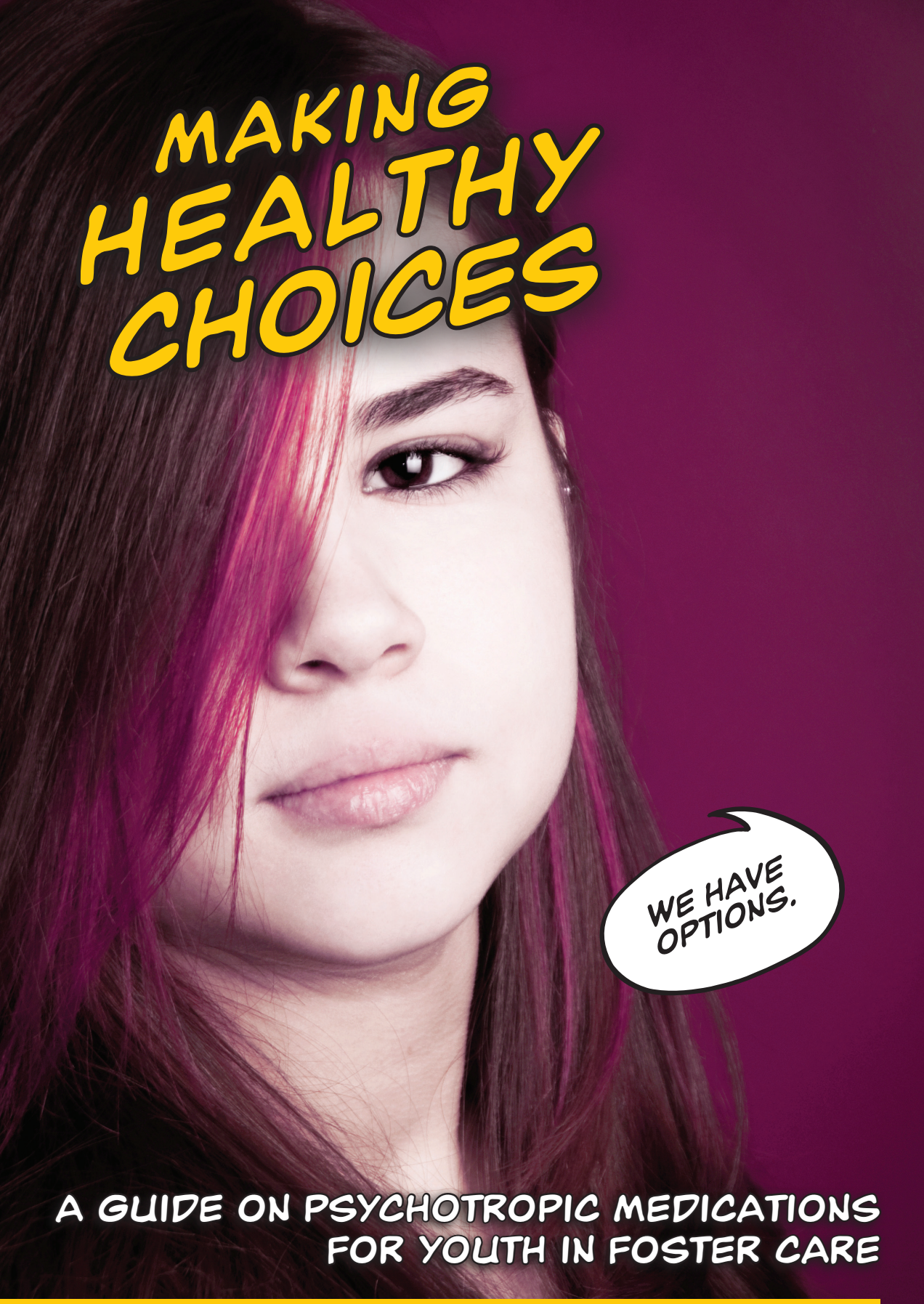
MAKING HEALTHY CHOICES



A GUIDE ON PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

LEARN MORE TO DECIDE WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU.

MAKING HEALTHY CHOICES: A GUIDE ON PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

2012

THE CONTENTS OF THIS GUIDE ARE FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY AND DO NOT SUBSTITUTE FOR PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL ADVICE.

