



Mending Mental Health During *MMT*

O*pioid addiction* and mental health problems – depression, anxiety, and other psychological upsets – often go together. Usually, it is unknown which came first, the addiction or the mental disturbance, and it may not matter.

Recovery during methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) involves mending mental health as well as overcoming active drug addiction. This brochure explains some mental problems frequently faced during recovery and how they can be helped by participation in MMT.

How does addiction affect mental health?

Addictive substances attack centers deep within the brain that control attention, memory, and strong emotions like fear, anger, and sadness. Natural chemicals in the brain, called neurotransmitters, may eventually get out of balance.

Meanwhile, the rational and calming influence of the thinking part of the brain is diminished. Distorted thought process and overpowering emotions take command.

Depression and anxiety are common byproducts of repeated opioid abuse. Some persons may be predisposed to these disorders to begin with, possibly influenced by their genetic makeup. Others, may

develop mental disorders solely by taking too much harmful drug, too often.

Can medicines help?

The brain cannot chemically adapt to repeated opioid "highs" and "lows" throughout the day as the person swings from euphoria to withdrawal and craving; then, back again. Long-lasting effects of methadone restore balance in the opioid system, eliminating withdrawal and craving.

Today, there also are other drugs available, generally called "psychiatric medications," that help counter too much of certain neurotransmitters in the brain and too little of others. Because there are many psychiatric

medications available, finding the right one (or combination) that works best can take some trial and error.

Are there side effects of the medication?

Chemical systems in the brain are involved that also control bodily functions. So, there can be some undesirable effects of the medications, such as: weight gain (or, loss, in some cases), stomach upset, headache, and others.

Often, these side effects are only temporary nuisances and eventually go away. In some cases, different dosages or alternative medicines can alleviate side effects. However, continuing substance abuse while taking these medications can make side effects worse.

What about psychotherapy?

Along with medications, counseling and therapy of various types can be potent forces in recovery. Even after chemical imbalances are improved via medication, there are still disturbed thought processes to deal with.

Group and individual therapy can help a person sort out the damage of the past, triumph over psychological demons of the present, and move toward better mental health. Some authorities believe that active participation in therapy, including 12-Step groups, actually helps improve brain functioning.

Does methadone help or hinder recovery from mental problems?

Methadone, itself, does not interfere with the beneficial actions of other psychiatric medications. Persons maintained on an adequate methadone dose, and abstinent from illicit drugs or alcohol, also can participate more productively in therapy and more quickly get their lives back in order.

Recovery – overcoming addiction and regaining mental health – is an ongoing process. Stopping drug abuse is a vital first step, but a return to mental health takes time and full, ongoing participation in the treatment program.

It is possible to achieve long-term remission from active addiction and mental disturbances, free of troublesome symptoms. However, the individual

must be on guard to avoid substances and circumstances potentially leading to relapse. Medications, such as methadone and antidepressants, may be required for a lifetime.

What can you do?

- **Make a commitment to recovery, realizing that it will take much work and time on your part, with possible setbacks along the way.**
- **Attend ALL counseling and therapy sessions as directed by clinic staff.**
- **Share your worries, fears, and joys openly and honestly during therapy.**
- **Involve family members and significant others as advised by clinic staff.**
- **Do not compare your progress with others; even persons with similar problems may have different chemical imbalances and react in individual ways to specific therapies and medications.**
- **Take all medications exactly as you are told; never adjust times or dosages on your own.**
- **Keep in mind that it can take weeks for some psychiatric medications to take effect. Meanwhile, using non-prescribed drugs to cope with uncomfortable symptoms or feelings will only delay your progress toward recovery.**

Let clinic staff know if any medications are causing you problems. And, bring your other questions or concerns to the attention of clinic staff so they can help you.

For further information on addiction and recovery issues, visit the *Addiction Treatment Forum* website at www.atforum.com.

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