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POLITICS & SOCIETY




# Depression: A complex but common mental disorder

Spotlight report



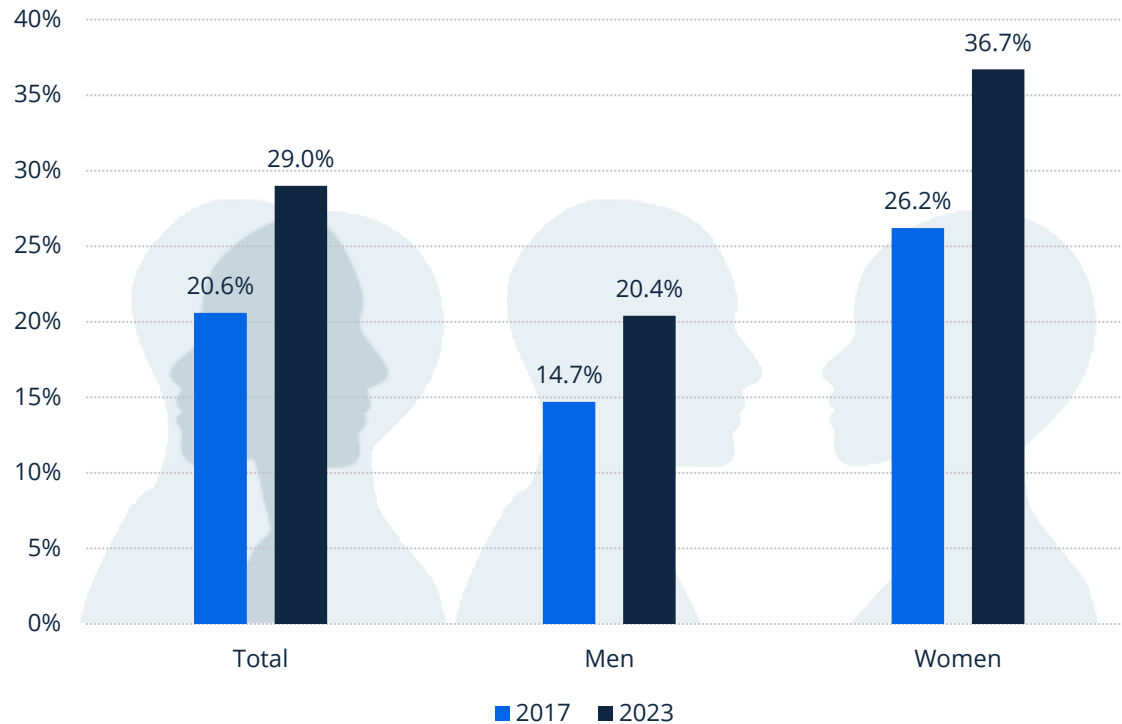
# What are the new approaches to deal with the rise of depression?

Key questions answered in this report

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<p><b>How does depression look in the 2020s?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An estimated <b>4.36 percent</b> of people worldwide suffered from depression as of 2021.</li><li>• Women are about <b>50 percent</b> more likely than men to experience depression.</li><li>• In several European countries, the share of young people reporting symptoms of depression <b>more than doubled</b> during the COVID-19 pandemic.</li></ul>	<p><b>What are the conventional treatments for depression?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consumption of <b>antidepressants</b> has increased in the last two decades.</li><li>• <b>Psychotherapy</b> can be an effective tool alone or combined with antidepressants, but barriers to access are an issue.</li><li>• At least <b>one-third</b> of people with depression are diagnosed with <b>treatment-resistant depression</b>.</li></ul>	<p><b>What are the alternatives to conventional treatments?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Psychedelic-assisted therapy</b> is being studied as a more effective alternative to conventional treatments.</li><li>• This emerging approach could lead to savings on costs worth <b>billions of U.S. dollars</b> in the United States and Europe.</li><li>• Mindfulness, breath work, physical activity, and nature exposure contribute positively against depression.</li></ul>

# The number of people with depression increased in the last decades

Share of U.S. adults who had been diagnosed with depression in their lifetime in 2017 and 2023, by gender



Depression is characterized by a continuous depressive mood, a loss of pleasure, or a loss of interest in activities. According to data from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, an estimated 4.36 percent of the global population suffered from depression in 2021, mostly women and younger people. This figure was up from 3.86 percent in 2019. Between 1990 and 2019, the prevalence of depression was always below four percent.

