

# After 20 years Prozac has won its spurs

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Just after Christmas, on December 29, Prozac will celebrate its 20th anniversary. For some people these drugs turned out to be the best present of all, but the past two decades have proved controversial for the first generation of the antidepressants that made depression easier to tolerate.

Depression is a common mental disorder and a huge public health issue, not merely a bout of sadness that a cup of tea and a "pull yourself together" conversation will cure.

The World Health Organisation defines depression as a "loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, low energy and poor concentration. These problems can become chronic or recurrent and lead to substantial impairments in an individual's ability to take care of his or her everyday responsibilities."

According to the WHO, depression is set to become second only to heart disease as the world's leading disability by 2020. About 850 000 people every year commit suicide because of it; 121-million people suffer from it. About 54-million people around the world take Prozac.

It has spun off a new generation of drugs that include Seroxat and Cipralax – selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Many more millions take these. Despite this, many people regard antidepressants as nothing better than a crutch.

It is still seen as an admission of personal failure, a sign of imperfection and mortality – not least, at first, by the people who take them. Instead of looking at an imbalance in the brain's chemistry as something to be dealt with and fixed in the way that people take flu medicine to deal with the symptoms.

It takes a long time for people to accept the idea that

they need to take medication, and that once they do it is probably going to be for life.

In New York, therapists have a trendy tag and everyone has one. In the UK, mental illness has recently been much in vogue, but in large parts of the world the stigma attached to mental illness, unfortunately, remains. Antidepressants don't bandage over other problems – they allow you to tackle them.

Often they are best used in conjunction with therapy, from cognitive behaviour therapy to interpersonal psychotherapy, both proven effective.

Talking to my father, a Toronto-based psychiatrist, he explained the effects of using antidepressants as "a kind of fine-tuning of the mind", akin to tuning a piano.

Low levels of serotonin can lead not only to depression but also to a range of anxiety disorders.

Antidepressants are the frontline of treatment, but not the only effective one.

Other things help depression. Even if you use an effective antidepressant, about 50% of users won't achieve complete improvement.

Some will respond equally well to placebos, to attention and to a bit of tender loving care. Even if the biological change is caused by psychological problems – a recent tragedy, a family trauma – the SSRIs help to

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restore the balance, which many people are not able to re-establish themselves.

That in itself leads to continued depression. In one study, a test was done on two groups of people using brain imaging. They asked both sets – one that was not clinically depressed and the other that was – to think of something that made them sad. After the experiment, the brains of the first group went back to normal, but with the second group the brain stayed the same.

In 2004, the US Food and Drug Administration issued a "black box" warning advising that antidepressants were linked with suicide in children and adolescents. This warning appears on the package insert for prescriptions.

Rather than watching more carefully over the child, physicians stopped prescribing it, which might have led to an increase in suicide rates.

For anyone who has been depressed and has benefited from using SSRIs, the drug is not only life changing but life enhancing.

Natasha (not her real name) remembers the sense of dread she had about life in general. Dogged by feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth and enveloped in a cloud of despair, the use of antidepressants, which started about 10 years ago, has not entirely lifted the fog of despondency, but allowed her to better cope with the negative thoughts and get on with a more fulfilling life.

Like many people it took her about a year, after a lifetime of sadness and the residue of an acrimonious divorce, to finally get the prescription filled.

People deal in many ways with depression, and doctors still don't have the answers to why some people suffer greatly and others don't. The important thing about Prozac and its successors is that they are valuable weapons that make life better for people who need it. While not the perfect answer, right now it may be the best.