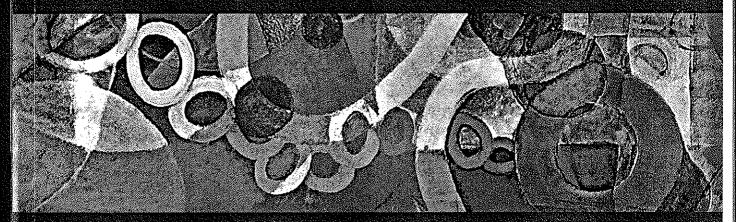


psychology in the real world

community-based groupwork



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Being inspired to come off antidepressants after 28 years' use

MANDY BARRATT

Early in 2006 I saw a flyer advertising Thinking about Medication which said the meetings were open to anyone taking psychiatric medication and as I had spent the last 28 years taking antidepressants I was interested in what the group may offer. I was particularly attracted by the wording: 'What are the pros and cons of taking psychiatric drugs and the pros and cons of reducing or coming off medication?' These words implied to me that the facilitators acknowledged that coming off medication can indeed be a positive thing and I was surprised to read that an NHS psychologist, along with other invited clinicians, were willing to speak on this. This was something long-awaited and totally new to me.

My history with psychiatric medication began at the age of 14 when I told my GP I cried a lot. He prescribed diazepam, asked nothing about what was making me so upset and quickly ushered me out. The drugs were perceived as something to potentially use in an overdose as much as something to supposedly help. Two years later I returned to my doctor and said I was still crying a lot. I received ... a prescription for diazepam.

The following year whilst doing nurse training my feelings of hopelessness became so great I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. It was here that I was first told I was suffering from a mental illness. I told the staff: 'I've always felt like this, so if I'm ill, I must have always been ill.' For the following 28 years I took various antidepressants, changing them as and when

they became ineffective in masking my depression.

The first time I ever felt well was when I was given Prozac. I was able to do things that I had struggled with previously - I could drive a car, talk to people, use the telephone and so on. After some years of being well I decided that I wanted to be free of psychiatric medication; I had heard about St John's wort being used for depression and thought that if I had to take something a herbal remedy would be preferable. My doctors had told me many times that I had a chemical imbalance in my brain and in order to function well I would need to take medication for the rest of my life. I was told to think of it as like a diabetic needing insulin – they know they need it and so they take it. Although I had always hated taking medication I had now come to believe what I was told - after all it was true that each time I tried to stop taking psychiatric drugs I sank into deep depression. Over the next week, after persuading my GP, I reduced my medication whilst increasing the dosage of St John's wort until by the end of the week I was solely on St John's wort. However, two weeks later my mood had dropped so low that I was having suicidal thoughts and so my GP put me back on Prozac - but this time it had no effect at all. I was told this was because I had stopped taking it and that it often does not work second time around. Now I was feeling depressed and guilty that I had inflicted this upon myself by trying to come off medication, especially as I had previously felt so well.

After two hospital admissions my mood stabilised whilst taking venlafaxine and I resigned myself to accepting that if I wanted to be well then I had to take medication for the rest of my life. In January 2006 I began attending the Thinking about Medication group. I found the group both supportive and informative. From the visiting speakers I learnt that there are no tests an individual can have that prove mental illness is the result of a chemical imbalance in their brain. I learned that nutrition can make a big difference as can drinking sufficient water. I also learned about the importance of light and of exercise, about how to reduce medication and that what I had been told was relapse could in fact be withdrawal symptoms. This really helped me see that my experiences on stopping medication might be temporary and not proof that I had to be either depressed or on medication. It gave me hope, something very important in recovery. I was also helped by hearing that other people had also experienced difficulties in withdrawing from antidepressants as I had always been told they are not addictive. Another thing that helped me was a comment from Guy when he said: 'Often depression is about feeling trapped.' Looking back on my times of deep depression this does seem to have been the case.

During the time that I was attending the *Thinking about Medication* group I attempted to gradually reduce my high dose of venlafaxine. Unfortunately I found that within weeks of doing this I became extremely distressed with thoughts of suicide. That, and the fact that I was now working within mental health services and needed to be well at work, together with my husband and I planning a mission trip to China in October of that year, resulted in me resuming my regular dose with the intention of trying to reduce again in the future. In July 2006, whilst attending *Out of the Box*, I met a Chinese woman who is a born again Christian like

myself. She told me: 'God is going to heal you of depression before He sends you into China. He's not going to tell you to pack up your depression and take it with you.' I was thankful for this but still could not risk coming off at that time and so in October I packed my medication and went off to China.

While in China, working with orphans, my husband and I began thinking about adoption and when we returned home we looked into the requirements for this. We discovered that anyone who has taken psychiatric drugs for a 'serious mental illness' (including depression) in the last two years cannot adopt a child from China. This made me frustrated and angry: here I was having to take medication so that I could function well and have a good life but being discriminated against because I was on medication. I thought about God's promise to me and began to put into practice what I had learnt at the Thinking about Medication group. I joined a gym and began using a light box. I started visiting a nutritionist who gave me dietary advice and supplements. She told me that depressed people are usually dehydrated ('causing the brain to shrink like a dry sponge'). I had only ever drunk tea and coffee, never water, and I started drinking water daily and reduced the sugar in my diet (I have since discovered that if I have too much sugar I cannot sleep and have dramatic mood swings).

While I was putting these things in place I intended to take my medication as usual and then gradually reduce it in a step-by-step process (as advocated on the course as the least likely way to induce withdrawal effects). However I realised that, after 28 years of taking medication each morning, I was now forgetting them every now and then, sometimes going a day, sometimes two, without remembering to take them. When I realised that it had been four days since I had last taken any medication I decided to stop them altogether. This was not what we

had been advised in the group but it worked for me: I had no withdrawal symptoms, no depression, just wellness.

It has now been just over two years since I came off psychiatric medication and during this time I have experienced some major losses in my life which have been very stressful but I have not become depressed, have not needed to go into hospital and have not needed psychiatric drugs. Instead I have grown stronger and have grown

closer to God. So what do I conclude from this? I am grateful to the medication for keeping me alive at times when I wanted to die but I can also feel sadness for what could have been and that I spent 28 years not knowing who I was, only knowing the person the medication enabled me to be. I am a woman who can now feel both the joys and the pains of life without those feelings being numbed by psychiatric drugs. Who has found God and found herself.