

## **“When will I start feeling better?”**

Most people with depression have felt poorly for a while and are anxious for quick relief of their symptoms by the time they decide to start an antidepressant. Unfortunately, these medications do not work right away. If your depression has gotten to the point that you cannot function at work or home, those several weeks it may take to get better can seem much longer. Some people do feel better within a few days of taking an antidepressant but the vast majority do not notice any significant relief for at least two to four weeks. Possible reasons for this are discussed in Chapter Three in the section on how antidepressants work.

You should expect to feel at least 50 percent better within four to six weeks of taking the right medicine at the right dose. Full recovery may take up to twelve weeks. Some symptoms can even take longer than twelve weeks to fully resolve, such as concentration and memory difficulties. Symptoms that do not go away even though the depression has mostly lifted are called residual symptoms. Managing residual symptoms is discussed in Chapter Six.

In some cases, an immediate improvement in one or more of your symptoms may be due to a side effect, not an antidepressant effect. A sedating antidepressant may help you sleep better as soon as you start taking it. Your mood could be starting to improve somewhat because you are sleeping better. An activating medicine could give you more energy, but not necessarily because your depression has improved. Taking an antidepressant that is not fully treating depression but helping because of side effects is generally not a good idea, since these effects will eventually wear off. Sometimes a side effect that helps in the beginning of treatment becomes problematic later on. If your sleeping improves because your depression has resolved, you may not want a medicine that continues to make you sleepy.

Sometimes doctors will prescribe non-antidepressant medications for people with depression. This may be because these medications provide more immediate symptom relief, or because the patient's condition has been misdiagnosed. One class, called the “benzodiazepines,” includes medication such as alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), lorazepam (Ativan), or diazepam (Valium). They are prescribed due to their calming effect. They help with anxiety, agitation, and sleeping problems, but they do not actually treat depression. They may even numb you emotionally. While the rapid effect is welcomed, these medicines can be

highly addictive, especially if taken for extended periods. They also quickly lose their effectiveness, resulting in the need to take higher and higher doses for the same benefit. If you have been on a benzodiazepine, don't expect the same fast result when starting an antidepressant. Be careful of taking something for short term relief that in the long run may be detrimental to your health.

### **“What will I feel? How will I know if it is working?”**

Depression is often described as similar to being at the bottom of a deep well, and the medicine is the rope that you need to pull yourself out. When an antidepressant works properly, you should experience improvement in emotional symptoms such as sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness, as well as in any physical symptoms such as sleep, appetite, and energy disturbances. Antidepressants are not “happy pills,” as some people mistakenly believe. Hopefully, once you feel better, you will be able to do the things you need that actually make you happy. You will also be in a better position to make changes in your life to reduce the chances of your depression returning. The medicine, like the rope in the well, does not do the work for you. Some people who are looking for a quick and easy solution to their depression jump from medicine to medicine. They do not get better until they realize and undertake the life changes they must make to bring on their recovery.

When you are on antidepressants, you still feel emotions. If someone close to you passes away, you will feel sad. If you are mistreated at work, you will get angry. You can still experience anxiety about finances or health concerns. The difference is, on antidepressants, you are able to better deal with these feelings. Without the fog of depression, you see options, be able to put things into perspective, and use your own resources to more effectively manage any problems you may face.

### **Undertreated Depression is Common**

One 2003 study showed that only 52 percent of those who had depression were getting any treatment. Of those who were getting help, only 1/4 were receiving what would be defined as adequate treatment. In other words, there are a whole lot of people not getting treated and, most likely, not getting better.