DOING WHAT YOU CAN TO FEEL YOUR BEST

Everyone can benefit from learning what to do to be healthy. Young people in foster care have a lot of stressful things to deal with in their lives. Often they hurt a lot inside. Sometimes their coping skills are overwhelmed. They may need extra help in figuring out how to handle their feelings and improve their health.

Teens who are sad or angry may feel better if they talk to someone they trust, do a favorite hobby, or exercise or play sports. Youth who feel really bad or act in unexpected ways often need help and support from other people. Sometimes, they need therapy and/or medication that can help them control their emotions and behaviors.

When you're hurt, there are often several things you can do to feel better. Imagine you fall and hurt your ankle—you can take a pain reliever, avoid walking on it, and/or apply ice. In the same way, when you hurt a lot inside, you can take medication, avoid activities that make the condition worse, and/or look for positive activities that help you balance your feelings.

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE?

Making decisions about your health and psychotropic medications involves several steps, shown in the arrows below. This guide presents valuable information for youth in foster care related to each step. Depending on your situation, selected sections or the entire guide may be useful to you. The guide's checklists and worksheets can help you organize your thoughts.

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READ ON TO LEARN MORE...

WHY READ THIS GUIDE?

This guide can help you figure out if certain medications are right for you. It was created by a group of youth who have experienced foster care, doctors, social workers, and others who care about young people.

Sometimes your thoughts, emotions, or behaviors get in the way of doing things you want to do. Maybe you're not able to sleep at night or do your homework or have fun with friends. This guide talks about psychotropic medications—one option that may help you feel better. These medications can have many benefits. They also can cause negative side effects and can be harmful if not used correctly. Once you know more, you can decide whether these medications are a good option for you.

WHAT ARE PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS?

PSYCHOTROPIC (PRONOUNCED "SIKE-OH-TROPE-ICK") MEDICATIONS AFFECT A PERSON'S ***MIND, EMOTIONS, MOODS,*** AND ***BEHAVIORS.*** DOCTORS PRESCRIBE THESE DRUGS TO HELP PEOPLE FOCUS ON SCHOOL OR WORK AND ENJOY THEIR LIVES MORE.

#1

RECOGNIZING YOU NEED HELP

HOW DO I KNOW IF I NEED HELP?

Young people in foster care are often struggling with past trauma and loss, lots of changes, and issues with family, friends, or their placement. Sometimes, the feelings that result can become overwhelming or even result in depression, anxiety, or stress symptoms that need to be treated with medication.

It's not always easy to know when you should seek help from a doctor, counselor, or teacher. Everyone has bad days from time to time. Most days should not be bad days.

Signs that you may need help include:

- You have symptoms that occur most days.
- You experience a big change in how you feel.
- Your symptoms get in the way of school, your job, or your relationships.
- Your actions are dangerous.

If you see signs that you need help, talk to trusted adults (an advocate, mentor, or caseworker) about getting an appointment with a doctor or mental health specialist.

MICHAEL'S GRADES DROPPED WHEN HE CHANGED SCHOOLS. HE HAD TROUBLE SITTING STILL AND PAYING ATTENTION IN CLASS. FRUSTRATED, HE BEGAN SKIPPING CLASSES. WITH MICHAEL'S INPUT, HIS PLANNING TEAM DEVELOPED A TREATMENT PLAN OF MEDICATION, MEETING WITH A SUPPORT GROUP, AND WRITING IN A JOURNAL. OVER TIME, MICHAEL FELT MORE RELAXED AND COULD FOCUS BETTER IN SCHOOL. HE HAS STARTED WRITING SHORT STORIES AND THINKING ABOUT COLLEGE.

WHAT IS A SYMPTOM?

A SYMPTOM IS SOMETHING YOU EXPERIENCE THAT MAY BE A SIGN OF SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS. FOR EXAMPLE, A TOOTHACHE CAN BE A SYMPTOM OF A CAVITY. THE FOLLOWING MAY BE SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION: NOT BEING ABLE TO PAY ATTENTION, LACK OF ENERGY, HEADACHES, AND CONSTANT FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS AND SADNESS.

SYMPTOM CHECKLISTS

Use the following checklists to help you record the ways you're feeling and behaving.[1] The symptoms checklists can help organize your concerns to discuss with a doctor or counselor. You also may choose to use the checklists to talk with other people in your life about what you're experiencing and what they've noticed.