Typically, women are more likely than men to be diagnosed with depression. However, while suicide rates vary around the world, they are almost always higher for men than women. Men are less likely to acknowledge depression and commonly present different symptoms than women. For example, while women tend to report sadness, men may feel more irritable or do not get pleasure from activities usually enjoyed. Additionally, men are more likely to abuse substances, potentially making them more reckless or violent.

In the United States, the share of adults diagnosed with depression during their lifetime reached 29 percent in 2023, compared with 20.6 percent in 2017. The same survey found that about twice as many women as men had been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives.

# Depression symptoms

According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a patient must present at least five (of nine) symptoms to be diagnosed with major depressive disorder. One of those five symptoms must be either a depressed mood (1) or a loss of interest or pleasure (2). The symptoms must persist for most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two consecutive weeks. The episode must create significant distress or social and occupational impairment. Moreover, those symptoms must not be connected to the physiological effect of substance use or another medical condition and should not be better explained by another psychological disorder. Those symptoms can vary depending on the age and gender of the patient. According to the World Health Organization, depression is the largest contributor to global disability and the major contributor to people dying by suicide.

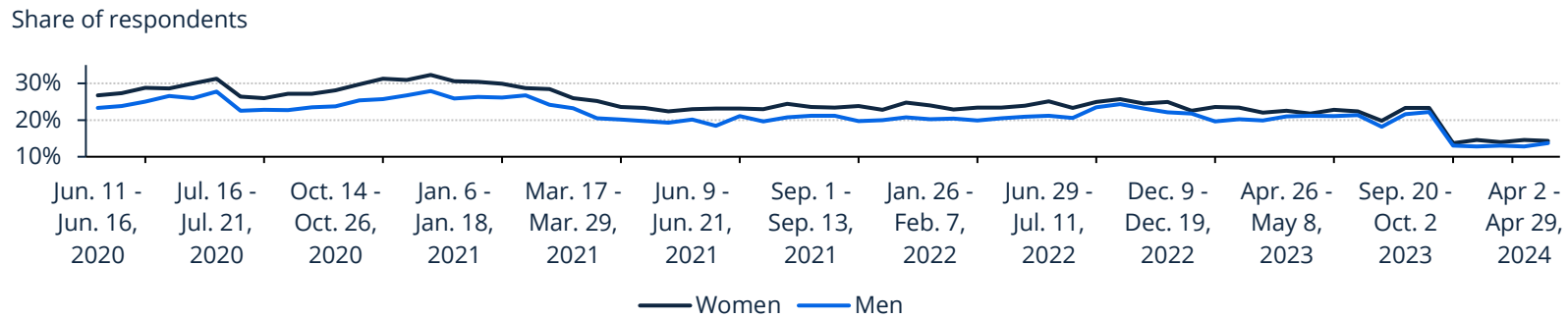


## Symptoms of major depressive disorder

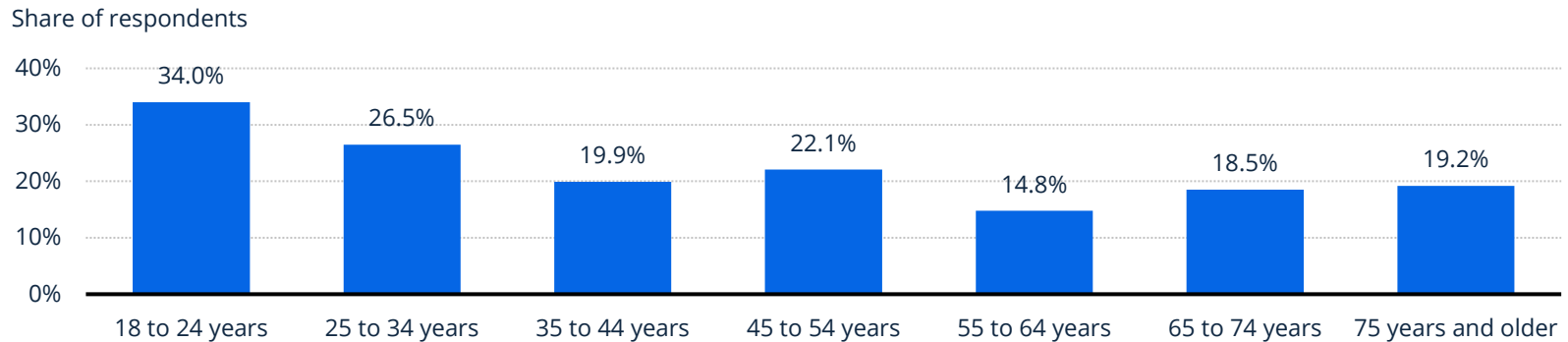
1. Depressed mood most of the day. In children and adolescents, could be exhibited with irritable mood.
2. Notably diminished interest or pleasure in all, or most, activities most of the day.
3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain.
4. Insomnia or hypersomnia.
5. Psychomotor agitation or retardation.
6. Fatigue or loss of energy.
7. Feelings of worthlessness, or excessive or inappropriate guilt.
8. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness.
9. Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for dying by suicide.

# COVID-19 and depression

Share of U.S. adults who reported depressive symptoms from June 2020 to May 2024, by gender



Share of adults who reported being more depressed during COVID-19 worldwide in June 2020, by age



Studies have shown an increase in the number of people suffering from psychiatric conditions since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common of which are major depressive disorder and anxiety disorder. Reasons for increases in depression rates include the psychophysiological consequences of the pandemic and the effects of the virus on the brain.

In the U.S., the share of women reporting depressive symptoms reached above 30 percent in July 2020 and again from November 2020 through January 2021 – both in the first year of the country’s coronavirus crisis.

Moreover, 34 percent of people aged 18 to 24 years worldwide reported being more depressed during the pandemic.

5 | Notes: (1) United States; 2020 to 2024; in July 2021, the question changed from over the last seven days to over the last two weeks; (2) Worldwide; 2020

Sources: (1) CDC; NCHS; U.S. Census Bureau; [ID: 1132653](#); (2) Sleep Cycle; [ID: 1184765](#); Text: Shetty, Ayari et al.

# Depression among younger people

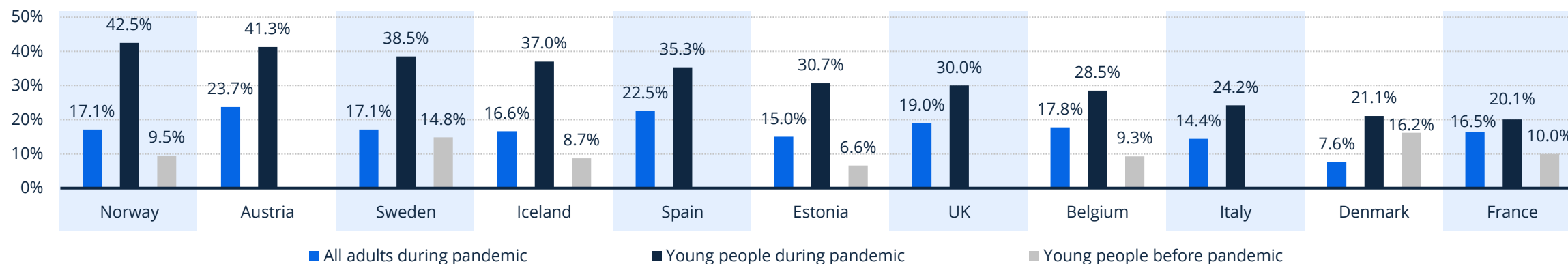
The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus had a strong impact on people worldwide, especially on younger age groups. In some European countries, depression levels among young people were four times higher during the pandemic than before the pandemic.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated elements associated with depression such as loneliness and life uncertainty, a rise in depression among

teenagers could be already observed. Some researchers attribute this to the increase in the use of smartphones and social media by the younger generations, which has led to a decrease in the time spent in person with friends as well as less time sleeping. A study published in Nature Communications in 2022 outlined that younger individuals experience periods of heightened sensitivity to social media, which can negatively impact life satisfaction.

