

## Antidepressants are not 'happy pills'

Depression medicines are not 'happy pills' or 'a quick fix' people who use antidepressants have said in a series of frank, heartfelt video interviews. The videos form part of a piece of research by Oxford University and the University of Nottingham that has been made into an information resource for the public, published on [Healthtalkonline.org](https://www.healthtalkonline.org).

Some of the interviewees explained that finding the right medication could be like 'waving a magic wand' but others struggled with unpleasant side effects, such as anxiety, loss of sex-drive, headaches and feeling 'detached'. It took some people several years to find a medicine that worked for them, and this could mean simply being able to 'manage' their depression, along with other strategies such as therapy. Some said they had never found one that was effective.

One of the interviewees, 36 year old Jenny, first experienced depression as a teenager and has been on 3 different antidepressants. Initially she had high hopes; *"I sort of expected to feel 'happy' because the media were dubbing antidepressants as 'happy pills'"* she says. *"I now know that they don't stop me feeling down when it is natural to feel down; rather they prevent me from getting stuck down there."*

Side effects such as anxiety, suicidal feelings, dizziness or loss of appetite could last for a month or more and, in some cases, people actually felt worse than before they started taking the pills. *"[Some types of] antidepressants can cause suicidal feelings, so while they're giving you a drug to counteract suicidal feelings... it can also cause them."* says Sonia (31), an administrator, *"I was suicidal when my doctor prescribed it, I felt it got worse in the week immediately after."*

52 year old teacher Stuart found the antidepressant venlafaxine very effective at stabilising his mood but it caused him to lose interest in sex. *"[It] was fine because I was single at the time...but then a few years later I met my current wife and having no sex drive isn't a very good approach to a new marriage."* He found, like many others, that it was a case of deciding whether this kind of longer-term side effect is outweighed by the benefits of the medication to their mental health.

More than 30 people shared similarly personal stories for this project. Their video interviews can be viewed on [Healthtalkonline.org](https://www.healthtalkonline.org), a charity website that provides information about health issues in the form of real stories shared in video, audio and written form. *"This project will be important for educating both patients and healthcare professionals about what it is actually like to take antidepressants."* says Claire Anderson, Professor of Social Pharmacy at Nottingham University *"When prescribed an antidepressant for the first time people often want to know more about what to expect; how they might feel when they are taking them, how long they take to work, how long they should expect to take them for and about potential side effects. People value being able to hear about other people's experiences."*

The experiences people shared also highlighted the role of doctors in helping people to find an antidepressant that suits them. *"Recent media reports on the rise of antidepressant prescribing have suggested that GPs are too ready to hand out prescriptions"* says Susan Kirkpatrick, senior qualitative researcher for the Health Experiences Research Group at Oxford University. *"Some people did comment that their doctor had been quick to reach for the prescription pad, but this varied widely. It was the amount of care, time and support doctors provided that seemed more important to the people we spoke to."* As Andrew (52) explained *"I felt that if I'm going to go on a treatment that may affect my mind in some way, I wanted to be able to trust the doctor and know that I was an individual to them"*.

Simon (31), a GP who has had depression since his early 20s, also shared his story for the project. Drawing on personal and professional experience he says that it can be difficult to keep taking an antidepressant during the first few months and often people give up. *“I always say to patients ‘look if you have any side effects, think to yourself, is this something you can put up with for a few weeks? If it is, put up with it, because it will get better. If it’s something that you feel you can’t put up with, come back to me and we’ll change it.’”*

Sometimes people need to try several antidepressants before finding one that is effective. Stuart has tried a number of different antidepressants over the years *“from my experiences they work very differently for different people and you can’t tell until you’ve started taking the drugs what they’re going to do for you, what the therapeutic effect is going to be, you can’t say what side effects you’re going to get if any’*. Eighty-four year old John was diagnosed with depression in his 30’s when he was prescribed valium. A few years ago he was prescribed Prozac for the first time; *“The black clouds lifted”* he says. Peter (34) said that taking venlafaxine after being on Prozac without success was *‘like waving a magic wand’*. Lucy (21) came off Prozac after 6 months because she felt dizzy and ‘distant’ from her emotions. It was only years later that she realised different drugs were available. She urges others to talk to their doctors if they aren’t getting on with their prescription or if they’d like to try other treatment options.

Others had advice too, stressing that it was important to see antidepressants as just one aspect of the ‘road to recovery’ rather than a solution in itself. Greg said *‘they may be of some help but they’re not going to solve a problem, whatever the problem may be’*. They emphasised the importance of dealing with problems, learning to understand yourself better and finding other ways to cope, for example through therapy or other lifestyle changes. People were also keen to let others know about the importance of being well-informed about what taking antidepressants entails. *“I wish someone had told me when I was starting out that there are so many of them they do different things, they might not work you need to be patient with them”* said Peter.

[‘Experiences of Antidepressants’](#) can be viewed on Healthtalkonline.org.

## Notes for Editors

The antidepressants project can be viewed on the newly redesigned Healthtalkonline.org at <http://healthtalkonline.org/peoples-experiences/mental-health/experiences-antidepressants>

### Participants from the project are available for interview:

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### About [Healthtalkonline.org](#)

Healthtalkonline.org is produced by DIPEx (registered charity No 1087019) in partnership with the Health Experiences Research Group at Oxford University. The site provides information on a range of illnesses and other health-related issues through real life experiences shared on video, audio and in text format. Thousands of people have shared their experiences on film to help others understand what to expect from health conditions such as breast cancer or arthritis including issues such as treatment, changes to daily life and support.