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Why Weaning off Antidepressants Wasn't the Right Choice for Me

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A little over six years ago, life was pretty chaotic. I had a newborn in the neonatal intensive care unit and a toddler at home as I recovered from major surgery. I've always been a worrier and prone to rumination, but becoming a parent – especially the second time around – amped up my natural tendencies. I felt as though I was drowning on a daily basis.

At the hospital for a follow-up appointment, I was anxious, scared, and crying so hard I could barely get a sentence out. The doctor listened to me for a while, and after we talked more, she prescribed an antidepressant. A little orange pill became part of my daily routine. Soon thereafter, my daughter came home from the NICU. The roller coaster of motherhood began to slow down and smooth out.

Earlier this year, as my former preemie thrived in kindergarten, I began to feel guilty that an antidepressant still had a place in my medicine cabinet. After all, the crisis that had triggered the need for the med was far in the past, and I was feeling so much better. Life was stable. I exercised regularly, went to therapy, and had a few good friends I knew I could lean on for emotional support. Why on earth was I still taking these pills?

My mind made up, I took the entire summer to carefully wean off the medication that had been in my system for more than half a decade. I was certain that stopping the antidepressant would enable me to lead a more authentic life – a life untarnished by unnecessary chemical interventions. After popping my last pill, I felt almost triumphant. “I’m med-free!” I croaked.

Fairly quickly, I noticed some changes. I’d wake up in the middle of the night, tossing and turning for hours, my mind racing and a tightness building in my chest. I felt anxiety creep back in, that sinister and familiar

intruder, as my brain began to play its tortuous what-if game. On beautiful, warm afternoons, while my kids frolicked in the backyard or chased frogs at the neighborhood pond, I sobbed hysterically because my brain kept replaying scenes from sad 80s movies. Things that should've been a blip on the radar now regularly brought me to tears: bad traffic, a botched drive-thru order, or cereal spilled on the floor.

All of this wasn't ideal, but I chalked it up to the cost of keeping it real. Wasn't that precisely what I had wanted? "This is how I'm supposed to be," I declared one day to my husband.

Then one weekend, when my husband was away on a business trip, I basically lost it. My daughters had been playing outside when my six-year-old suddenly approached me with a guilty expression. "Mama, I, um ... I drank some muddy water from the backyard." My heart jumped into my throat. "You did what?!"

In that split second, my mind tumbled down a rabbit hole as anxiety ripped the logical, calm part of my brain to shreds. I pictured amoebas and parasites from the mud now worming their way into my daughter's intestines. I ran through a list of possible symptoms she could develop and panicked about what antibiotic she might need. Tears stung my eyes as I contemplated whether she'd miss her first day of school due to severe illness. Before long, I was crying, my kids were crying, and I was frantically texting my husband and phoning the on-call pediatrician.

My daughter ended up being just fine. But the incident forced me to recognize that unmanaged anxiety and depression don't impact only me – they affect my family too. If my kids continually see me unraveling in

extreme anxiety and fear, will they learn to cope in a similar way with life's uncertainties? Will my own neuroses someday become theirs?

Ultimately, the way we manage our mental and emotional health is different for everyone. Therapy, the development of coping skills, and the cultivation of a trusted support network are all parts of an equation that may or may not involve medication. It took weaning off my antidepressant to show me that, at least for now, medication is a critical factor in my own equation. Without medication, my life did not become more authentic or real as I'd hoped. Instead, I began to view life through the dark lens of anxiety and depression. My world became a realm ruled by excessive worry, a place where monsters appeared out of thin air, and flesh-eating amoebas lurked in the soil behind my house. Without medication, all of the other tools I was using to manage my symptoms failed to work as effectively as before. It was like baking a cake and skipping the egg or another key ingredient. The end result – in this case, my life – was a sad, gloppy mess.

My fear that medication was causing me to miss out on an authentic life was unfounded. Looking back on it, I can honestly say that when I was taking my prescription, I never felt as though the world was all cupcakes and rainbows. I simply felt like I could deal with life, whatever it might bring. In the end, that's the attitude I know I need to model for my children.



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