

WHERE THERE'S A PILL



by CHAYA KURTZ

Psychiatric Medication in Our Communities

Suri* left the doctor's office fearful. Her teenage son had been prescribed an antidepressant, and she wasn't sure what to do. Would he get addicted to it? Would he experience side effects? Would it affect his siblings' *shidduchim*? Would his father allow him to take it? Suri felt like this was one of the hardest decisions of her life.

Many parents and individuals in the *frum* community face situations like Suri's. When a mental health professional suggests psychiatric medication, it might sound frightening. Until now, you have or your loved one has been struggling without medication. Do the benefits outweigh the risks? Should you take this step toward better mental health?

Pesach Tikvah, the original mental health provider to the *frum* community, has provided two highly qualified psychiatric clinicians to address concerns about this hard decision: Dr. Rachel Michaels, Director of Psychiatry at Pesach Tikvah, and David Binyaminov, PMHNP, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner at Pesach Tikvah's 640 Family Center. With guidance, these crucial decisions can become easier.

Yoel's Story: Acknowledging a Mental Health Struggle

Yoel's* mood shifted between hypomania and depression. Sometimes, he would be extremely animated, energetic, social and inclined to take risks like overspending. Other times, he would experience long periods of depression during which he felt hopelessness and despair. He could barely keep a job and was nasty to his family when depressed. His wife and children never knew which Yoel to expect. His *shalom bayis* suffered, and his children were having problems at school. It was clear that Yoel needed help, but he resisted it because he didn't want to admit that he had bipolar disorder. Denying his problem was easier for him than facing it. It took years of suffering for Yoel to admit he had a mental health struggle.

"The first fear people have is of being diagnosed and having mental illness. People don't want to believe that they have an illness that needs medication," says Dr. Rachel Michaels, Director of Psychiatry at Pesach Tikvah. "They fear going on a medication – changing their personality, having side effects or not being able to go off the medication."

"Our goal in psychiatry is to reduce a person's symptoms that are interfering with daily life, relationships, work or overall functioning," says David Binyaminov, PMHNP, provider at Pesach Tikvah's 640 Family Center. "Mental illnesses are considered medical conditions. They're not personal failures. Conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, ADHD and severe anxiety often involve changes in

brain signaling. Psychotropic medications are designed to help regulate these systems, similarly to how insulin helps regulate a diabetic's blood sugar."

Rivka's story: Fear of Personality Change

Rivka* had moderate to severe anxiety. Nevertheless, she managed to work and lead a somewhat normal life. She lived with frequent panic attacks and constant fear and struggled in social situations. She suffered for years without mental health treatment because she perceived mental health care to be for "crazy people on the street," not "normal" people like her. She also heard that mental health medications would change her personality. What would people think if her personality suddenly changed?

"If you have been depressed most of your life and you no longer have depression or anxiety, you will appear different to other people," says Dr. Michaels. "What people will notice is if you are not depressed or if you're less irritable. People will want to be around you more."

"These medications are not designed to change personality," David Binyaminov says. "They're designed to help regulate the systems that are causing imbalances, the chemicals that are causing symptoms. They're treating the underlying conditions."

Dovid's Story: Fear of Lifelong Medication

Dovid* suffered from depression. A range of setbacks in life left him feeling numb and negative. He was no longer interested in things that he used to enjoy. Doom and gloom went with him everywhere. He was miserable, and therapy alone wasn't alleviating his symptoms. His therapist suggested seeing a psychiatrist and starting medication. Dovid, though, was hesitant because he didn't want to be a lifelong user of psychiatric medication.

"Most people's biggest fear is that they won't be able to come off medication," says Dr. Michaels. "Except for some severe psychiatric illnesses (including bipolar disorder and schizophrenia), the great majority of people actually can come off medication once their symptoms are under control in combination with therapy. For first-time depression, most people can come off medication after a year. The same for anxiety and panic disorders. We treat for a limited amount of time, and then we try to stop the medication when someone has gone back to a normal level of functioning. A person would need to have four relapses before we would treat the condition as chronic. This usually happens over the course of 10 years."

Perel's Story: A Decision About ADHD Medication for Her Child

Perel* hesitated to agree to medicate her 11-year-old son, who had ADHD that was interfering with his schooling and homelife. She worried about him having to take medication forever, and a friend of her son's had side

effects from medication. Her worries were valid, but a compassionate mental health team helped her overcome her fear. Perel's son's life changed for the better with ADHD medication — his performance at school improved, and he behaved less impulsively at home.

"In rare instances, children need psychiatric medication to deal with aggression or severe mood disturbances. Medication can make a big difference," says David Binyaminov. "We see ADHD quite often. With ADHD, there's a neural vulnerability and imbalance that's happening with a neurotransmitter called dopamine, which is responsible for memory, learning and cognition. Often, there's a lack of sufficient dopamine in the front part of our brains called the prefrontal cortex. We would introduce medication that would help elevate these levels so that the brain can get that much needed chemical."

"Just like with other psychiatric medications, if someone is put on an ADHD medication, it's not a life sentence. We reevaluate each year," says Dr. Michaels. "Parents are also afraid of side effects. However, their prescriber can help the child to manage, decrease or entirely eliminate side effects."

"Side effects should be taken seriously," says David Binyaminov. "One way is to have a longer titration period so that the body can adjust. Titration is the process in which we start at a low dose of the medication, and at regular intervals of time, we increase it slowly. Week by week, we see how the person is tolerating the side effects. If they're doing well, we can increase to a maintenance dose, which is where we see most people get actual benefits from the medication."

Yosef's Story: A Preference for Natural Medicine

Yosef* ate a health food diet, avoiding pesticides and anything else that he considered a possible threat to his health. He generally avoided Western medicine, opting for herbal remedies. Unfortunately, he also had obsessive compulsive disorder that interfered with his day-to-day functioning. Therapy alone helped him manage his symptoms partially, but they persisted and continued to make his life difficult. Could he add some kind of "natural" medication to his therapy to make it more effective, or



would he need to take traditional psychiatric medication?

"It depends on the psychiatrist you talk to about this issue," says David Binyaminov. "I personally do operate from a holistic approach, and I think that there's a place for supplements. I look for the least invasive approach. In severe cases, a person might need medication from the get-go. If someone is on the milder side where he's able to function normally, sometimes, I would opt out of using medication right away and instead try to introduce a certain supplement in combination with therapy."

What should you consider if a psychiatric provider has suggested medication to you?

"You're suffering in your life. You're having so many difficulties. The people around you also are impacted when you're not treating your mental health. You're not accomplishing what you probably could in your life if your mental health was stable," says Dr. Rachel Michaels. "Swallowing a pill (with the guidance of a doctor) takes a minute per day, and it allows you to manage your symptoms. You will feel better, and everyone around you will feel better. Some of the most productive, intelligent people in the world have had psychiatric conditions and taken medication." ■

**Names and personal details have been changed to ensure patient privacy.*

Thanks to Dr. Rachel Michaels and David Binyaminov, PMHNP, for their input into this article. Pesach Tikvah, which offers treatment in several Brooklyn locations, has been at the forefront of providing comprehensive, culturally sensitive, multidisciplinary developmental and behavioral health services and resources geared specifically to the needs of the community since its inception in 1983. To inquire about therapy or psychiatry for adults or children, call 718-875-6900.