

Medication should usually only be considered where anxiety is more severe or prolonged. There are currently a number of different groups of medications that are used in the treatment of anxiety. No names of any specific medications are mentioned in the workbook. Instead the aim is to inform you about the general principles of using these medications. You can obtain details of the different anti-anxiety medications from your own doctor.

i) Why use anti-anxiety medications for the treatment of anxiety?

Links exist between the altered thinking, feelings, behaviour and physical aspects of

anxiety. Because of the links between each of the areas, the physical treatment offered by medication can lead to positive improvements in each of the other areas as well. Medication aims to relieve the physical symptoms of anxiety. In turn this may make the person feel better, think more positively, and change any unhelpful behaviour. Where anxiety problems are severe, disabling or prolonged a combined approach of medication and psychological treatment can help you move to a position where you are more able to make changes in other areas of your life.

ii). How long do they take to work?

Most anti-anxiety medications are started at lower doses and slowly increased in dose over a number of weeks. The maximum benefits may therefore take some weeks or months to occur. This is especially true where the anti-anxiety medication is prescribed to treat panic disorder, social phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder. For example, it can take up to 6 weeks for the tablets to begin to show any clear benefit in the treatment of panic. It can then take up to 12 weeks to reach full effect. The full dosage is usually then continued for at least another 3-6 months at this higher dose. It is important therefore to take the tablets regularly and for long enough if they are prescribed. If there is little or no improvement, an increase in dose, change of medication and fresh look at other problems may be needed. Overall, taking anti-anxiety medications helps around half to two thirds of people.

iii). What happens after the medication is stopped?

A common problem is that the anxiety levels worsen again when the medication is stopped. Medication is therefore best seen as only part of an overall package of care. The package should also include learning new ways of tackling anxiety. Overall, treatment with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and some other psychological treatments seem to be as good as treatment with anti-anxiety medication. These self-help leaflets are all



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based on CBT. There are benefits of using both approaches together. Medication may be helpful when high anxiety makes it difficult for you to achieve change using the psychological approach alone.

Important note about benzodiazepines (minor tranquillisers).

Benzodiazepines have been widely used for the treatment of anxiety. They are commonly called tranquillisers and are also used as sleeping tablets. However, over time, higher and higher doses are often required to have the same effect. Because of this need to take more tablets and the occurrence of problems with withdrawal, they may become addictive. They commonly cause side effects of tiredness and problems with concentration. When benzodiazepines are taken on a regular basis, about one in three people experience problems of addiction. The risk of addiction is higher if you have had problems of addiction with illegal drugs, other medications or alcohol. If you become addicted to benzodiazepines, suddenly stopping the tablets leads to problems of worsening anxiety. There may also be physical symptoms such as feeling sweaty, shaky with a rapid heart and sleeplessness. This can occur up to three weeks or more after stopping the medication. Due to this problem of addiction, doctors prescribe these medicines much less commonly now. Therefore, the dose should be limited to the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time. They are short-term medications and not usually for long-term use.

If you have taken benzodiazepines for a long time it is important that any change of medication is done at the right pace and with the agreement of your doctor. Please do not suddenly stop any regular medication without a discussion with them. There are some very effective treatment programmes that can help you reduce and stop long-term benzodiazepines use. These treatments usually combine medication and psychological treatments. If you find yourself in this situation, discuss it with your doctor.

iv). Do anti-anxiety medications have side effects?

All tablets have side effects. Modern anti-anxiety medications often don't have very severe side effects. Many side effects disappear within a few days of starting the tablets as you get used to them. Sometimes anxiety can actually worsen when an anti-anxiety medication is prescribed. This especially occurs in the treatment of panic. If you notice side effects, your doctor can reduce the dose, or change the tablet to another one. Please discuss this with them.

v). Can I drive or use machinery if I take tablets?

Many anti-anxiety medications can affect your ability to drive and operate machinery. They also can exaggerate the effects of alcohol. Read the medication advice leaflet that accompanies your prescription to see if this applies to you.

Conclusions.

When deciding whether to start or continue anti-anxiety medications, the key questions are whether taking the tablets will help you improve how you feel. Whether you take medications or not, psychological treatments such as the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy approach used in these leaflets are often a central part of treatment. Medication should be reserved for when you feel stuck, or when the anxiety is at a distressing level for a prolonged time. Remember if you are taking medication, the best way to move forwards is to also use a Cognitive Behaviour Therapy approach alongside or instead of the tablets.

Putting into practice what you have learned.

If you want to find out more about the use of anti-anxiety medications please discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist. They will be able to suggest other sources of information about the treatments that are available. If you have found any aspects of this workbook unhelpful, upsetting or confusing, please also discuss this with your guide, health care practitioner or someone else whose opinion you trust.

