

Medicating Normal – How Big Pharma Took Possession of Mental Health

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Benzodiazepines, used to treat anxiety, can cause harmful side effects when taken long-term. The documentary "Medicating Normal" explores how psychotropic medications can worsen patients' conditions over time
- › Long-term use of benzodiazepines can lead to impaired thinking, confusion, disorientation and negative effects on fluid intelligence. Even teenagers are increasingly prescribed psychotropic medications for mental health issues
- › The pharmaceutical industry has redefined "normal" to equate discomfort with abnormality, leading to overprescription. This approach prioritizes profit over addressing root causes of mental health issues
- › Polypharmacy, the use of multiple medications simultaneously, is a growing problem in America. It affects various groups, particularly the elderly, and can lead to numerous health complications
- › To reduce medication dependency, list all medications, use one pharmacy, scrutinize new prescriptions and consider healthy lifestyle changes. Regular medication reviews with health care providers are also crucial

Benzodiazepines are a class of psychotropic medications used to treat anxiety disorders. They work by promoting the release of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter, thus slowing down the nervous system.¹ However, they're prone to

abuse, and when taken for years, can cause harmful side effects – many of which have not yet been fully identified and studied.

The documentary film “Medicating Normal,” produced and directed by filmmaking duo Lynn Cunningham and Wendy Ractliffe, sheds light on this problem. The film was inspired by a relative of Cunningham, who, at one point, was taking 10 pills daily, and she wanted to raise awareness about it. Here’s their statement, from the film’s official website:²

“It is estimated that of the 1 in 5 Americans taking such meds, 30% to 35% are gravely harmed by the very treatment meant to help them. ‘Medicating Normal’ focuses on the predicament of this group – individuals facing trauma and stress who are drugged needlessly and made sicker as a result ...

Our hope is that ‘Medicating Normal’ will present one very important and predominantly untold story so that as a society we can begin a meaningful, informed nationwide discussion about what it means to be fully human and mentally well.”

Psychotropic Medications Can Actually Worsen the Patient’s Condition

The film follows several people over three years, taking a deep, intimate look at how long-term abuse of psychotropic medications affected their lives. It opens with the story of Dave Cope, a former U.S. Navy officer who was forced to retire from service due to chronic use of Ativan (lorazepam), a type of benzodiazepine, during his time in grad school. During this period, he was also diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed amphetamines.³

While Cope noted that these medications initially helped in the first few months, they eventually created troubling side effects. In one example, he experienced cognitive block to the point he had trouble remembering where he lived. Moreover, he developed a sense of apathy, unable to become excited for his upcoming wedding.⁴

U.S. Army veteran Angie Peacock had a similar experience. In the film, she narrates how she was prescribed Klonopin (clonazepam), another benzodiazepine, to manage her mental health after coming home. In an interview⁵ for *Mad in America*, she described how the drugs she took led to severe physical and mental health issues:

“I remember very quickly I had these problems. I had low-grade fevers, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, high heart rate. Then within two weeks, I couldn’t sleep. Every time I heard a noise, I would jump. I remember being scared of standing outside, I became agoraphobic.”

Again, benzodiazepines work by slowing down the central nervous system, reducing anxiety, seizures and muscle spasms.⁶ However, long-term use, as evident from Cope’s and Peacock’s experiences, can cause psychological issues. According to a study⁷ published in *The Ochsner Journal*, long-term effects of taking benzodiazepines include impaired thinking, confusion and disorientation. Increased tolerance and dependence are observed, too.

In another study⁸ published in 2021, long-term benzodiazepine use was observed to have a negative effect on fluid intelligence, which is the brain’s ability to interpret data and come up with solutions to puzzles or abstract problems.⁹

Teenagers Are Also Prescribed Psychotropic Medications

Even teenagers cannot escape from the clutches of Big Pharma’s machinations, like in the case of college student Rebecka Green.¹⁰ In the film, she explains that she developed anxiety during high school, which caused her to lose weight. Afterward, her parents scheduled a meeting with a therapist to help her. Unsurprisingly, Rebecka was immediately prescribed Zoloft, an antidepressant drug.