Read through each checklist item and think about how often you experience each symptom. While the lists may seem long, they should take only a few minutes to complete. **It's a good idea to bring these checklists with you when you visit your doctor, nurse, or mental health specialist**.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS			
	Never	Sometimes	Often
I have headaches			
I have stomachaches			
I get rashes or other skin irritations			
I get tired easily			
I have trouble sleeping			
I sleep too much			
I have problems seeing clearly			
I have problems hearing clearly			
Other:			

	Yes	No
I've recently gained a lot of weight		
I've recently lost a lot of weight		

1 Checklists adapted from *Team Up for Your Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Working Smarter With Doctors, Schools, Insurers, and Agencies.* (2008). Oak Ridge, TN: Melton Hills Media. Checklists adapted with permission of author Wendy Lowe Besmann.

BEHAVIORS AT SCHOOL, WORK, AND HOME			
	Never	Sometimes	Often
I lose my things (school books, lunch, jewelry, etc.)			
I have trouble getting organized			
I have trouble paying attention			
I have trouble sitting still or doing quiet activities			
I have trouble stopping one activity and starting another activity			
I start many projects without finishing them			
I have difficulty waiting my turn			
I act impulsively (quickly without thinking)			
I argue with people in charge (teachers, bosses, caseworkers)			
I'm afraid to go to school or I skip school			
I talk too much or too fast			
I must follow fixed routines (do things in the same way every time)			
I pull out my hair (from my head or other parts of my body)			
Other:			

	Yes	No
My grades have dropped a lot recently		

SYMPTOMS RELATED TO RELATIONSHIPS			
	Never	Sometimes	Often
I fight with kids my age (peers)			
I have little interest in spending time with friends			
I have trouble making or keeping friends			
Other:			

SYMPTOMS RELATED TO FEELINGS			
	Never	Sometimes	Often
I feel sad or "lost"			
I feel anxious, very worried, or stressed			
I'm easily frustrated			
I get really angry and have outbursts (throw things, yell)			
I blame others for my mistakes or behaviors			
My feelings change very quickly (for example, I'm laughing and happy and then quiet and sad)			
I'm afraid to try new things because I may make mistakes			
I'm really concerned with my weight			
I feel lonely and depressed			
I feel that my life is worthless			
I feel that no one loves me or cares about me			
I think about wanting to die			
Other:			

SYMPTOMS RELATED TO RISKY BEHAVIORS			
	Never	Sometimes	Often
I lie or "con" others to get out of trouble, avoid things, or get things I want			
I've deliberately set fires			
I've been cruel to animals			
I bully or threaten others			
I've hurt others on purpose			
I've used a weapon to harm a person, animal, or property			
I've run away or stayed out all night without permission			
I've committed crimes			
I abuse drugs or alcohol			
I physically hurt myself (cutting)			
I have sex to gain approval from others or to feel better about myself			
Other:			

SEEK IMMEDIATE HELP FROM A DOCTOR, MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL, OR EMERGENCY ROOM IF:

- YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT HURTING YOURSELF OR ATTEMPTING SUICIDE.
- YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT HURTING SOMEONE ELSE.
- YOU'VE BEEN FEELING DEPRESSED, HOPELESS, OR WORTHLESS FOR SEVERAL DAYS AND HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.
- YOU'RE HEARING OR SEEING THINGS THAT OTHERS DO NOT HEAR OR SEE.

GETTING A PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT

If you are having symptoms that are a problem for you, you should meet with your regular doctor to get the medical help you need. Your doctor will do an assessment that may include asking you a lot of questions, conducting a physical exam, and doing some laboratory work to identify any medical problems. The doctor will then work with you to figure out what might help you feel better.

You and your doctor may decide that it is important to get additional help. For example, sometimes doctors refer patients to a mental health specialist for a full evaluation.

Assessments and evaluations are chances for you to learn more about:

- **Your concerns or symptoms**—Are there reasons for why you feel or behave the way you do?
- **A diagnosis**—Is there a name for what is making you feel or behave the way you do?
- **Recommended treatment**—What does the doctor suggest you do?
- **Options**—Will taking medication help you feel better? What else might help? (Options may include getting help in school, talking with a counselor, or learning strategies for dealing with your feelings and behaviors.)

#2 KNOWING YOUR RIGHTS AND WHO CAN HELP

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

Youth in foster care have legal rights related to health care and medication.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO...

