FROM HELL AND HEALING: INTERNET USER'S CONSTRUCTION OF BENZODIAZEPINE DISTRESS AND WITHDRAWAL

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Background: Benzodiazepines (benzos) are a group of drugs used mainly as sedatives, hypnotics, anti-epileptics and muscle relaxants. Highly effective for short term treatment, benzodiazepines and Z drugs are not recommended for use beyond 2 to 4 weeks, as they carry a high risk of tolerance, dependency, accidents and morbidity, including increased risks of dementia. Patients who do withdraw successfully report significant improvements in health and wellbeing; however for some users the withdrawal process can be difficult and protracted.

Objectives: To understand patient experiences of benzodiazepine discontinuation syndrome from the user perspective.

Design: Qualitative study of online patient narratives of benzodiazepine discontinuation and recovery, with thematic analysis.

Setting: Online study of data gathered from open access electronic support groups (ESGs), Internet blogs and YouTube videos on benzodiazepine withdrawal (discontinuation) syndrome.

Results: Our searches indicate that users frequently post stories about their experiences on Internet support sites and YouTube and employ vivid metaphors to portray the psychologically disturbing and protracted nature of the withdrawal the recovery process. We discuss 9 common themes of user stories: (1) hell, (2) heightened anxiety and sensitivity, (3) spaced out/imprisoned, (4) depression and exhaustion, (5) bodily symptoms, (6) anger and remorse, (7) waves and windows, (8) healing and (9) success stories. By posting stories, ex-users make known that distress does lessen and recovery can happen, but that the timescale for this is unpredictable and in some cases may take months or years.

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