After some time, Rebecka started hallucinating about people who weren’t there. She was also hospitalized several times and was prescribed with more medications to treat the side effects of the other drugs she was taking. She recounts her experience, saying, “I think at one point, I was on six or seven [drugs] at one time.”¹¹

Using drugs to relieve symptoms without addressing the root cause is now a growing problem among the youth. In a 2022¹² report from The New York Times, the number of visits by teenagers (younger than 20) to psychiatrists increased from 200,000 in 1993 to 1.2 million in 2002. Moreover, a Medicaid survey noted that 85% of children enrolled in the program currently taking an antipsychotic drug also had a second medication.

As you can imagine, these drugs don't really work, even for the youth. According to Dr. Joshua Gordon, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, the lack of data showing what combination of drugs can help a child can eventually lead to multiple medications:

"Why kids end up on multiple medications is because we don't have the medications that are really working for them. All of it suggests we need more research," Gordon adds.¹³

Big Pharma Has Twisted What It Means To Be 'Normal'

According to U.S. Navy psychologist Mary Neal Vieten, Ph.D.,¹⁴ much of the issue of overprescription stems from how drug marketers co-opted the notion of "normalcy." She noted that drug marketers deliberately conflated "normal" with being comfortable. Therefore, if you're feeling uncomfortable, you're automatically "abnormal" and must take a pill. Dr. Allen Frances, former chair of psychiatry at Duke University, builds on this argument further:¹⁵

"Normal is in danger. The definitions used in psychiatry and even more, the way they're applied, have become so wide that a far too large percentage of the population would be defined as having a mental disorder ...

But most people presenting to a GP (general physician), for anxiety, have a short-term stressor that's making them feel terrible. Most of the symptoms will go away in most people within a few weeks or a month. We shouldn't confuse normal sadness and normal anxiety with mental disorder, and that line has been terribly blurred."

The only reason that makes sense why this suffering has been allowed to thrive for so long is the pursuit of profit. Robert Whitaker,¹⁶ a renowned journalist critical of the psychiatric industry, noted that the obsession over taking pills for all sorts of health issues stems from a culture looking for magic bullets. Expectedly, Big Pharma took advantage of this.

In the 1970s, American psychiatrists were competing with talk therapists, social workers and counselors for patients. To attract more patients to their side, they put on a white coat and presented themselves as medical doctors.

Finally, they adopted a disease model for approaching mental health issues, with the goal of prescribing drugs to relieve symptoms. This made Big Pharma excited, as they were finally able to tap into a highly lucrative market originally inaccessible.¹⁷

As the decades passed, Big Pharma's influence on creating government policies has grown to the point where patient safety isn't important anymore. In the film,¹⁸ David Cope was shown attending a 2017 public hearing on Bill H4062, a law that aims to require informed consent for benzodiazepines.

However, Bill H4062 has been stonewalled because doctors complained that providing complete informed consent about the potential adverse effects may discourage patients who might "benefit" from taking these drugs.¹⁹

The last update regarding this bill was an updated draft in 2022 – it is still stuck in limbo.²⁰ The best that the U.S. government was able to do, for the time being, is to require Big Pharma to update the black box warning on benzodiazepines "about their potential for physiological dependence, withdrawal and other serious risks."²¹

The Growing Polypharmacy Problem Cannot Be Ignored

A recurring theme in "Medicating Normal" is the issue of polypharmacy, which is defined as the simultaneous use of multiple medications.²² In the film, the subjects started with just one prescription drug, but eventually snowballed into several more – and their stories bring to light what millions of other Americans are experiencing right now. Health

Affairs,²³ a journal focused on health care policy, called polypharmacy as “America’s other drug problem.”

According to the CDC’s latest statistics,²⁴ 48.6% of Americans have taken at least one prescription drug in the past 30 days. In the same time frame, 24% of the population have used three or more, and 12.8% have used five or more.

Which groups are the most affected by polypharmacy? According to a 2023 study²⁵ published in Global Health Research and Policy, it’s prevalent among the elderly, those affected with heart disease and diabetics.