- ☐ **Get a good assessment** in which a doctor or specialist meets with you, listens to you, and discusses options.
- ☐ **Know your diagnosis** and understand the name and nature of what makes you feel and behave the way you do.
- ☐ **Find out all of your options** for treatment, including alternatives to medication. (See page 10.)
- ☐ **Ask questions** about the benefits and side effects of any medication a doctor suggests you take. (See sample questions on pages 14–15.)
- ☐ **Receive support from a planning team** to help you with medical decisions. (See page 8.)
- ☐ **Know who has permission to make decisions** about medications for you. (This may differ according to each State's law.)
- ☐ **Ask an adult you trust for help** in understanding your rights to accept or refuse medication and to ask for changes in your treatment plan.

WHAT IS INFORMED CONSENT?

CONSENT MEANS TO GIVE PERMISSION FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN. THROUGH *INFORMED CONSENT*, A DOCTOR PROVIDES INFORMATION ABOUT THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF A PARTICULAR MEDICATION OR TREATMENT BEFORE PERMISSION IS GIVEN FOR THE MEDICATION TO BE USED. FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT IN FOSTER CARE, THEIR PARENTS USUALLY MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT MEDICATION. FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE (OR STATE CARE), EVERY STATE HAS DIFFERENT LAWS AND POLICIES THAT DETERMINE WHO CAN GIVE PERMISSION FOR MEDICATION. AS YOUTH GET OLDER, THEY ARE INCLUDED IN DECISION-MAKING AND GIVING THE "GO AHEAD." (ASK YOUR CASEWORKER ABOUT WHO CAN GIVE CONSENT OR PERMISSION FOR MEDICATION IN YOUR STATE.)

WHO CAN HELP ME MAKE DECISIONS?

You play a key role in decision-making about your health. You're not alone in making health-care decisions. Several people can help you, including those suggested on the worksheet on the next page.

YOUR PLANNING TEAM

A PLANNING TEAM IS A GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT PROVIDE YOU WITH INPUT AND GUIDANCE ON MEDICAL CARE. THE PLANNING TEAM (IF YOU HAVE ONE) MAY INCLUDE YOUR:

- CASEWORKER
- BIRTH PARENTS, SIBLING, OR OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS (IF THEY ARE INVOLVED IN YOUR MEDICAL CARE)
- FOSTER PARENT OR GUARDIAN
- ADVOCATE, MENTOR, OR ANOTHER TRUSTED PERSON OF YOUR CHOICE
- FRIENDS
- ATTORNEY
- GUARDIAN *AD LITEM* (GAL) OR COURT-APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE (CASA)–PEOPLE ASSIGNED BY A JUDGE TO LOOK OUT FOR YOUR BEST INTERESTS WHILE IN FOSTER CARE
- DOCTOR, NURSE, OR OTHER MEDICAL PROVIDER WHO HELPS WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE
- HEALTH- OR MENTAL HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER WHO PRESCRIBES MEDICATIONS TO HELP BALANCE MOODS AND BEHAVIORS

WORKSHEET ON WHO CAN HELP MAKE DECISIONS

Fill in the table with names of people you feel you can talk to for support and guidance.

Caseworker	
Name	
Phone	
Email	
Birth parent, sibling, or other family members	
Name	Name
Phone	Phone
Email	Email
Foster parent or guardian	
Name	
Phone	
Email	
Advocate, mentor, or another trusted person of your choice	
Name	
Phone	
Email	
Friend	
Name	
Phone	
Email	
Attorney, guardian *ad litem* (GAL), or court-appointed special advocate (CASA)	
Name	
Phone	
Email	
Doctor, nurse, or other medical professional who helps with physical health care	
Name	Name
Phone	Phone
Email	Email
Health- or mental health-care provider who prescribes medications to help balance moods and behaviors	
Name	
Phone	
Email	

#3 CONSIDERING YOUR OPTIONS

WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS?

Your doctor or mental health specialist may discuss several options with you. These options may include:

- Helpful approaches other than medication
- Psychotropic medication for temporary or long-term use
- A combination of the above

OPTIONS OTHER THAN MEDICATION

Sometimes there are treatments that can be used instead of or in addition to medication.