## Share of young people and adults with depression symptoms during and before the COVID-19 pandemic in selected European countries

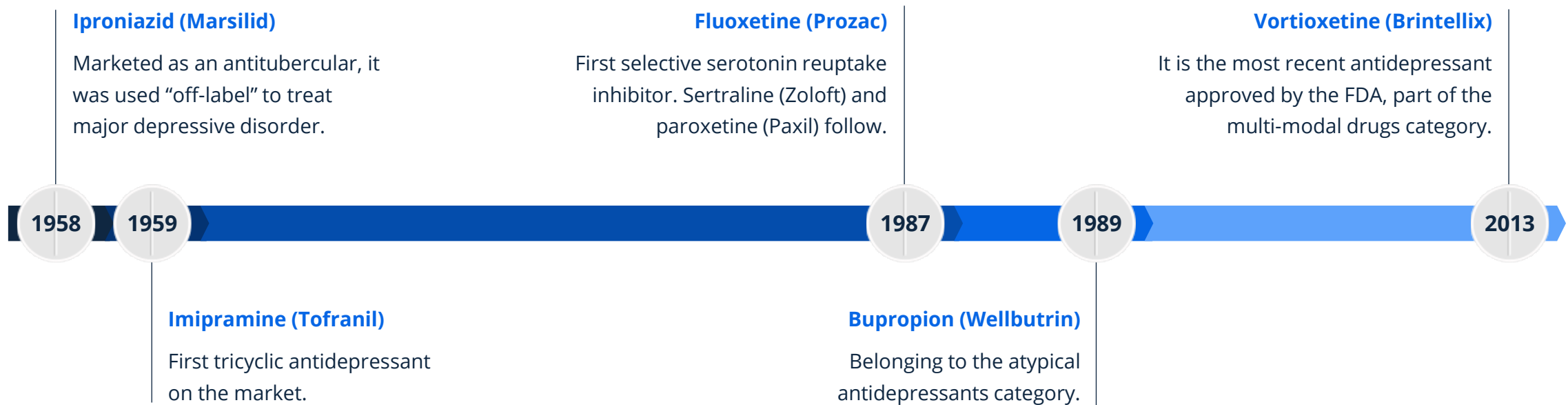
Share of respondents



# The development of antidepressants

In the 1950s, some doctors noticed that the side effects of iproniazid (a tuberculosis medication) included euphoria, psychostimulation, increased appetite, and improved sleep. Subsequently, the drug was tested on patients with depression, showing 70 percent improvements. Imipramine, sold under the brand name

Tofranil, was the first medication marketed as an antidepressant, establishing the class of drugs called tricyclic antidepressants. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), and paroxetine (Paxil), were introduced.

