

# Changing Medications

A workbook to help guide people through a change of medication for mental health issues



## **What do you think of this booklet?**

Please give your feedback to help make future versions of this resource as useful as possible.



This booklet was written with the insights of people with experience of mental health, drug and alcohol issues, who have gone through a medication change.

We thank them for sharing their advice and experiences with us and for helping with the creation of this workbook.

The quotes throughout this booklet were contributed by them as they reflected on their own experiences.



*Special thanks to the artist 'Brimo' for sharing his artwork 'Hope', displayed throughout this booklet. It depicts the hope he holds for his own recovery.*

# About this workbook

Medications are an important type of treatment for mental health issues. Some people may need medication to manage symptoms in the short term and some may take medication over a long period of time to prevent them from becoming unwell again.

It can take time to find the medication, the dose or the combination of medications that is right for you to manage your mental health issues. This could mean that your treating team or prescriber suggests you to try a different dose, a different medication or a combination of medications. Sometimes medications may also need to be changed due to unwanted side effects.

We heard from people with lived experience that sometimes, changing medications can be a challenging and confusing time. Most medication changes can be managed easily in partnership with your treating team. Having the right information can help you feel more prepared for this process and help with any worries you may have.

We have created this booklet to help guide you through that process and put some plans in place to help make things smoother for you.

# Contents

This booklet is designed so you can write down the information that is important to you and keep it as a resource. You might also like to share it with a support person.

You can skip to the section you need and go back to review the information at any time.

**1 Medication change challenges**

**3 Planning your medication change**

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# Medication Change Challenges

Changing medication can be a challenging time for some. Spending time trialing different medicines because of side effects, allergies or ineffectiveness can be tiring and sometimes it might feel like you won't find the right medication for you.

Issues that can occur when changing medications can include:

- Return of original symptoms of mental health issues
- Physical symptoms associated with stopping medications
- Side effects of new medications
- Confusion over the plan to switch or adjust medication
- Not knowing where to go for advice

There are many things that can be done to help you feel safe and supported during this time, and make sure you know where to go if you need advice.

Remember, for many people, the process of changing medications goes very smoothly so please don't feel worried by the possibility of having side effects. If they do happen, most are manageable and will only last a short time while your body adjusts.

*Changing medications can be very hard and very confusing. It can also be frustrating waiting to notice changes, good or bad*

- person with lived experience

When things feel difficult, it can be helpful to remember the reasons why you are changing your medication.

You can note your reasons for change below.

**What has led you to change your medication?**

**What do you hope to gain from changing your medication?**

# Planning your medication change

Preparing for the process of changing medications can help things run more smoothly and help you to feel more in control.

This could start with a conversation with your prescriber or treating team about what to expect.

The checklist below might help you know what to ask.

## Things to ask your prescriber:

- ☐ What medication options do I have?
- ☐ Why is this medication(s) being recommended to me?
- ☐ What are the risks and benefits of changing medications?
- ☐ How long will it take to see results from new medications?

## You can write other questions below:

☐☐☐

## Planning tips

- Ask your prescriber or pharmacist to give you a list of all your current medications and doses so that you have this with you if needed. Carry this list with you at all times, and refer to it when seeing a health professional or asking advice.
- Pre-book your next appointment with your prescriber or treating team to make sure you don't have to wait long if you need advice. You can always reschedule if it's not needed!
- Ask the person prescribing your medication for some written consumer medicines information.
- Ask the person prescribing your medication to write you a plan for switching, starting or stopping a medication.
- Keep a note of questions or symptoms that you may want to ask about at your next appointment
- Take a support person with you if possible, to help you remember your questions and the plan for changing medications.

*If you have a great support person who knows all of which is going on then they certainly should be attending. Quite often you get muddled and confused as well as forgetful when needing to talk about this.*

- person with lived experience

# Your Written Plan

It can be helpful to have a written plan for your medication changes so you, and those supporting you, know what to do and expect.

“ I was told there may be some side effects but wasn’t given much detail. I also found it a little difficult to remember how much to reduce my medication by and how often. ”  
– person with lived experience

You can use the template below to write a plan with your prescriber or treating team. They may also have their own plan they use.