- **Counseling/therapy.** It's always good to have trusted friends and family to talk with about your problems. Sometimes that's not enough. In those cases, you may want to talk with a trained therapist who can listen and offer guidance. The therapist can help you learn useful ways to deal with your feelings. An adult on your planning team can help you find a therapist.
- **Meditation.** Meditation is a type of mental exercise in which you learn to relax your body and calm your mind. Meditation is known to reduce stress and can help improve concentration. It can bring inner peace by helping you control your thoughts and become more aware. Meditation is a skill that requires learning and practice. A workshop or class can help get you started.
- **Exercise.** Exercise releases endorphins, or "feel-good" chemicals, in your brain. These chemicals make you feel less sad or anxious. Being active can take your mind off your problems and improve your ability to deal with things. You can exercise alone, join a team, or organize some friends. Look for physical activities that you enjoy—hiking, dance, basketball, or other—and make exercise fun.

- **Diet.** What you eat may affect your moods and energy levels. You may feel better eating less "bad carbs," including foods with lots of sugar or white flour (muffins, white bread, bagels). Research tells us to eat foods rich in healthy omega-3 fats, which can be found in nuts and certain fish (tuna, salmon). Vitamins and minerals also can help your brain and body work better. Before taking vitamin supplements or making changes in your diet, talk with your doctor.
- **Other activities.** There may be other ways to help you feel better, such as:
  - Keeping a journal of what's going on in your life and how you feel about things
  - Drawing, painting, or other art work
  - Joining a club
  - Participating in a support group of other youth in similar situations
  - Volunteering and helping others

AFTER BEING SEPARATED FROM HIS MOTHER AND LITTLE BROTHER, TONY LASHED OUT AT THOSE AROUND HIM. HIS MIND WAS RACING ON OVERDRIVE. AFTER TALKING WITH HIS DOCTOR AND A YOUTH COUNSELOR, HE DECIDED MEDICATION WASN'T FOR HIM. INSTEAD, HE STARTED MEETING REGULARLY WITH A THERAPIST, WHO HELPED HIM SORT THROUGH HIS ANGER. JOINING THE SCHOOL'S FOOTBALL TEAM ALSO HELPED CHANNEL HIS ENERGIES.

PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS

Psychotropic medications can help people be healthy. Some medications may affect how you feel, and some may change behaviors that get in the way of your well-being. They can help you focus on things you want to do—like staying in school, holding a job, and enjoying time with friends. They may help you feel more in control and more satisfied with your life.

Doctors prescribe these medications to reduce symptoms such as anxiety, difficulties paying attention, and racing thoughts. They also are used to treat conditions including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, psychotic disorders, and others.

While psychotropic medications can have many benefits, they also may have side effects. Side effects are unwanted changes that occur in addition to the intended positive effects. Side effects vary from medication to medication and person to person. Some possible side effects of psychotropic medications include sleepiness, stomach upset, headaches, nervousness, irritability, and weight gain. Often, side effects will go away within a few weeks. You may decide that it's worth putting up with side effects, if the benefits outweigh them.

There is a risk of medications causing harm if not used correctly. Safe use of psychotropic medications is discussed in the section on maintaining treatment (page 18).

ANITA THOUGHT MOVING IN WITH HER GRANDMOTHER WOULD MAKE HER LIFE BETTER, BUT SHE STILL FELT WORRIED ALL THE TIME. SOME DAYS, IT SEEMED DIFFICULT JUST TO BREATHE. SCARED HER FRIENDS WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND, SHE BEGAN TO AVOID THEM. ON THE ADVICE OF HER DOCTOR, SHE FOUND A MEDICATION THAT HELPED HER FEEL BETTER. SOON, IT WAS EASIER TO MAKE IT THROUGH THE DAY. SHE BEGAN LOOKING FORWARD TO HAVING FUN WITH HER FRIENDS AGAIN. OVER TIME, HER DOCTOR HELPED HER TO GRADUALLY STOP TAKING THE MEDICATION AND IDENTIFY OTHER WAYS TO DEAL WITH HER ANXIETY.

#4 MAKING YOUR DECISION

WHAT INFORMATION DO I NEED?

There is a lot of information you should have before taking medication. Below is a list of questions to help guide you in making decisions about how best to stay healthy. You may have more questions than you see here.

Take these questions with you when you talk about your health with the adults in your life. Remember, answers to these questions and your decisions may change over time.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF
...ABOUT BEING HEALTHY:

- ☐ What are some things that I could do to be healthy? (For example, change my diet, get more sleep, see a counselor, take medication)
- ☐ What do I already know about how each option (including medication) might help me? How might they harm me?
- ☐ How long would I need to do each of these things?
- ☐ How will I know when I'm healthy?
- ☐ Who can help me make the right decision for me?

