

Brigitte Jennewein, 34, antiques dealer

'When I was in the depths of depression last year, my fouryear-old daughter Minnie drew a picture of me. My face

was entirely black. That really shocked me. I was so low, when I went to my GP I told him I thought Minnie would be better off without me. The doctor didn't say much, just wrote me a prescription for Prozac, and told me it was important that I take it for the next six months. He didn't offer me counselling, but I didn't think it was strange I was offered a pill so fast. At that point, I'd have done anything to feel better. Though I hit rock bottom last year, my depression had been coming on slowly. My relationship with my partner of eight years was falling apart and when we finally agreed to split in December 2006, things went downhill. I felt incredibly guilty about breaking up my little girl's family, and kept bursting into tears. All I wanted to do was sleep. The antidepressants definitely helped. I was a bit dizzy for the first few days, but after about three weeks I started to feel much less stressed and more relaxed. It was like coming out of a cave and rubbing my eyes in the sunlight. I stayed on the Prozac for six months and had no trouble coming off it - for me, the drug was a crutch to get through a crisis. Thankfully, life has been getting better ever since. I needed Prozac at that time to give me a holiday from myself."



Tina Cornock, 30, freelance PR

'Antidepressants are doled out too easily. When, after years of exhaustion and tearfulness in the winter months, I finally saw my GP, he said, "Why don't you try these?" and tore off a Prozac

prescription. There was no suggestion I try counselling or alternative remedies. 'For as long as I can remember, I've found winter months hard to deal with. In the winter of 2006, I reached a new low. I found it impossible to get out of bed, and would burst into tears over something as small as a £50 overdraft. My husband Craig was worried about me, but also fed up with my mood swings, and he suggested I see my doctor. I told the GP I thought I was suffering from SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) and he sent me off with Prozac. 'If anything, the drug made me feel worse. I wanted to believe it was working, but instead I felt anxious, achy and found it difficult to sleep. I naturally started to feel better as winter came to an end, and decided to come off the pills. 'Around the same time, I read an article

about fish oil supplements, and how they can help people with SAD, so I started to take them. When October came around, I trebled my dose to 2000mg a day. Last winter, for the first time I was able to get out of bed easily, and my mood remained on an even keel. I know that antidepressants can be a lifesaver for some, but I won't be taking them again.'



Helen Nickols, 27, works for a charity

'If it hadn't been for SSRIs, I would not now be living independently in London. I would not have two

degrees, a job or a full social life. At times, I wonder if I'd even be here at all. Looking back, I suffered from low moods all through my childhood. But at 17, I broke up with my first boyfriend: I stopped eating, started sleeping 16 hours a day and thought about suicide. My family doctor told me to "pull myself together", and the counselling I was offered didn't help me.

'It was only when I started university that a doctor took me seriously - I'd been in his office less than a minute when he prescribed Prozac. Within three weeks, I found it easier to get out of bed: the weight I felt I was carrying got lighter every day. I had a new lease of life and stopped taking Prozac after eight months. I was fine for the next five years but, two years ago, I found myself getting very down and imagined ending it all. This time my doctor gave me Citalopram, and after two weeks, the suicidal impulses had gone. Two years on, I'm still on antidepressants and am happy to remain so. They enable me to get out of bed, then I can get on with the rest of the day. The new research says that SSRIs only have a placebo effect on most patients. All I know is that if I forget my pills for a few days, I feel myself slipping again. And that's not a place I want to return to in a hurry.'



Tina Browne, 45, project manager 'When my doctor offered

me the SSRI antidepressant Citalopram, I was so desperare, I would have

taken anything. It was 2006, and I felt I was being bullied by a colleague at work. Gradually, over a period of months, I became anxious, completely lost my selfesteem, and started to suffer from the most terrible insomnia. One day, someone asked me to do a task at work and I seized up completely. My boss sent me home and I went to see my GP. To be fair to my doctor, he gave me a leaflet about counselling, but

I had already arranged some Cognitive Behavioural Therapy through my work. Meanwhile, my GP told me that the antidepressants would help me, and when I asked about side-effects, he told me there weren't any with this drug. Within three days, however, I started to suffer hot sweats, my arms started aching and if anything I felt even more anxious. I was tempted to stop taking the pills, but I gritted my teeth and stuck with them. Within weeks, my symptoms had abated and I felt notably calmer, almost to the point where I didn't care about anything. Taking an antidepressant allowed me to think clearly enough to make the most of my counselling. I came off the drug after a year – slowly, so as to avoid withdrawal. SSRIs were a short-term fix that allowed me to look at what was wrong with my life.'

## **WHAT ELSE WORKS?**

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY

WHAT IS IT? A therapeutic approach that helps a patient change the way they feel, by changing the way they think and act. It includes keeping a diary of significant events and associated feelings. questioning unhelpful behaviour and trying out new ways of behaving and reacting. THE DOCTOR SAYS: CBT has been proven to be very effective in treating depression, anxiety, phobic illnesses and post-traumatic stress disorder,' says consultant psychiatrist Dr Farrukh Alam. TRY. Your GP should be able to refer you for CBT, though there is usually a waiting list. Overcoming Depression by Professor Paul Gilbert (Robinson, £9.99) is a self-help CD. Feeling Good by David Burns (Mass Market Paperback, £4.14 at amazon.co.uk) is prescribed by US doctors.

FISH OILS

WHAT ARE THEY? Fish oil supplements are rich in EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) - a substance found in cell membranes in the brain. The theory is that having low EPA levels can lead to depression.

THE DOCTOR SAYS: 'Anecdotes suggest fish oils can maintain wellbeing. But proper scientific evidence is lacking about their treatment for depression, says Dr Alam. TRY: Eye Q (£7 49 for 60 capsules) or VegEPA, (£11.95 for 60 capsules), from www.vegapa.com

REGULAR EXERCISE

HOW DOES IT WORK? It stimulates neurotransmitters in our brain to produce serotonin, the 'feel-good' hormone. A 2005 report by the Mental Health Foundation concluded that exercise is as effective as antidepressants for mild depression, and helps prevent depression too. THE DOCTOR SAYS: 'Tiredness and lack

of motivation are common symptoms of depression, and moderate activity has been shown to improve these,' says Dr Alam. TRY: Try doing half an hour's brisk walking - or any other exercise you like - every day.