

Recovery Phase

In the recovery phase, you will find that your mood, level of energy, and other aspects of your life that have been affected by depression should get better. As you feel better, it becomes easier to live a normal life again. At this point many people make the mistake of assuming their depression is “cured.” They may stop taking their medication. However, it is very important that you keep taking your medication until you talk to your physician. The risk for relapse - a return of depressive symptoms - is high. Relapses can be worse than the initial episode, and are very upsetting to people. The symptoms you have worked so hard to get rid of may come back, and treatment must usually start all over again.

Consider the first few months when you are feeling better as a time when you can look at areas of your life that you may want to change. Some of these areas may have led up to your depression, or made it worse. You may already know what kinds of changes are necessary. You may use self-help books (found in any large book-store), self-help groups, or ask for a therapy referral if you have not done so already. Therapy can be effective in helping you learn ways to cope with your problems. When you feel better, you are more able to think about and solve problems for the long-term.

Continuation Phase

The continuation phase refers to the period when your depressive symptoms have largely gone away. You have returned pretty much to normal (that is, how it was at work, with friends, with your family, etc.). Again, while it may seem as though your depression has been successfully treated, medication use should continue until you talk to your physician. This is to avoid having the depression return.



If this is your first period of depression, at approximately 7-9 months, you and your physician should discuss how and when to stop taking medications. Stopping medications should be done gradually over a period of weeks. Just quitting your medications can result in a variety of symptoms that may seem like the “flu.” When stopping medications, you should be alert to any return of depressive symptoms. In the event that any symptoms begin to come back, talk to your physician right away. Pay close attention to how you feel. This will help your physician to decide if medication should be started or changed early, before you develop a full relapse.

Maintenance Phase

Major depression happens only once for about half the people who get it. For the other half, it is an illness that will return one or more times. For most people with repeated episodes of depression, the symptoms go away completely between episodes. But for some people with depression, there are continuing symptoms between episodes. Maintenance treatment refers to ongoing use of medications. This is often recommended for people who have had more than one episode of depression. The more times you have been seriously depressed, the more likely you are to have it come back again. In such cases, your physician may talk to you about using medications on a long-term basis (over several years). Or he or she may even urge lifetime use of the medications that have been helpful in treating your symptoms. We hope this information has been helpful to you. This is the first of three brochures the other two additional brochures have additional more information on depression and its treatment.



Major Depression & Antidepressant Treatment:

*What you should know about
your treatment*

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Are you a person recently diagnosed with depression? Have you been prescribed medication by your psychiatrist or physician to treat your depression? If yes, ValueOptions wants to offer you some free information. In this, the first of three brochures, we give you information about the course of your treatment.

A second brochure will focus on the medications that may currently be part of your treatment. We will also tell you about their possible side effects. We will also talk about your important role in making it more likely that the medications will work for you.

Finally, a third brochure will talk about plans for self care that we feel may be important for you. As you start to feel better, you can do many things to help avoid becoming depressed again. We believe the information contained in these help sheets is important and we would like to share it with you.



Depression: Antidepressant Treatment Course

There is help for your depression, but it takes time. How long will you need to take antidepressant medications? Specific time periods should be discussed with your physician. But recent treatment guidelines suggest that the first time someone is treated for depression, medication should be taken for at least 9 months. One reason for this is that people who have been treated for depression remain at risk for it to come back again. You may lower this risk by taking medications exactly as your physician tells you to. The course of medication treatment for depression involves not only helping you feel better. It also involves keeping depression from happening to you again. If you have been treated in the past for depression, medications may be prescribed for longer periods of time. If you have been treated several times for depression in the past, your physician may urge you to continue using antidepressant medications for a long period. In some cases, you may need to take them for the rest of your life.

Starting Treatment

First, you and your physician must make the decision about use of medication. Then, beginning treatment with certain medications is the first step toward helping you feel better. It is also often the scariest part of treatment. Your medication was chosen by your physician from a list of drugs that are now available to treat depression. Deciding between medicines means looking at the positive effects of the medication and the possible side effects of each medicine. Also, because it takes people a while to get used to taking these drugs, physicians usually take a cautious approach to giving medications.



Your physician may initially suggest a low dose, and gradually increase the dose over several weeks or months. At the start of treatment, your physician may want to see you more often. The purpose of these visits is to keep track of or adjust the dosage of your medication. The physician will want to watch for side effects. He or she will also want to see how treatment is working. As you feel better, you will probably meet less often with your physician.

Initial Phase



The initial treatment phase takes place within the first 2-6 weeks of treatment. It may take up to 6 weeks before you notice that you feel better. During this time, depressive symptoms may not improve much. Improvements may seem to come and go. However, during this time, you are at greatest risk for side effects of the medication. Most people get better with their first medication. However, about half of individuals also experience side effects from these medications. In some cases, side effects may affect your work or personal life. There is a very small risk that the medications you are taking will produce harmful side effects. But the side effects may upset you so much that you may consider stopping them or using them "on and off". While it can be frustrating, patience is important. Many side effects are short-term. They go away as the medication becomes effective in helping you feel less depressed. It's important to keep taking your medications exactly as prescribed. Please do not lessen or increase the amount you take. Please do not stop taking the medication without talking to your physician. In the event that side effects are too bad, or the medications make you feel worse, you and your physician can work together to find a more effective medication. It's common to try several medications before finding one that works with few side effects.