QUESTIONS YOU MAY ASK AN ADVOCATE, MENTOR, OR OTHER ADULT
...ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS:

- ☐ Who has the right to make decisions about my taking medication?
- ☐ Can a decision be made without me saying what I want? If that happens, what right do I have to speak to the person who made the decision (such as the judge or caseworker)?
- ☐ Do I have a right to refuse to take medication?
- ☐ If I refuse to take medication, what will happen? Can I be punished? Can I be asked to leave my placement?

CONTINUED...

- ☐ If I disagree with a decision about medication or my medical care, what can I do or who can I call? Should I speak with my attorney or guardian *ad litem*?
- ☐ Does my State have someone, such as an ombudsman (pronounced om-budz-man), who investigates complaints and helps youth in foster care?
- ☐ If I disagree with a decision about medication, do I have the right to get a second opinion from another doctor? How do I get a second opinion?
- ☐ Who else should know that I'm taking medication? What do they need to know and why?
- ☐ Who will find out that I've taken this medication? Can it make it harder to get a job or join the military if I take this medication?
- ☐ Can I see my medical records? Can I have a copy?
- ☐ Who pays for my health-care expenses while in foster care?
- ☐ How will I pay for health-care expenses when I leave foster care? Who can help me with medication decisions and payments once I leave care?

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

...ABOUT GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT A MEDICATION:

- ☐ What is my diagnosis?
- ☐ Do you recommend medication? What is the name of the medication you recommend?
- ☐ How much do I have to take and how often? (this is called "dosage")
- ☐ How long will I have to take the medication?
- ☐ How will I know it is working? When will it start working?
- ☐ How common is it for people my age to be on this medication?
- ☐ How much experience do you have with this medication?

...ABOUT HOW THE MEDICATION MAY CHANGE YOUR LIFE:

- ☐ How will this medication make me feel?
- ☐ How will using this medication change the way I act at school? How will it change the way I act or feel around family or friends?
- ☐ How can this medication help me achieve my goals in life?

...ABOUT THE SIDE EFFECTS OF THE MEDICATION:

- ☐ How might this medication harm me?
- ☐ What are the medication's side effects? How long do side effects typically last?
- ☐ Will the medication cause me to gain weight? Will I lose weight? Is there anything I can do to keep my current weight while taking the medication?
- ☐ Is this medication addictive (hard to give up once started)?
- ☐ What are the effects if the medication is taken with alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs?

...ABOUT USING THE MEDICATION SAFELY:

- ☐ What do I do if a problem develops (I get sick, I miss taking the medication, or I get side effects)?
- ☐ Are there foods I should avoid while on the medication? Are there special things I should or should not do while taking the medication?
- ☐ Will I need blood work or other kinds of medical tests before, during, or after treatment? What will the doctor look for?
- ☐ What do I do if I start taking the medication and then decide I don't like it? Who do I talk to?
- ☐ If I want to, can I just stop taking the medication?
- ☐ How often should I see the doctor (or other person) who prescribed the medication?
- ☐ Who will help me keep track of how the medication is working for me? How will changes be monitored?
- ☐ Who can I talk to about medication other than my doctor? Who needs to know I'm on this medication and why?

...ABOUT ALTERNATIVES AND OPTIONS:

- ☐ What other medications might help me?
- ☐ What alternatives to medication (meditation, changes in diet, exercise, etc.) might help me?
- ☐ Should I try other things that might help me at the same time as the medication?

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS?

Based on what you've learned, you can use this worksheet to write down the pros (benefits) and cons (negatives) of taking medication.[2] You can discuss your hopes and concerns for this medication with adults who are helping you make your decision.

PROS AND CONS WORKSHEET

If I DO take the medication—*What does my doctor (or other decision-making supports) say about taking the medication*?

Pros/Benefits	Cons/Side Effects

If I DON'T take the medication—*What does my doctor (or other decision-making supports) say about NOT taking the medication*?

Pros/Benefits	Cons/Side Effects

2 Adapted from *Making a Choice: A Guide to Making A Decision About Using Antipsychotic Medication* by Youth MOVE Maine (http://www.youthmovemaine.org), Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team (http://www.ylat.org), and Maine Department of Health and Human Services. Available from http://www.ylat.org/rights/medication.pdf.

