

Antipsychotic meds prompt zombie-like state among patients

February 5 2015, by Rob Payne



Disturbingly, researchers found participants often exhibited 'a culture of hopelessness' where acceptance was dominant, which they warn can destroy an individual's will to recover. Credit: Charlotte Spencer

Interviews with community members who are taking antipsychotic medication for mental health problems have added to growing concerns about how the drugs are administered, their effectiveness against placebo

and the severity of their side-effects.

The recent research also touches on how stigma can lead individuals to 'just put up with the drugs' despite not believing they help.

While their sample size is limited, Murdoch University and the University of Queensland researchers say insight into lived experience is invaluable.

"People using antipsychotic medications experience adverse side-effects that reach into their physical, social and emotional lives, and cause a level of fear and suffering that is difficult for anyone else to fully comprehend," Murdoch Professor Paul Morrison says.

"The proportion that experiences a disturbing side-effect has been estimated at between 50 and 70 per cent, and participants in our study reported on average between six and seven medication side-effects.

"It is difficult for an outsider to appreciate what this means to individual consumers, and how it impacts on their self-image and ability to cope."

Side-effects can include Parkinsonism, akathisia (restlessness) and tardive dyskinesia (involuntary movements), as well as weight gain, hypersomnia, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, dry mouth, constipation and dizziness.

The most profound side-effect is extreme fatigue, which leaves many in a 'zombie state'.

Participants engulfed by hopelessness

Disturbingly, researchers found participants often exhibited 'a culture of hopelessness' where acceptance was dominant, which they warn can

destroy an individual's will to recover.

"The issue here is the extent to which people with a mental illness have been conditioned into accepting the disabling effects of [psychotropic medications](#) without protest," Prof Morrison says.

"The ability of mental health staff to forestall protest arises from the guilt communities thrust upon the sufferer.

"Without this guilt and shame, would [mental health](#) consumers and their loved ones be so ready to accept that a life of zombie-like consciousness and physical discomfort is preferable to hearing voices, or would they be demanding more intensive efforts to develop 'cleaner' medications?"

The study advocates creating a standardised rating scale for assessing and monitoring side-effects and better communication between practitioners and those taking medications.

The research suggests psychosocial treatment methods should be explored, such as relaxation and distraction techniques, which have been proven to improve quality of life.

Researchers also recommend giving patients more say in what medications work best for them, empowering them with a sense of meaning, purpose and self-esteem.

More information: "Living with antipsychotic medication side-effects: The experience of Australian mental health consumers."
International Journal of Mental Health Nursing. doi: 10.1111/inm.12110

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