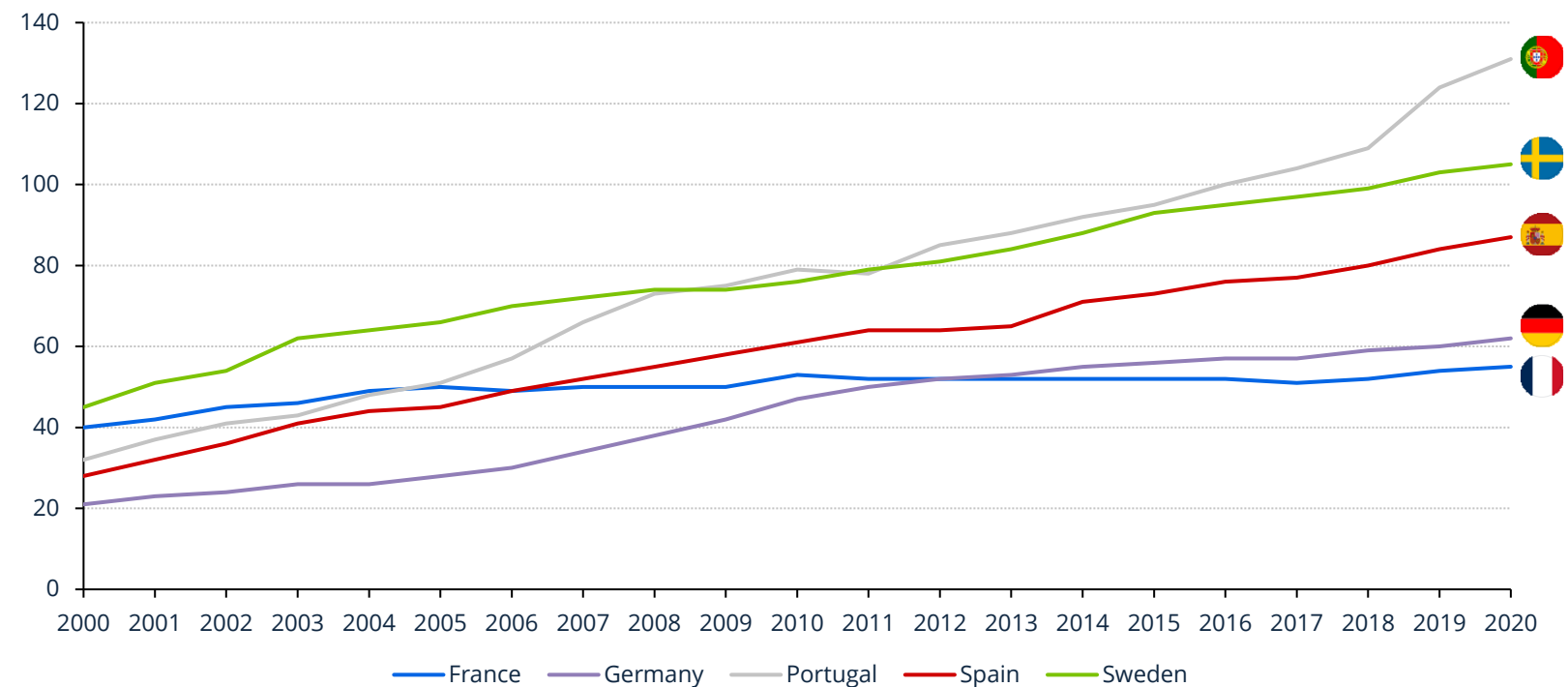




# The increase in the use of antidepressants

## Consumption of antidepressant drugs between 2000 and 2020

in defined daily dose per 1,000 inhabitants



Worldwide, the consumption of antidepressants has strongly increased in the last two decades, with Europeans being the largest consumers.

