

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEDICATION

by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA

THE TREATMENT OF ADHD presents an interesting contradiction:

- The safety and effectiveness of ADHD medication has been demonstrated in hundreds of studies.
- Yet, there is often a strong resistance to trying medication or a preference to try everything else first.

Why does such an effective treatment evoke such negative reactions? To answer this, we need to discuss not only how people make decisions, but also how ADHD is seen as a disorder and how potential treatments are evaluated.

My goal is not to push one mode of treatment over any others, but rather to help you think about treatment options and make well informed, well considered decisions that are consistent with your goals and values. This could be for yourself or your child, romantic partner, patients, clients, or students. There is no perfect or one-size-fits-all treatment, so it involves making personal choices. I hope to help you make the best possible choice for your specific situation.

Facts vs. opinions

Let's begin by briefly discussing the important difference between facts and opinions.

- **Facts** consist of objectively accurate and verifiable information (for example, more people with ADHD benefit from stimulants compared to nonstimulants).
- **Opinions** are positions based on personal preferences and interpretation of facts (for example, when indicated, I believe that it is often worth trying medication for ADHD).

This difference is important, because we are more likely to make bad decisions when we assume that an opinion is a fact. Good decision-making requires being clear about what is what, starting by relying on reputable sources that don't confuse facts and opinions either. Good decisions are based in facts but guided by opinions. For example, you may accept that medication can be beneficial, but need to decide whether it is worth trying based on your specific circumstances.

The medication controversy

Stimulant medication tends to be surrounded by more than its fair share of myths and inaccurate information, such as that they are addictive, overprescribed, and just used to control poorly behaving kids. These myths tend to be either sweeping overstatements or simply inaccurate. Inaccurate information obviously makes good decisions less likely, but it can be hard to sort through the contradictory information that is available, especially on the internet.

Despite the controversy, the facts about ADHD medication remain clear: Hundreds of studies have shown that, when appropriately prescribed for someone who genuinely has ADHD, these medications tend to be safe and effective for most people. This doesn't necessarily mean that someone with ADHD should take medication (which is a matter of personal opinion), but the facts are clear.

What the medication does is increase activity in the parts of the brain related to attention, behavioral control,



and executive functions. This enables people with ADHD to be more reliable, consistent, planful, timely, etc., so they can better apply their abilities. Or, as I sometimes describe it, medication closes the gap between intentions and actions. Given this, you need to make your own decision about whether medication is worth trying, which will depend on your personal circumstances. For example, someone who is generally doing quite well with behavioral strategies may be less inclined to try medication, as opposed to someone who is getting written up at work for chronic lateness.

Making a good choice

If you do decide to try medication, you need to evaluate the results to see if it's worth continuing. Value depends on benefits versus costs (including side effects). Increasing the benefits or decreasing the costs changes the math, so working with a knowledgeable prescriber can bring out the best.

In evaluating potential benefits and side effects, however, we also need to also consider the costs of not treating. This half of the equation is often neglected. Many parents are concerned about the potential side effects or risks of medication, but don't consider the risks of leaving ADHD untreated—which includes greater school difficulties, more family stress, higher incidence of anxiety and depression, and so forth. Or, as I sometimes tell parents in my office, all the problems that brought them into my office in the first place. I don't like the idea of kids on medi-

cation, but what I like even less is the idea of preventable suffering. If the child in my office had diabetes, it would be a very short conversation about starting insulin.

Whether someone takes medication or not, good performance still depends on using good habits and systems, working hard, getting enough sleep, eating well, etc. There are no short-cuts in life. Some people see this as merely a matter of willpower, that simply trying harder will lead to success. (This belief carries with it the implication that those who cannot maintain these good habits just aren't trying hard enough.) Unfortunately, this opinion shows a lack of understanding of the many effects of ADHD. It also doesn't take into account that untreated ADHD itself makes all these good habits more difficult to maintain. By contrast, medication makes them more likely. Success in life usually comes from a combination of good intentions, effective systems, and strong abilities. Untreated ADHD undermines all of these.

Even when they acknowledge the potential benefits, some people don't like the idea of becoming dependent on medication (that is, addicted). This is understandable, but there is an important distinction to be made here. These fears refer to addictive dependency in the way that an alcoholic is dependent on alcohol to get through the day. Addictive dependency limits the person's life and overall brings more problems than solutions.

By contrast, using medication to appropriately treat ADHD enables the person to live a bigger, more interesting, more effective life, in the way that contact lenses enable me to live a better life (it sure is nice being able to see where I'm driving). I am dependent on my contacts in order to continue to be able to drive, but it makes my life better, so I accept that. If medication helps you live a better life, then perhaps that is a worthy trade-off, even if it isn't perfect.

ADHD is a neurological condition and medication temporarily alters that neurology. But there is a lot of psychology involved in the decision to try medication. Whether you decide to hold off on medication or to try it, I hope you use a good process to come to that decision and that you will re-evaluate your decision as circumstances change. 🗣️

MORE INFO

Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67ad8iJUZf4> to watch Dr. Ari Tuckman's presentation on this topic for Mercer County CHADD.

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