Now, what happens to your health when you take more than one drug at the same time? A combination of symptoms may manifest, such as reduced alertness, loss of appetite, skin rashes, depression, cognitive problems and accidents. Moreover, taking multiple drugs can increase your risk of drug-to-drug interactions.²⁶

Are You Taking Too Many Prescription Drugs?

According to the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, Americans spend more money on prescription drugs compared to other nations.²⁷ As of June 2024, the annual average cost of prescription drug use is \$1,400 per American. Second are the Germans with \$1,000, and third are Canadians with \$865.²⁸

If your spending is getting close to the reported average, it’s time to do a serious reevaluation as to what drugs you’re taking and why. That way, you’re not only saving money that you can allocate toward other important expenses, but also to see if you’re overmedicated. Consider the following signs that may show you are under the spell of polypharmacy:²⁹

You visit multiple doctors — You may think that all the different specialists you visit communicate with each other and exchange notes on how to help you address your health concerns. However, that doesn't happen.

If you see one specialist for a particular issue and another specialist for a different problem, one doctor does not know what the other doctor has prescribed.

New health conditions appear – If you've been taking several medications, new health conditions and symptoms may appear due to the possible interactions. Before taking a new prescription from your doctor, always do your due diligence and ask possible interactions and side effects.

You belong to a high-risk group – If you're over the age of 65, you may be more likely to be overprescribed medications. According to the Canadian Deprescribing Network, women are also at higher risk because they have a longer life expectancy, and their physiology increases the risk of adverse drug events.³⁰

You have access to good health care – Those with good health insurance may be at higher risk for polypharmacy. It's not uncommon for people in this position to see multiple doctors who are unaware of the medications being prescribed.

You have trouble keeping up with your medication – When you're taking too many prescription drugs, you may start having problems keeping up with the frequency and timing. This could signify that you're on too many drugs, and a visit to your primary care physician is warranted.

Financial pressure – A potential sign that you might be taking more medication than is necessary is the added financial strain on your budget.

Strategies to Help Reduce Your Dependency on Medications

You can take several easy steps to help reduce the number of medications you or a loved one is taking, thus reducing the potential of an adverse drug event:

- **List all medications you're taking** – Begin by listing the medications and OTC drugs you're consistently taking. Review with your primary care provider all the medication

you've been prescribed by other specialists, and see what you can replace through healthy lifestyle changes.³¹

It would be wise to repeat this process with your primary care physician at least once a year. Do this also after being released from the hospital due to a recent operation. It's not unusual to receive a prescription that continues at home after your stay at the hospital.

Create a chart of all the medications and present it to your primary care physician during your medication review. Context is important, so list the reason you're taking them, who prescribed them, when they were started and side effects you may be experiencing. This helps your physician see the big picture quickly.

If you're seeing other specialists, bring the chart with you to each of your appointments.³² This keeps all your health care providers up to date with your treatment plan and all the medications you're taking, both prescribed and over the counter (OTC).

- **Use one pharmacy for all prescribed medications** — A single pharmacist going over all your medications can quickly determine possible interactions between your prescriptions from different doctors, as well as answer any questions you have about OTC drugs and supplements.
- **Pay attention each time a new medication is prescribed** — Diligently read the product label and devote time to research online. If you find information that concerns you, consult with your primary care physician. They can help you come up with a strategy that may help you avoid taking a drug.

Ultimately, taking stock of all your medications is important because you may not need all of them. As seen in “Medicating Normal” and published studies, polypharmacy may not even address the problem — it may even make you feel worse. Furthermore, understand that there is no magic pill that addresses all your health issues instantly. However, there are lifestyle choices you can make that go a long way toward achieving your goals.

If you're currently dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues, I recommend creating a strong foundation for your body and mind. Get an adequate amount of high-quality sleep, and incorporate a fitness routine. Physical [exercise has repeatedly been shown to outperform drugs for mental health](#). For other nondrug recommendations, visit my article "[Anxiety May Be an Inherited Trait](#)."

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