



The Role & Value of Medication



BACKGROUND

It is important for young people to know that staying well, managing mental health, and recovery is possible. Mental health challenges are common among youth and young adults. At least 49.5% of youth will experience mental health struggles in their lives, with 22.2% suffering from severe mental impairment. Additionally, 25.8% of young adults ages 18-25 live with mental health challenges, putting young adults at a higher risk for mental health than any other adult population (Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health, 2020). There are several pathways to effectively navigate serious mental health conditions, including the use of medications to manage symptoms and recovery. In this issue brief, we provide information to help guide an informed decision as young people consider their treatment options.

Access to professional support and medication as treatment options can be valuable and improve the quality of life of young people facing mental health challenges. Medication can be used to treat and alleviate symptoms. In conjunction with therapy, youth peer support, nontraditional supports, and other professional services, medication can play a key role in managing mental illness. Mental health providers will typically complete a mental health assessment and a qualified medical doctor or psychiatrist determines which medication(s) will be prescribed to achieve the desired goal(s) identified during treatment planning. It is important that mental health providers use a **shared decision-making framework** while working with young people. As equal partners, youth should be driving their own mental health and wellness journeys. One of the most significant actions supportive adults can take to support the overall wellness of young people, is to create space for youth voice and choice in decisions that are made about their mental health treatment and recovery. Research has shown that shared decision-making leads to improved self-efficacy, self-esteem, treatment engagement, outcomes and satisfaction (Bjønness, Viksveen, Johannessen, & Storm, 2020).

Shared decision making is a best practice in behavioral and physical health that aims to help people in treatment and recovery have informed, meaningful, and collaborative discussions with providers about their healthcare services (SAMHSA, 2020)

MAKING A CHOICE ABOUT MEDICATION



Deciding to take medication as a youth or young adult can be a big decision and a life-changing experience. When considering options it is important to evaluate the pros and cons of each choice to ensure a fully informed decision is being made.

Benefits of Taking Medication

Medications can be one effective tool for managing health, mental health, and substance use challenges. Medication can assist youth and/or young adults with gaining control over their lives and help them cope with mental health symptoms that are affecting their daily moods, thoughts, and behaviors (SAMHSA 2019).

When deciding to take medication, youth and young adults can identify a list of people to have on their team to support them in this process. Doctors, psychiatrists, caseworkers, care providers, youth peer providers, and natural supports such as family members or friends are people who can be on a young person's care team. Healthcare providers can assist with the process of selecting which medication(s) would be best for the specific circumstances experienced by the youth or young adult. When deciding to take medication as a treatment option, learning more information about all of the medications available is recommended (Mental Health America, 2020). There are many types of medications available and prescribers should work with youth to determine which medications, if any, are the right fit to support mental health management and recovery.

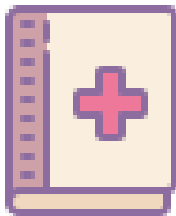
Types of Medications

- **Antipsychotics:** can help reduce or, in some cases, eliminate hearing unwanted voices or having very fearful thoughts. They can promote thinking clearly, staying focused on reality, and feeling organized and calm.
- **Antidepressants:** help reduce such feelings as sadness or depressed mood and anxiety as well as suicidal thoughts.
- **Mood stabilizers:** help reduce or eliminate extremes of high and low moods and related symptoms.
- **Tranquilizers and sleeping pills:** can reduce anxiety and insomnia and help you feel more relaxed.
- **Stimulants and related medicines:** can have a calming effect and help improve concentration and attention span in both children and adults (Mental Health America).



Risks of Taking Medication

Young people should know there are possible side effects for taking medication. Before making a decision, research the potential side effects of each medication under consideration to assess the risks and benefits. In some cases people taking medications may experience drowsiness, insomnia, weight gain, confusion, dizziness, and more (Mental Health America, 2020). Be mindful about whether or not the medications are effective, and watch out for behaviors or signs that the medication may be making symptoms worse. Young people can work with their providers to determine the best course of action, should side effects impact their quality of life. Ongoing discussions about the side effects and risks associated with prescribed medication will ensure the best possible treatment course to support mental health maintenance and recovery. It’s important to be aware that medication affects individuals differently- while one person may have negative side effects, another may have none at all. It may take time and some trial and error to find the right medication to manage symptoms. If a



decision is made to stop taking medications, partnering with a provider is recommended for safely tapering off the medication. This also allows for a gradual adjustment and reduces the risk of uncomfortable side effects such as withdrawals (NAMI, 2021). Ultimately, active partnership and engagement with the prescribing provider is a critical step to ensure youth voice is driving treatment planning.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: TAKING MEDICATION

When making a decision to take medications, it can be helpful to consider the following questions

What are my medication options?

What symptoms should this medication help?

How long will I have to take it?

Why did you choose this medication?

What are the side effects? How long will they last?

What should I do if it doesn't work?

What are my medication options?

What are the chances of getting side effects?

What should I do if I get bad side-effects?

What is the usual dose of this medication?

Are there other medications that I could try?

Will the medication affect other drugs I am taking?

Are there any treatments apart from this medication?

How long will it take to work?

Can I drive while taking this medication?

(Rethink Mental Illness, 2021)

...NON-MEDICATION OPTIONS



Youth and young adults may consider trying options and alternatives beyond medication such as other mental health services like psychosocial care, non-traditional supports and activities, and lifestyle changes. There are many non-medication approaches to care, ranging from therapy provided by licensed clinicians, to diet and exercise changes, to mindfulness and meditation practices (Strong and Informed: Supporting Shared Decision Making). It's important to look at the overall context of life to identify potential conditions that are activating or triggering mental health

symptoms. By identifying triggers, youth can partner with their providers to holistically support decision-making around the things that can be controlled. Some youth may have cultural or worldview considerations around taking medication or even mental health, so keeping these holistic approaches in mind to be youth-driven and culturally responsive is key. Researchers have studied some non-medication options and found that they work. At the Youth MOVE Peer Center, we integrate the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Eight Dimensions of Wellness into the work that we do with youth and young adults, recognizing that taking care of mental health and whole health in a holistic way that addresses the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, environmental, financial, occupational, and social aspects of a young person's life is crucial. To learn more about the Eight Dimensions of Wellness, visit SAMHSA's [Step-By-Step Guide to Wellness](#) resource.

Psychotropic medications can be a helpful tool for managing mental illness particularly when they are part of a comprehensive treatment approach that includes therapy and other community-based interventions focused on providing maximum support (Yale Child Study Center, 2021). Young people should be active participants in their treatment planning and be supported in making informed decisions about medications. By taking a partnership approach with young people, providers can ensure youth are driving their mental health care and recovery.

Resources

[YMN Self-Care Plans](#)

[YMN Taking Care of Your Body While Quarantined](#)

[The Role of Medications in the Treatment of Adolescents and Young Adults with Opioid Use Disorder](#)

[Decisions in Recovery](#)

[Youth Mental Health Bill of Rights](#)

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