

Coming Down From Antidepressants

Two Women Wean Themselves Off Antidepressants



By Sara Reistad-Long

Weaning yourself off antidepressant medication is like going off any other drug you've had in your system for an extended period of time.

Withdrawal effects are real, and they can be dangerous if not managed properly. AOL Health spoke to two women who had markedly different experiences going off antidepressants.

Read their stories below.

One Woman's Game Plan to Kick Antidepressants

For Roxanne Grant (pictured), it had taken her doctors years to hit upon a combination of medicines to help her cope with the debilitating depression and suicidal tendencies that had begun in 1997, when a difficult pregnancy put her on bed rest for several months. So when the 41-year-old Kansas City minister told her psychiatrist that after several years in the clear, she felt ready to stop using her antidepressants, he warned her to keep her expectations in check. But Grant felt ready.

"I missed the range of emotions I had before the depression, and I felt strong," she says. "I was okay with going back on drugs the moment being without them didn't work, but I really wanted to see if my body could do it."

Having spent countless hours reading up on the process, she presented her psychiatrist with such a comprehensive game plan -- frequent check-ins, a strong network of friends who'd been briefed on her decision and a healthy diet, gym and sleep schedule -- that he agreed to give the approach a try.

Grant has been off her medication for five years. This isn't to say the process has been easy.

"This year alone, I've gone through my second divorce, so I'm dealing with single parenting again and working more than one job," Grant says. "I was recently diagnosed with a thyroid condition. What I've learned, though, is to prioritize my mental health. I keep at it, and I monitor my progress very closely. I work at doing positive things to stay well as if my life depends on it. Because, in so many ways, it really does."

"Lynn" Felt Like a Strung Out Drug Addict

When "Lynn," now a 44-year-old research editor in New York, started taking Effexor to help her cope with her serious depression and anxiety issues, she quickly noticed a difference.

"Initially it worked," she recalls. "I was at a point where I was having trouble going through the motions of a day, and this seemed to give me a bit of a jolt."

But after more than four years on the drug, she felt like things had fallen back to status quo.

Still, her psychiatrist was reluctant to explore much more than downscaling her dose a little and prescribing new drugs in addition to the Effexor. Frustrated and feeling trapped, she tried to wean herself off the antidepressant on her own.

"I felt wretched -- aches, shakiness, nausea and this sort of delayed mental reaction to everything around me," she says. "I remember coming to my brother's house one night and feeling completely strung out, like a drug addict. I'd used up my last dose, and my body was screaming for it. We seriously considered taking me to the emergency room and getting me back on."

Lynn's experience is far from unusual. Tapering off mood-supporting drugs can leave your mind raw and vulnerable.

"Antidepressants generally work by blunting the activity in the brain's processing center," says Stephen Ilardi, Ph.D., author of "The Depression Cure: The 6-Step Cure to Beat Depression Without Drugs." "The effect is like a cork that's been pulled under water to stop it from bobbing. Going off these medicines is a little like letting that cork go. It will shoot out. The mind becomes hyperactive, and people start to feel things like anxiousness, shakiness, nausea and lightheadedness."

While Lynn did ultimately manage to weather her physical withdrawal symptoms, her mind was a

different story, and she rapidly became suicidal. Within six months, she voluntarily checked herself in to an in-patient program and was eventually put on the antidepressant Lexapro.

Once again, she experienced positive initial results, but after a year and a half, things spiraled downward. With doctor supervision this time, she weaned herself off. The physical experience went well, but she says she's still looking for ways to cope with her depression over both the short and long term.

Whether taking an antidepressant or weaning yourself off one, Ilardi emphasizes these crucial activities for combating depression: exercise -- research shows that as little as a brisk walk three times a week has strong mood benefits; sunlight, which regulates sleeping and waking patterns; vitamin D and omega-3s, both of which seem to have a strong antidepressant effect in clinical studies, and a combination of social support and constructive activities to start working your way through the moment your mind starts to ruminate and dwell on negative thoughts.

Be sure to follow your doctor's advice when tapering off your medication, and if you have trouble coping with unpleasant withdrawal side effects, alert your doctor right away.