WILL MEDICATION HELP ME REACH MY PERSONAL GOALS?

You may want to think about how medication might help you achieve your life goals.[3] For example, if your goal is to go to college, medication may help you to concentrate in school and improve your grades. In some cases, medication or medication side effects may make it harder to reach your goals. Share your goals with your doctor so he/she understands what you want to achieve.

GOALS WORKSHEET
Use this worksheet to write about your goals—things you want to achieve in life.
In the next 3 months, my goals are to:
In the next 2 years, my goals are to:
If I could look into a crystal ball and see myself 5 years from now, what do I hope for?
How could medication help me reach my goals?
How might medication or medication side effects create challenges for reaching my goals?

3 Adapted from *Making a Choice: A Guide to Making A Decision About Using Antipsychotic Medication* by Youth MOVE Maine (http://www.youthmovemaine.org), Maine's Youth Leadership Advisory Team (http://www.ylat.org), and Maine Department of Health and Human Services. Available from http://www.ylat.org/rights/medication.pdf.

#5 MAINTAINING TREATMENT

HOW DO I MAKE SURE I'M TAKING MY MEDICATION SAFELY?

To increase the benefits and reduce the risks of using psychotropic medication, you need to be an active member of your health-care team.

It is important to:

- **Ask questions.** Talk with your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, and other health-care providers about your medications. Know what each medication is for, how to take it, what kinds of side effects to expect, and what actions might help reduce the side effects. (See sample questions beginning on page 14.)
- **Follow the directions on the label.** Take the medication exactly as prescribed.
- **Learn about what things don't mix well with your medication.** Some medicines, foods, and drinks should not be taken together. When mixed, they may reduce the positive effects of your medication or cause harmful effects. For example, drinking alcohol while taking medication can slow your reactions and make driving a car dangerous. Some herbs and supplements can interact with prescription medications in unsafe ways. Also, some medical conditions (such as high blood pressure) can cause unwanted reactions with certain medications. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist and read medication labels to learn more about what you should avoid when taking your medication.
- **Keep records.** Make an up-to-date list—on paper or your phone—of ALL medicines (prescription and over-the-counter) that you take, as well as vitamins, herbs, and other supplements. Make notes on how each medication makes you feel, side effects, and changes over time.
- **Follow up with your doctor regularly.** Throughout the time you are taking your medication, your doctor(s) should follow up with you, listen to your concerns, and monitor your progress.

DO NOT SHARE YOUR MEDS!

YOUR PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATION IS INTENDED TO BE USED BY YOU AND ONLY YOU. GIVING YOUR MEDICATION TO SOMEONE ELSE COULD RESULT IN SERIOUS SIDE EFFECTS AND EVEN DEATH.

PREVENT BREAKS IN YOUR MEDICATION.

TIP: DON'T WAIT UNTIL YOU RUN OUT OF MEDICATION BEFORE YOU ASK FOR A REFILL. ADD A REMINDER TO YOUR CALENDAR OR PHONE TO CHECK YOUR SUPPLY AND CALL FOR A REFILL. IN SOME CASES, YOU MAY BE REQUIRED TO HAVE A DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT IN ORDER TO GET A REFILL.

WHAT IF I WANT TO STOP TREATMENT?

Always talk with your doctor if you are thinking about stopping your medicine. You and your doctor should make this very important decision together. When you suddenly stop taking certain medications, you may experience uncomfortable or harmful side effects. These medicines have to be decreased slowly over several weeks. When you and your doctor agree that it is time to stop a medication, it is very important that you follow your doctor's instructions about how to do this.

Get rid of unused medication carefully. Make sure that other people and animals can't take and be harmed by leftover pills.

For more information, read *Disposal of Unused Medicines: What You Should Know*. http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicines/ucm186187.htm

SONYA DIDN'T LIKE HOW HER MEDICATION MADE HER FEEL TIRED AND UNABLE TO CONCENTRATE. SHE WANTED TO STOP TAKING IT. INSTEAD, SHE MET WITH HER DOCTOR AND TALKED ABOUT CHANGING TO A NEW MEDICINE THAT DIDN'T HAVE THE SAME SIDE EFFECTS.

WHAT SHOULD I DO ABOUT MEDICATION WHEN I'M LEAVING FOSTER CARE?