1

## What to expect

Expected time for the new medication(s) to take effect

## Medications in this plan

Medicine name	What this medication is for

## Future appointments

Booked	Date	Time	Location
<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>			

## 2 Instructions for starting or stopping medications

	Medication 1:	Medication 2:	Medication 3:
Week / Day	Dosage	Dosage	Dosage
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:
	AM: PM:	AM: PM:	AM: PM:

### Notes

### 3 Symptoms and side effects

What you might experience when stopping or reducing a medication.

Possible side effects of new medication(s) you are starting

What to do if you feel concerned

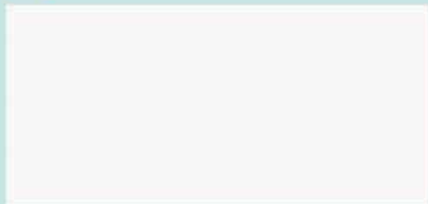
# Supports and Strategies

Personal supports and coping strategies can also be really helpful during a change of medication, when you might be feeling unsettled or having side effects.

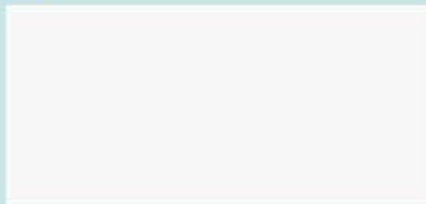
You might like to make a note below of all the personal supports and things that work for you which you can draw on during this time. This could include:


- Support people like friends, neighbours, family
- Community groups or other services that you access
- Things that help you cope or feel better, like going for a walk, exercising, art, breathing exercises, time with pets

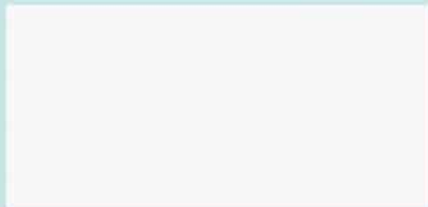
 **Support / Strategy 1**




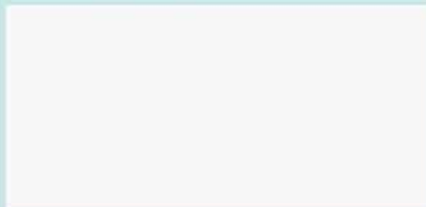
 **Support / Strategy 2**



 **Support / Strategy 3**



 **Support / Strategy 4**



*Know who is in your support network and the best environment for you to talk to them (e.g. catch-up with friends while taking a walk or for other relationships it's over lunch or dinner).*

- person with lived experience

# General advice about medications

Whatever your situation, there are some useful things to remember about any medication.

One of our pharmacists makes the following suggestions:

- Your healthcare team work hard to keep you healthy, but you are also responsible! Empower yourself with information about your own medicines.
- Carry a list of your medications with you at all times. Include details of the brand and generic name, strength and how you take it. Update this list when your medicines change.
- Become familiar with all of your medications; learn the names (brand and generic), dose, frequency and what they are for.
- When you start on a new medication, ask your prescriber or pharmacist how to take it, what it is expected to do, what are the potential side effects and how they should be managed. Ask for written information on your medicines and keep the information for future reference.

- Keep records of the medications that you have been on in the past, if they were helpful or not and if you had any side effects to them.
- Take your medicines only as prescribed.
- Do not stop taking your medication unless advised by your prescriber or treating team.
- Do not share your medication and do not take other people's medication.
- Take your medication at approximately the same time each day. A pre-packed kit of medications or smart phone apps (e.g. MedicineWise app) can help you take your medications.
- Don't take any other medications (including herbal medications or vitamins) without checking with your prescriber or pharmacist first.
- Store medications in a cool dry place, where they can't be seen or reached by children. Keep them in the same packaging that they come in from the community pharmacy.


# Getting information and advice

Sometimes things don't go to plan, you forget something or are feeling unsure about what you are experiencing with your change of medication.

It is useful to know who you can go to for advice. The below services are some suggestions of reputable places and people you can contact if you have questions or concerns.

*“ Make a plan in advance of who you can call at different times of the day or at weekends. It's not until you can't access someone out of hours that you think about what to do in this situation. ”*

– person with lived experience

 **Your prescriber (person who wrote the script for your medication) or treating team (e.g. Community Mental Health service)**

Your prescriber will be able to answer most questions for you and can check any side effects you might be having.

Your treating team will also be able to provide some guidance on where to go if you are concerned, or may be able to offer some reassurance and support.

If it is difficult to get an appointment quickly, you could call the service reception to explain what is going on, that you feel worried, and ask if someone can give you a call to discuss.



## A local Pharmacist

Pharmacists are specialists in medications, side effects and how medications might work with each other. They can answer many questions about what you might be experiencing or when to feel concerned.

You can visit your local pharmacy and ask to speak to the pharmacist about your medications. If you live in a larger town, you might even have a pharmacy which is open for extended hours and at weekends.



*The pharmacist has been really helpful. I have got to know my local pharmacist and she knows me and my history now so I trust her enough to ask questions.*



- person with lived experience



## Health Direct

Health Direct is a free service funded by the Australian Government to provide health advice. There is information on their website about many medications and health issues which may answer some of your questions.

They also run a free 24 hour phone service which can assess your symptoms, answer questions and provide you with advice about what to do next.

**Health Direct - 1800 022 222 - [www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)**



## **NPS MedicineWise (National Prescribing Service) and Medicine Line**

NPS has a number of services which provide advice and information about medications.

- The **Medicine Finder** allows you to search for a medication and read information about it.
- The **MedicineWise app** gives medication information and lets you store details of your medications like dosages and when you took them.
- **Medicines Line** is a free phone service which can give you information about your medications. It is available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm AEST.

**NPS and Medicine Line - 1300 MEDICINE - [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)**

If you are concerned about the symptoms you or your loved one is experiencing, visit your nearest Emergency Department for advice and assessment.

If you are very worried, or feel that your need is urgent, please call 000 for an ambulance.

# Other helpful resources



# Lived Experience Story



Over the last few years I have been through quite a few changes to my medications as my treating team try to find the right types and dosages for me.

There were three trickier phases; firstly when I started trialing medications in 2012, followed by 2016-2017 when I needed an admission to the Mental Health Unit and review of my medications, and then across the past 18 months as we have been changing medications again to find the right ones for me. I have learnt a lot during this time and have gained a lot of trust in my treating team and other supports.

In the early days, before I was linked in with Community Mental Health, my medications were managed between my then GP and private Psychologist. I also saw a private Psychiatrist. There was a lot of confusion, with chopping and changing medications in the first 6 months and I didn't really understand what they were doing to me. I didn't know where to go for help or advice and turned a lot to my girlfriend at the time. I tried phone services too but didn't find them helpful for me.

Unfortunately, the Psychiatrist then didn't give me any information at all. I had to get some pharmacy information sheets to learn what the side effects could be or other information about the medication.

I knew the medications weren't working for me at the time but I didn't know where to turn. Ultimately, I went to the Emergency Department and had an admission to the Mental Health Unit.

Having an admission to the Unit and then being connected with Community Mental Health helped restart a plan for medications. We tweaked medications & made minor changes over the next 3 years, including the decision to decrease some of my medications.

After reducing medications, I went through a tough time with side effects, feeling depressed and negative impacts on my mental health, including having suicidal thoughts.

I was calling the clinician in Community Mental Health for support very often during this time and even though she couldn't directly help with the side effects, I felt better because I knew that things were being noted and passed on to the Psychiatrist for review.

Sometimes it would take a few days for the clinician to get back to me. I learnt during this time where I could reach out for urgent help if I needed it. I would call Accessline or the Community Mental Health clinician would arrange a call from Accessline to check-in on me.

In 2020, my Community Mental Health team & I decided to make a change to one of my constant medications I'd been on since 2012. About two or three weeks after decreasing my medication the side effects arrived and made me feel really unwell. I was due to be discharged from the Community Mental Health service but because of the side effects, the Psychiatrist decided to continue the episode of care.

I felt almost ready to be discharged from the service and had to wait longer for that but saw it as a positive as it gave me more time to manage the medication change with support.

I now have a support team around me that I can ask questions or go to for support as I need it. They also pick up on signs that I might be struggling.

I know what questions to ask my Doctor about my medications to help me know what to expect. I feel much more involved in decisions about my medications now. My local Pharmacist has been really helpful too. I now know and trust her enough to ask honest questions about my medications and how they might affect me.

One thing I learnt is to know who is in your support network and the best environment for you to talk to them; like having a catch-up with friends while taking a walk or for other relationships it's over lunch or dinner.

I have a plan now for when I need support quickly or after-hours. It was difficult to learn where to get support and advice around medications but I have better knowledge now than I used to.



# Your notes and questions





