SHOULD YOU TAKE PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATIONS?
SHOULD YOUR KIDS?

Your doctor may recommend that you or your child take some kind of psychiatric medication. You aren’t sure if it’s a good idea, yet you want to do what’s best for you and for your children. To help you approach the decision with wisdom, we (at Single & Parenting) have asked counselors Dr. Edward Welch and Dr. Michael R. Emlet some pointed questions.

Q: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT USING PSYCHIATRIC MEDS?

Dr. Michael R. Emlet: The Bible doesn’t say anything about the use of psychiatric medications because that hadn’t come into existence. That doesn’t mean the Bible is silent on the issue. The Bible says a lot, for instance, about suffering, and one of the things we need to keep in mind is that when Jesus came, He not only forgave sin but He also healed disease. He also relieved suffering. Medications may be one way that suffering is relieved. We also need to remember that the Bible says suffering conforms us to the image of Christ and that God is working through our suffering to make us more like Him. We want to be careful not to look at taking medications as the be all and end all, in terms of relief, but that we always are looking at ourselves and are asking how can I change? What does God want me to do that will be more in line with His values? At bottom line I would say medication is a wisdom issue. It’s going to vary from individual to individual whether or not medications may be wise. I think some people want to rush too quickly to medications. Other people refuse to even consider the possibility of medications. Both of those positions could be problematic because they reflect motives of the heart that may be off base.

Q: IS IT WRONG TO TAKE PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATION OR GIVE IT TO MY CHILD?

Dr. Edward Welch: The decision is not a moral matter: is it right or is it wrong to take medication? It’s a matter of wisdom. What wisdom does is it gathers information and it seeks to make an appropriate decision based on that information.

Q: HOW CAN I MAKE A WISE, INFORMED DECISION?

Dr. Welch: The first place you’re going to go for wisdom is to your physician, and wisdom means you’re going to be asking questions: “Why are you recommending this particular medication? What critical issues do you see that medication might address? What are some of the potential side effects of the medication?” Get a second opinion when you need to. You can also ask a trusted friend to come alongside you and ask questions of the psychiatrist or physician.

Dr. Emlet: It’s important to have a conversation with your physician: “Why are you coming to this conclusion? What is it about my symptoms (or my child’s) that led you to this conclusion? Are there any other explanations or alternatives for that diagnosis?” And when you try to understand the treatment course: “Does my physician have experience in this particular problem?” Get as much information as you can from your physician, from trusted friends, counselors and pastors before you go down a treatment path.

Q: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF TAKING PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATION?

Dr. Welch: For some people the medication seems to relieve some of the more difficult symptoms, and when medication does that, we’re delighted. But what psychiatric medication can do is limited. It’s not going to fill a person with spiritual hope. It’s not going to cause a person to love others more. It can potentially alleviate some of the troubling features that come with life.
Q: WHAT WOULD BE EXAMPLES OF TIMES MY CHILD OR I MAY NOT NEED PSYCHIATRIC MEDS?

Dr. Emlet: A place you might want to wait would be in mild depression or mild anxiety. Those are situations where hopefully you are meeting with someone who is walking alongside of you and helping you to frame your struggle in a biblical way and to gain insight from the Scriptures. Research shows that unless symptoms are severe, counseling—talking with someone who’s wise and experienced—is very effective, and we don’t necessarily need to jump to medication as a first step.

We want to start with the least invasive form of treatment. If you or your child are diagnosed with some sort of psychiatric disorder, like ADHD, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, separation anxiety, these things can be treated in a variety of ways, depending on the severity of the symptoms in the person, and it’s on a continuum. While one person may need to be hospitalized and put on serious psychotropic medications, another person may just need some behavior modification, some coping skills; he may need to be trained and educated. I always encourage people [who are questioning putting their child on medication], “First get counseling, and pray for your child. Talk to the teachers; provide your kid with tutoring if he has ADHD. Don’t just go for the medication.” The idea of least invasive to more invasive forms of treatment is important when it comes to psychiatric disorders.

Q: WHEN IS IT WISE TO TAKE PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATION?

Dr. Emlet: Some situations where it may be beneficial for you or your child to consider the use of medication would be if you’re having symptoms that would be in the psychotic range. You’re losing touch with reality. You’re having hallucinations or delusions. The use of medications to deal with those problems would be extremely important. Another place where it may be important would be in the diagnosis of bipolar disorder, particularly what is called the manic phase where someone’s mood and behavior is really elevated and they may engage in risky behavior. Mood stabilizers may be actually very protective for you or for your child. There are some psychiatric disorders that definitely have a physiological weight to them, and in those kinds of situations it is important to consider the use of medication.

Q: SHOULD I FEEL GUILTY FOR TAKING MEDICATION OR FOR GIVING IT TO MY KIDS?

Dr. Welch: I find people who feel guilty if they’re taking medication or giving medication to their children. They feel it’s a cop-out or an indication they have failed. How can we have a more simple view of medication? Medication, if it helps (and sometimes it won’t), can alleviate some of the difficult experiences of life. As parents we want to recognize that medication doesn’t do everything. It doesn’t deal with the very heart of our children. That is our turf [as parents]. Our task is how can our children grow to truly know the God and Father who loves them dearly? Medication is not going to help us do that. It’s not going to prohibit us from doing that either.

Q: MY CHILD HAS STARTED TAKING MEDICATION; WHAT STEPS SHOULD I TAKE NEXT?

Dr. Welch: You work with your child. You see if there are any side effects. You see if there are any improvements over a period of time. You continue to see that psychiatrist or physician and keep him up-to-date with changes that are positive, changes that are negative or no changes at all. Remain in contact and continue to ask his opinion as to what you should do with the medication.

Q: HOW LONG SHOULD I STAY ON THE MEDICATION?

Dr. Emlet: Frequently touch base with your physician about whether or not you need to stay on it for the long haul. There are some situations where you might need to be on medication a longer time, but it’s important to be able to engage with your physician and say, “Is there a possibility that I could come down off this medication now?” Certain medications, for instance in the Valium class, can be associated with physical dependence and even withdrawal if you stop things abruptly. Even if you feel like you don’t need this medication anymore, I wouldn’t stop it outright. I’d make sure you have a conversation with your physician; there may be a weaning process. It’s important to periodically touch base and see, do I really need to stay on this? If you’ve been involved in counseling and getting help and working through issues, that also will factor into the decision.
We hope you found this article helpful. Please understand that it was prepared and presented as general information for a wide audience, and should not be considered specific advice for your circumstances and situation. Always make decisions regarding the use of medications with the advice and guidance of the prescribing doctor or counselor.

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Dr. Edward Welch is a counselor and faculty member at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Glenside, Pennsylvania. He has written extensively on the topics of depression, fear and addictions. His books include Depression: A Stubborn Darkness, Running Scared and When I Am Afraid: A Step-by-Step Guide Away from Fear and Anxiety.

Drs. Emlet and Welch are featured experts on the Single & Parenting videos. To hear more of their insights, visit a Single & Parenting group near you, www.singleandparenting.org.

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