

When I came off my antidepressants last summer, I really struggled to manage my mental health. This was mainly because I underestimated the withdrawal symptoms I would experience. I don't think I'm alone in this. Despite their popularity, there is still a lot of misunderstanding about the intense effect antidepressants have on the body. When I went to the GP seeking help for my mental health, medication was one of the first options offered. I believe this is because the NHS mental health sector is under so much strain. The system is simply unable to facilitate the sheer number of people experiencing mental health challenges. In an ideal world, everyone would have access to the treatment method they prefer. I would have preferred counselling, but because 1 in 4 people in the UK face mental health challenges, waiting lists can be extensive. I didn't feel I could cope without any treatment, so I started taking medication. After a year, I suddenly stopped taking the medication. If I'd known how much of an impact this would have on my health and wellbeing, I would have made preparations to keep myself safe and secure.

If you're considering coming off your mental health medication, I urge you to seek advice from your doctor. The advice below is only intended to help you manage your self care. If at any point during your withdrawal process you are unable to cope on your own, I recommend using a crisis support service like Samaritans. If your mental health is posing a risk of harm to yourself or others, contact the emergency services.

**Make a strategic plan for reducing medication slowly**-Seek advice from your doctor. They will reduce your medication dosages slowly so your body can get accustomed to the chemical changes. If you don't feel fully comfortable with the plan your GP suggests, don't be afraid to seek a second opinion. You have a right to feel control over the process.

**Create a safe space**-It goes without saying that feeling safe where you live is fundamental to good mental health. Unfortunately, not everyone has this privilege. During your medication withdrawal, it is essential to have a safe space to retreat to, should you need it. Whether that safe space is in your own home, at your parents or a trusted friends, make sure you have access to it at all times. It needs to be familiar to you and bring a sense of comfort and security. Some of the symptoms I experienced were intense paranoia, insomnia and hallucinations. When your body is readjusting to its natural chemical composition, your nervous system is on high alert. You may have overwhelming, irrational fears that you are being threatened. During these episodes, there is nothing that can put your mind at ease as much as a locked door. When creating your safe space, be mindful of the fact you may go through periods where you want to be totally alone. Having a TV or radio is great for some much needed background noise. If you feel afraid and don't want to be alone, ask a friend to stay over. Be honest about what you're going through. The people that care about you won't be judgmental. Having constant access to a phone is vital but when you are feeling vulnerable, nothing can replace the value of real life human contact.

**Have a list of crisis number to hand**-Having someone to turn to when things get really tough is absolutely integral. Write down a list of phone numbers of family and friends you can really trust. Include a mental health crisis support line such as Samaritans. If you've never used a crisis support line, the prospect of opening up to a stranger may seem daunting. The great thing about services like Samaritans is that you can be completely honest about what you're going through without fear of judgement. Sometimes you just need someone to listen. Medication withdrawal can bring unwanted memories in to your mind. For me, these images were invasive and alarming-I felt like someone was rewinding and playing a tape with the scariest moments of my life on repeat, and I had no means of pressing pause. If your emotions are frozen by antidepressants, the withdrawal is like a thawing process. Lots of thoughts and feelings that were buried begin to trickle out. You may start to feel really bad really quickly. That's why it's so important to have a list of crisis numbers just in case you can't manage on your own. If your feelings get so intense that you are a risk to yourself or others, call 999.

**Make a diary/log book to record your feelings**-Writing down your feelings as you experience them will help you to make sense of the changes that are taking place in your mind, body and spirit. Keeping track of your progress will enable you to recognise how far you've come. This is really important to help you stay positive when you're having a bad spell. Keeping a log of your moods will help you to recognise patterns. You may feel more most vulnerable at certain times of the day. This information will help you to plan ahead and take action that protects you.

**Make a self care kit**-Gather all of the items that bring you peace and keep them in one place. This can include things like candles, craft sets, your favourite book or film, essential oils and your diary. When you feel positive, you can use sticky notes to write compliments and uplifting words. Store them in your self care kit for your future self to find.

**Practise self compassion**-Self compassion essentially means extending compassion to yourself in times of perceived inadequacy, failure or general suffering. This means treating yourself with the kindness, care and love you deserve. It is easy to extend out empathy to others, but we often neglect our own needs. Prioritising yourself is not selfish, it's self-love. Recognise that by coming off your medication, you are making significant alterations to the chemical composition of your body. You wouldn't stretch when you've just had stitches removed, so don't over extend yourself while you're coming off your medication, even if you think you can manage. This will only lead to higher stress levels and you won't have the emotional energy to recover. Instead, make sure you take the time to rest. If you struggle to take care of yourself, imagine you are looking after your best friend who is going through the same thing, would you push them in to doing things when you know they are feeling bad? Set boundaries in your relationships that allow you to respect your own needs. If you need time alone, say it. If you can't listen to anyone else's life problems, assert that. You don't have to be rude or dismissive. Try saying 'I understand you are going through a

difficult time, but I really need to focus on helping myself right now.' if the relationship is of any real value, they will respect your wishes.

**Stock up with your favourite foods**-Whether that's frozen pizzas, fish fingers and chips or you're the type that makes their own home-made super healthy vegan curry, make sure you have enough in the house so you don't need to go outside if you don't feel like it. As a general rule, the more vitamin-packed the best, but don't opt for something you wouldn't normally eat. Comfort is key!

**Make an appointment at a natural therapy centre**-Centres that provide massage, aromatherapy, Reiki and other holistic healing therapies will help the withdrawal process by releasing energetic blocks in your body. Make a booking in advance is advisable, since waiting lists can be long.