If you're getting ready to leave foster care, there are a few important things for you to do:

1. **Meet with your caseworker to develop a plan.** The law requires your caseworker to meet with you at least 90 days before you turn 18 (or before you are scheduled to leave foster care) to develop a transition plan. The plan should discuss ways to meet your needs for:

   - Lifelong connections to caring and supportive adults
   - Mental health and medical services
   - Health-care insurance coverage
   - Housing
   - Education
   - Employment

   You have the right to invite a mentor or other trusted adults to this meeting to help develop a plan that best meets your needs.

2. **Think about whether you want to continue your medication.** At the meeting with your caseworker and other trusted adults, discuss your wishes and concerns. Find out what your doctor(s) recommend.

   - **If you want to continue taking your medication:**
     Talk to your caseworker before leaving foster care about who can help you get and pay for future medication.
   - **If you want to stop taking your medication:**
     Talk to your doctor about how to decrease the dosage gradually.

3. **Get a copy of your medical records.** You should receive a free copy of your medical records. This is required by law when you're leaving foster care at 18 (or the age of majority in your State.) You may need some information from these records for future health care and also for college and job applications.

   Make sure your medical records include information on:

   - The name(s) of your doctor(s) and other health-care providers
   - Major illnesses, medical conditions, and injuries and the services provided to address them
   - Medications taken (psychotropic and others), when taken, when stopped, and why
   - Undesirable reactions to medication (if applicable)
   - Allergies
   - Immunizations
   - Growth records
   - Biological family history of major medical conditions (if known)

4. **Look into health insurance.** Health care can be expensive. There are some ways to get free or low-cost health care, including:

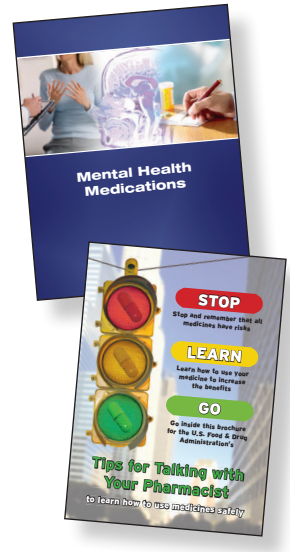
   - **Medicaid.** Many States offer continued health insurance for former foster youth through the Medicaid program. (Note: Medicaid coverage is only available until you reach a certain age, often 19 or 21.) To get continued health insurance, you often have to **make arrangements before you leave foster care**. Work together with your caseworker (or other adult) to complete the necessary paperwork. Make sure you find out what you will need to do on your own to continue coverage.
   - **Community health centers.** Federally funded health centers care for you, even if you have no health insurance. You pay what you can afford, based on your income. You can find a health center near you on the web at http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov.
   - **Student health centers.** If you're in college, you may be able to access health care through your school's student health center.

   Talk about these and other options with your caseworker.

NOW WHAT?

LEARNING MORE IS AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP. CONTINUE TO ASK QUESTIONS AND TALK WITH YOUR DOCTOR(S) AND OTHER TRUSTED ADULTS. TOGETHER, YOU CAN FIGURE OUT WHAT MAKES THE MOST SENSE FOR A HEALTHY YOU.

To learn more about possible side effects and taking your medication safely, read the following online publications:



- *Mental Health Medications*. National Institute of Mental Health. http://mentalhealth.gov/health/publications/mental-health-medications/complete-index.shtml
- *Stop—Learn—Go. Tips for Talking With Your Pharmacist to Learn How to Use Medications Safely.* U.S. Food and Drug Administration. http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/ucm163330.htm

WHAT DID I LEARN? WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Use this space to make notes that will help you think through your decisions about taking medication and other options to improve your health.

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- Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative
- Maine Department of Health and Human Services
- Maine Youth Leadership Advisory Team
- National Resource Center for Youth Development
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- Tufts Medical Center
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Children's Bureau et al. (2012). *Making healthy choices: A guide on psychotropic medications for youth in foster care.* Washington, DC: Author.

I CAN GET HELP.

I DESERVE TO FEEL BETTER.

I HAVE A CHOICE!

BEING ACTIVE HELPS.

WHAT IS BEST FOR ME?

I NEED TO PLAN AHEAD!

WE HAVE OPTIONS.

I AM NOT ALONE!

WHAT I FEEL IS REAL.

HOW AM I FEELING?

I CAN FEEL MY BEST.

Children's Bureau

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Administration for Children and Families
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http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb