

By Dr. Samke J. Ngcobo (MD Vocal Mentality) • vocalmentalityvm@gmail.com • www.sistersformentalhealth.co.za
 Dr. Clementine Chawane (Specialist Psychiatrist) • reception-b@global.co.za
 Dr. B.L. Letlotlo (Specialist Psychiatrist) • letlotlo12@gmail.com

A hard pill to swallow

There remains a bone of contention and controversy surrounding the issue of pharmacological interventions in the realm of mental health. **To put it simply, the topic of medication in managing mental illnesses is difficult to address.**



Dr. Samke J. Ngcobo

"...I have come to understand and appreciate the role of medication in my life..."

Often times, there are views which are polar opposites of each other where some will advocate for taking treatment and others will be completely against it. Persuading patients to take their medication varies in terms of ease, depending on what the patient's attitude and perception is towards it.

I am in the watershed of having been on both sides of the consultation sphere as I am a doctor who has administered the medication and a patient who has the experience of using the medication. In experiencing these contrasting roles, I have gained invaluable wisdom which has enabled me to be a more empathetic doctor and to be an empowered patient.

I believe that it is very important for patients to feel seen, heard and understood by their doctors when consulting. It is important for patients to feel that they have a say about their management because their level empowerment has an influence on their attitude towards the management plan.

I have navigated an arduous and tumultuous journey when it comes to my relationship with my medication. Many issues have been at play and it is those issues which have influenced my attitude towards taking treatment consistently.

One of the greatest challenges relates to my insight and understanding of my illness. Earlier on, I did not understand what it meant to have a mental illness and why this mental illness required chemicals to regulate it. I had not been counselled to understand my diagnosis of bipolar disorder therefore I denied having the mental illness and subsequently rejected the medication.

The issue of a patient's level of insight is often overlooked but it is critical to comprehensively psycho-educate patients about their illnesses, in whatever form they present. When I understood that I had a chemical imbalance which requires medication to regulate it, I became more embracing of this intervention.

One of the most important issues related to taking treatment, is the challenge of side-effects. Side-effects cannot be downplayed or overlooked because they have a direct impact of either persuading



Above: having gained 40kg in a space of 4 months

or discouraging a patient to continue to take their medication as prescribed. When I was first diagnosed, I was simply given medication to take in order to remain 'sane'. There was no room to complain about any side-effects as I was simply expected to be grateful that I was behaving like a normal human being. There was no regard for the fact that my self-esteem was suffering as a result of having gained 40kg in a space of 4 months. Not only was it a battle with the person in front of the mirror but it was also a futile battle against the harsh reaction of people who felt offended by my sudden "deformed" state which was dismissed as a newly acquired reckless eating habit.

Weight gain is one of several side-effects which can result from taking medication. It is important to know that side-effects can be addressed and managed. The key is to communicate when they arise as opposed to discontinuing without having a discussion with the healthcare provider.

As doctors, what is important to realise and understand is that empathising and contextualising a patient's experience is critical in maintaining a healthy relationship with them. It is important to listen to patient's concerns and to respect their personal views and opinions.

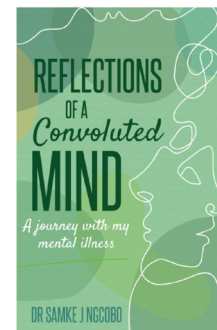
As patients, it is important to feel empowered and to know that you have a right to understand why certain decisions and recommendations are being made regarding your health.

Far too often, only the negative aspects are highlighted when the topic of medication is brought up. It has been a long and ongoing journey, but I have come to understand and appreciate the role of medication in my life. My denial would lead me to not take my medication as prescribed and in turn, I would frequently relapse.

What has enabled me to remain on course is understanding the diagnosis itself and how it exists in my body, the mechanism of action the medication, the quality of my relationship with my doctor and my level of empowerment as a patient.

Knowing that medication is not the only superior intervention for my illness but it is among other effective interventions, has been comforting. Prayer, exercise, psychotherapy and other forms of self-care are equally important because an individual is layered and complex.

We are mind, body and spirit after all.



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