

The New York Times

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What I Learned From Being Off My Anxiety Meds in a Pandemic

How do I know therapy works? Because I'm surviving this.

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April 28, 2020

It started with a bump on my hand, at the base of my thumb, where it meets the wrist. Actually, it started with a thought that bubbled up out of nowhere: *What if that's bone cancer?* The thought didn't even feel like it came from me, but it took root anyway.

What followed was a week of tug-of-war between two selves. One self, the rational one, told me that everything was fine and I needed to calm down. The other self, the one that had come up with this absurd theory to begin with, was loud and relentless. *You're dying*, it said. *Life has gone too well for you so far, so now you're paying the price.* Logical self would cite statistics, and other self would combat them: *You've been the exception to statistics before. Your entire career was against all odds; why not this?*

When I tell you it was a week of tug-of-war, I don't mean that every day, one side or another was winning the struggle. I don't even mean every hour. I mean every minute, I would go back and forth. I couldn't work. I could hardly eat. I knew that something was wrong — not with my hand, which I was aware was most likely fine, but with my head.

On the drive home from the doctor, a week later, after he pronounced me perfectly healthy, I looked down at my hand and realized there wasn't even a bump there. I had spent a week imagining it into being.

I talked to my therapist about medication not long after.

Previously I had heard two narratives about medication: Don't take it, because it will change your writing, your art. Or take it if you need it, but you'll be on it forever, probably. Both of those narratives, ill informed though they were, kept me from trying medication for a long time. But my anxiety wore away at both of them.

Mostly, my anxiety was exhausting, a hobby I had never intended to take up but spent all my time doing. I was in therapy, learning the right techniques to manage it, digging deeper into its causes and its intricacies, but I was too panicked, most of the time, to summon the will for a mindfulness exercise or progressive muscle relaxation. The anxiety was draining me of the energy required to fight the anxiety.

What made me decide to finally take the plunge was something very simple. My therapist told me, Veronica, you don't have to fight so hard all the time. I burst into tears, relieved. She had given me permission to rest.

I tried four medications before I found the one that worked, but it did work. I had believed for years that anxiety was such an integral part of me that losing it would mean losing a part of myself. But that wasn't the case at all. As it turns out, beneath my anxiety is someone clearheaded and competent. Someone who can deliver a keynote speech to a room full of librarians without a benzodiazepine to keep the panic at bay. Someone who can travel to a different country and order at a restaurant instead of making my husband do it for me. Medication made the rational voice, the one that talked me through panic, a lot louder and more convincing.

Antidepressants helped me to redefine myself as someone who can do hard things. I began saying yes. Yes, I can handle that task. Yes, I can go to that social function. Yes, I can do that five-minute meditation. Yes, I can go up in that helicopter. Yes, I'm scared. Yes, I'll do it anyway. Yes. Yes.

And then last fall, four years after I started taking antidepressants, I decided to stop.

This is the hardest part to explain. Why go off a medication that's doing such a good job? My psychiatrist reacted by saying, simply, that everyone wants to be sure that they are taking a medication for a reason.

And that's true. But there's more to it than that. Everything in life has a cost. A choice for one thing is a choice against something else. When I got married to my husband at the tender age of 22, I knew that I was choosing to know the depth of one person instead of the breadth of other people. I was surrendering that thrill you feel when you first touch a new date's hand for knowing every single crease of his. I haven't regretted it for a moment. But I recognize that I gave something away in exchange.

It's the same with the antidepressant. In exchange for greater stability, capacity, capability, I did give things away. They were small things, things I didn't mind losing. My easy, happy tears. The way I used to physically tremble when I got angry. The way my face got hot when I was particularly focused on writing a scene or reading an engaging book. The little fluctuations of my life. I can't describe to you how unimportant these losses were in the face of my profoundest anxiety. But after a while, I started to miss them. I wondered if I could have them back ... *and* still keep the rest of me.

The only way to find out was to try.

I have now been off my antidepressant for six months, and I have been confronted with the ultimate test of whether the tug-of-war would start up again: Shelter in Place.

Shelter in Place is the Thunderdome of anxiety. It is an edict that you stay in your house with your thoughts as company and the looming threat of sickness, grief and economic collapse in every breath you take. And for me, there was a bonus: I had a book come out last week. A book tour, canceled. It's just a small piece of a worldwide puzzle of uncertainty and gloom, but it's *my* piece. I thought, in the weeks leading up to book release, *what a terrible time to go off medication.*

But there was a moment that made things clearer to me. It was mid-March, and some other book releases had been pushed back. I had asked whether the same would be possible for mine, and I wasn't sure that such a move would even be wise. I had been clenched like a fist for days, too anxious to sleep, no appetite. Then I found out the answer was a definite no. We had to continue as planned. And something interesting happened: The fist opened. The anxiety dissipated. I wrote an email that started with, "Maybe we should see this as an opportunity to do something interesting."

What I learned on that day in mid-March, when my anxiety lifted, was that stress and anxiety really are different. The uncertainty of not knowing what was best for my book, for my career, that was what caused anxiety. When the uncertainty was gone, I was still stressed — there was a lot to do, after all, in pivoting from a traditional book tour to a virtual one — but I wasn't anxious. If you had asked me five years ago whether such a thing would ever be possible for me, I would probably have said no. But here we are.

If Shelter in Place is the Thunderdome of anxiety, I know which Veronica will emerge the victor, and it's not the one that was convinced she had bone cancer. And that's because on medication, I rebuilt myself with a better foundation. Hour by hour, day by day, I let each bad thing that came my way but didn't knock me down, each new experience, each yes, carve out a new pathway in my brain. And four years later, I am this. I am a sturdy house, built to last.

I keep thinking about those two narratives about medication: "It will change your writing, so don't take it at all" or "There's no hope of improvement without it, so don't ever go off it." I offer, then, this third narrative. Antidepressants didn't ruin my writing, my art, by taking away some of my pain. They made my writing better, because they created space in my mind. They also made it possible for me to grow. To try life without them again — for now.

Veronica Roth is the author, most recently, of the novel "Chosen Ones" and the author of the "Divergent" series.

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