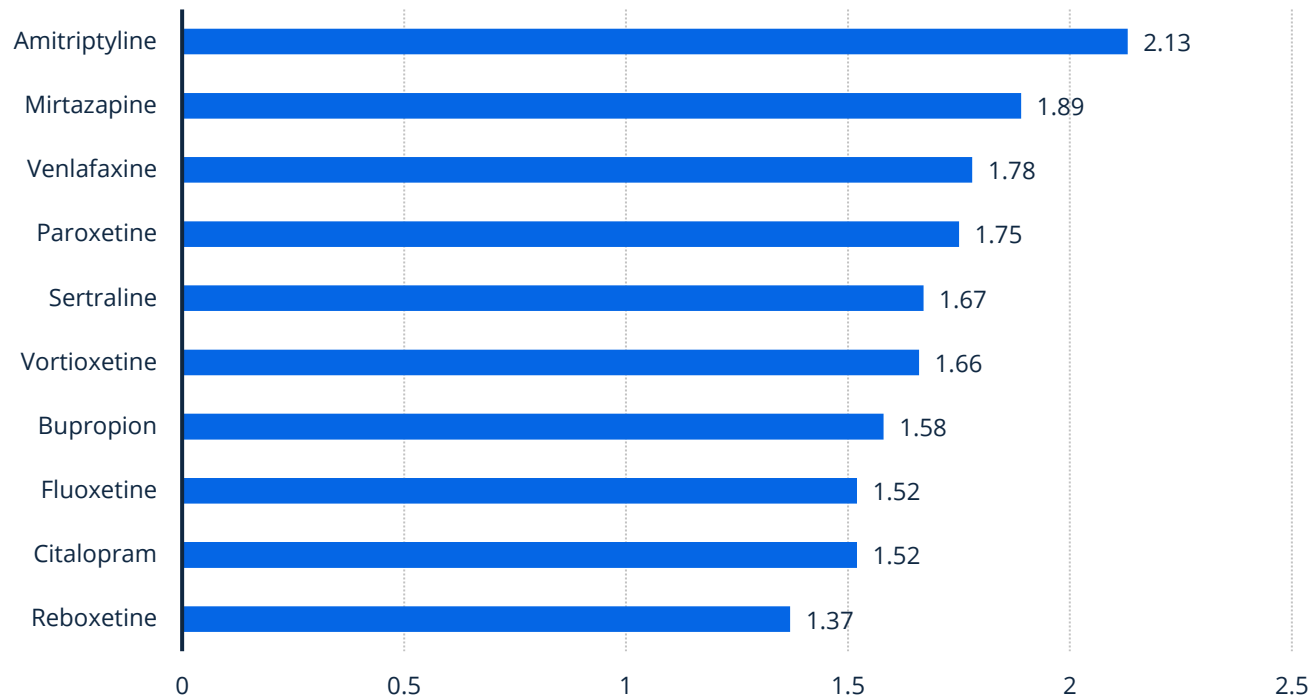
Between 2000 and 2020, the consumption of antidepressants increased by 304 percent in Portugal, by 208 percent in Spain, and by 200 percent in Germany.

Some researchers attribute this increase to factors such as a greater recognition of depression as a mental illness, the major availability of antidepressants, and the use of antidepressants in a wider range of cases.

# The effectiveness of antidepressants

## Average efficacy of selected antidepressants compared with placebo

Odds ratio (1= no better than placebo)



A study published in the Lancet explored the efficacy and tolerability of the major antidepressants on the market versus placebo on patients with major depressive disorder. Fluoxetine, commonly known by the brand name Prozac, was among the least effective antidepressants, but it was one of the best tolerated.

Nevertheless, the study outlined that all antidepressants were more effective than placebo. On average, after two months of taking antidepressants, 60 percent of patients have a positive response with a 50 percent reduction in symptoms.

However, there are still patients who do not respond to these medications, although currently, seven classes of antidepressants are available. In fact, at least 30 percent of people with depression have treatment-resistant depression, which equates to an estimated 77 million people worldwide.

# Psychotherapy: The types of therapies to treat depression

**Time needed to work to afford a session with a private psychologist in selected European countries in 2019** (in hours)

**Price for a one-hour session with a private psychologist in selected European countries in 2019** (in euros)

Country	Time needed to work to afford a session with a private psychologist in selected European countries in 2019 (in hours)	Price for a one-hour session with a private psychologist in selected European countries in 2019 (in euros)
Romania	18.65	60
Croatia	13.14	50
Italy	12.17	75
Portugal	11.60	60
Greece	11.33	60
Poland	10.98	44.75
Denmark	9.88	167.5
Spain	9.68	75
Germany	9.03	100
Ireland	8.38	100
Austria	8.13	90
UK	7.50	83

Psychotherapy can be an effective treatment for patients with mild to moderate depressive disorder, and it is often combined with the use of antidepressants. Several types of psychotherapy can be used to treat depression:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Interpersonal psychotherapy
- Supportive psychotherapy
- Behavioral therapy
- Marital and family therapy
- Brief psychodynamic psychotherapy

Access to psychotherapy is a concern in lots of countries. According to a 2023 survey coordinated by the European Commission, 35 percent of respondents who have encountered problems accessing mental health services said the services were too expensive.

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