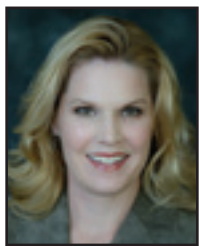


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# Demystifying Psychiatric Medications: A Therapist's Guide to Effective Collaborations, Referrals, and Side Effects

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The collaboration between therapists and psychiatric prescribers forms a cornerstone of effective mental health care. While therapists use psychological interventions to address emotional and cognitive challenges, psychiatric medications target the hypothesized neurochemical underpinnings of mental health disorders. Despite this complementary relationship, many therapists feel uncertain about discussing medications or making referrals. This article aims to bridge that gap, providing therapists with information about psychiatric medications, their side effects, and best practices for collaborating with prescribers.

Psychiatric prescriptions involve varied professionals, each offering specialized expertise. Psychiatrists (M.D./D.O.) are medical doctors specializing in mental health who handle complex cases requiring advanced pharmacological strategies. Physician assistants (P.As) work under physician supervision, playing an active role in prescribing and managing medications. Psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners (PMHNPs) integrate psychiatric nursing and medical care, including psychopharmacological strategies, often taking a holistic approach to treatment by assessing biologic, psychological, and social factors. PMHNPs must meet state licensure requirements every two years, national board certification every five years, and participate in continuing medical education (CME) to stay current with advances in psychopharmacology.

### Principles of Psychiatric Prescribing

The process of prescribing psychiatric medication follows well-established principles designed to ensure safety and efficacy. Prescribers initially consider potential medical contributors to mental health symptoms, such as thyroid disorders or vitamin deficiencies, and they may order laboratory tests to

rule out these factors. If medications are indicated, discussions include potential benefits, side effects, and alternatives, allowing clients to make informed choices (Oluboka et al, 2018). In an outpatient care setting, medications typically start with low doses that are gradually adjusted, a principle known as “start low, go slow,” which minimizes side effects while optimizing therapeutic outcomes. Prescribers also strive to simplify treatment by using the fewest medications at the lowest effective doses. Regular monitoring is important given that medications with delayed onset—such as antidepressants—require close observation to ensure efficacy and safety (Santarsieri & Schwartz, 2015). Additionally, medication should be prescribed to reduce mental health symptoms to remission with the intent to discontinue medications following evidenced-based research and guidelines (Oluboka et al, 2018).

Therapists who are knowledgeable about psychiatric medications can support the therapeutic process in several ways. Integrating an understanding of pharmacology with psychotherapy ensures that the two treatment approaches are aligned, leading to more effective care. Additionally, therapists who dispel clients' myths and misconceptions—such as fears of dependence or personality changes—empower them to make informed decisions (Pillinger et al., 2023). A foundational understanding of psychopharmacology also enables therapists to collaborate effectively with prescribers. Clear communication about clients' treatment goals and progress ensures that both therapy and medication work synergistically to address the challenge of mental health symptoms.

Clients often approach psychiatric medications with hesitation, due to fear of dependency, or loss of self. Therapists can address these concerns by framing medications as mechanisms for enhancing, rather than replacing, therapy. A balanced approach involves validating clients' concerns while providing accurate information about medication efficacy and safety. Informed dialogue fosters trust and reduces stigma, empowering clients to make choices that align with their values and needs (Brown & Patel, 2023).

Cultural and personal beliefs heavily influence attitudes about psychiatric medications. For example, some cultures view mental illness and its treatments as taboos, while others prioritize holistic remedies. Therapists and prescribers alike must approach these conversations with a cultural awareness, respecting their clients' personal and cultural perspectives, while providing them clear and accurate information. Discus-



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sions that consider cultural, religious, and individual values enhance rapport and support informed decision-making (Johnson et al., 2021).

### The Synergy of Combined Treatment

Evidence consistently supports the combined use of therapy and medication for many psychiatric conditions, such as depression and anxiety. Studies indicate that this integrated approach often yields better outcomes than either modality alone (Stein et al., 2022). Therapists play a critical role in recognizing when therapy alone is insufficient—such as when severe symptoms persist or progress stalls or when therapeutic work can be enhanced by mitigating mental health symptoms such as anxiety or depression—and by making appropriate referrals. This partnership helps ensure that treatment plans are individualized and responsive to clients' needs.

Knowing when to refer clients for psychiatric evaluation is an essential therapeutic skill. Therapists can also facilitate referrals for clients who express interest in exploring medication as part of their treatment. Collaboration with psychiatric prescribers helps ensure a comprehensive approach to care (Taylor & Green, 2024).

### Common Psychiatric Medications and Side Effects

Familiarity with common psychiatric medications allows therapists to better understand their clients' experiences. For example:

- Antidepressants (e.g., SSRIs, SNRIs) often cause side effects such as weight gain, sexual dysfunction, or emotional numbing.
- Anxiolytics, including benzodiazepines, address acute anxiety, but carry a risk of dependency.
- Mood stabilizers, like lithium or anticonvulsants, may result in tremors and cognitive dulling.
- Antipsychotics may contribute to metabolic syndrome (hypercholesterolemia, hypertension, weight gain, etc.) or sedation.
- Stimulants used for ADHD are effective, but addictive. Additionally, careful assessment is needed to distinguish the side effects from the withdrawal effects of these medications.

Assessing side effects better helps therapists to understand clients' concerns, and facilitate communication with their prescribers (Nguyen et al., 2023).

### Collaborating with Prescribers

Collaboration between therapists and prescribers is crucial for delivering effective care. Regular communication ensures the alignment of therapy goals with medication management. Establishing clear boundaries, maintaining confidentiality, and obtaining client consent are ethical imperatives in these col-

laborations (Simpatico, 2008). Therapists seeking to expand their knowledge of psychiatric medications can access various resources, such as webinars on psychiatric medications, books (e.g., by Stephen Stahl or Nassir Ghaemi), peer-reviewed articles, and professional websites (like the Neuroscience Education Institute). Networking with local prescribers also fosters collaborative opportunities and shared learning.

Therapists and prescribers are integral members of the mental health care team, united by a shared goal of improving client outcomes. By understanding the fundamentals of psychiatric medications, therapists can further collaboration, dispel myths, and empower clients to make informed decisions. This integration of psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy ensures a holistic, client-centered approach to mental health care. ▲

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References are available on the LACPA Website [www.lacpa.org](http://www.lacpa.org).

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