

A Deeper Dive into IBS Relief

Session Four: The connections between our emotional states and our digestive health are very ancient. Establishing lasting IBS control relies on creating solid abilities to regulate our emotional lives.



IBS Relief Now!

Session Four: Emotional Regulation for Enhancing Gut Regulation

Emotions and Digestion: What's the Connection

Across countless years of evolutionary time, each new generation of life brought subtle changes to how our brains and digestive systems were developing. Both bodily systems developed together, each shaping the other, even as both were simultaneously changed by the environments in which early forms of life lived. One of the main changes that developed involved the amount of information that the digestive tract's brain (the enteric brain) and the body's central brain could process in any given second. This incoming flood of information required a system for determining what would get attended to first, which would dictate the appropriate response that was generated. But, what might signal what was more important in any given moment? What did these brains develop that helped them to filter what was given first priority by our attention?

Primitive reptiles had an effective but crude signaling system. What was perceived was judged to either be food to be eaten or a predator from whom escape was required. Thus, "safe or dangerous" decisions determined whether the response was to approach or escape. If the signaling system determined that food was at hand and safe to approach, the digestive system shut down to redirect the body's energy resources to assist in hunting down the prey. If the stimulus turned out to be a predator, the digestive system would also shut down, assuring that the body's full complement of energy was available for escaping and preserving one's life. Otherwise, the enteric and central brain worked together to shunt most of the

energy to the digestive system, activating it and concentrating the body's available energy on the digestive process, which went into high gear extracting energy from food and storing it safely in the body for use at a later time.

As life became more complex, the safe/dangerous and approach/avoid systems became more complex, too. Increasingly diverse emotions emerged as a way of

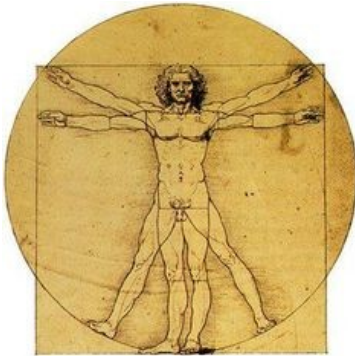
"tagging" what was most important when many different stimuli competed for information at the same time. Emotions notified the enteric brain and the central brain in a "language" for fine-tuning what mattered most in any given situation. More basic emotions like raging, caring, lust, fearing, playing, panicking or grieving would take priority over secondary emotions like interest, worry, pleasantness, irritation, or sadness. Lust might trump modest arousal, but an immediate and potent danger would likely trump lust.



We are Embodied Human Beings

With the development of an increasingly richer set of emotions, the coordination between the enteric brain and the central brain became more sophisticated and deeply intertwined. Both brains use the same nerve cell networks to carry electrical information between

the body and the central brain. As a result, electrical information about hunger, thirst, and emotion-based “gut feelings” travel the same neuronal roads together. There is no complete separation between the digestive system and the central brain. They are intimately linked. They are part of the same body. Gut, brain, and body are an integrated whole. We are fully “embodied beings.”



In practical terms, this means that what happens in one system inevitably happens in the other. Gut activities influence our emotions (central brain) and the emotional central brain influences the digestive system (enteric brain).

But, there is a missing piece in this equation. The central brain is also directly influenced by the mind. To develop effective IBS management depends on learning to regulate our emotional reactions, which, in turn, also helps us to regulate IBS reactivity.

How Minding our Brain Matters

When it comes to managing IBS, learning to use our minds makes all the difference in the world. Using your mind to support your health is a central key to improving your health. While the central brain and the enteric brain talk to each other all the time, they are both subject to the influence of what is on our minds. You see, the advantage of having a sophisticated brain is our ability to process so much information all at once. But, a disadvantage is that very little of that processing occurs in our active, self-aware mind. Much of the information processing occurs in the background, outside of our mind's awareness, where it is free to exert a constant and often negative, symptom-aggravating influence.



Many of the clients I have seen for IBS-related difficulties report being worried about their inability to control their symptoms. They will tell me that they do a lot of anticipatory thinking, imagining future situations they might encounter later in their day or week, and engaging in “what if...” worrying: *What if there is no bathroom handy? What if I eat lunch with my co-workers and my gut acts up? What if I am in a meeting and I can't control by pain and bloating? What if I can't sleep again?*

These are common and understandable concerns. However, I have found they are rarely the only set of concerns or worries that operate in the background of the minds of IBS sufferers. This **Deeper Dive** issue is focused on the link between emotion and digestive health. Most of the people I've met related to IBS are sensitized to situations in which they feel out of control. And, control of their guts is just one of many areas of their lives where potential loss of control is feared. Other examples include:

- What will someone else say or do...
- How will I be judged by others...
- Will I be accepted or loved...
- Will others be disappointed in me...
- Will my efforts be enough...
- Will my actions ever be good enough...

In short, in addition to understandable worries about the reliability of a digestive system that rarely feels reliable, many IBS sufferers are plagued by constant worries about what might go wrong in other parts of their lives, too. Those fears and worries, operating silently in the back of their minds act like an alarm that is constantly sounding off and activating the danger/avoid response system throughout the body. Gradually, this chronic fear-based stressor dysregulates an individual's control of his or her digestive system functioning.



For many IBS sufferers, learning to use the mind to recognize stressors, learn to reframe them, and slowly learn to discharge their fears will restore digestive

control and reduce IBS symptomatology. How you learn to “mind” your worries become the key tool through which you learn to rebuild healthier communication between your enteric and central brains, and throughout your body.

How Do You Mind Your Health

Think of mind as directed attention, which has three main elements.

1. To what do you pay attention?
2. With what attitude do you pay attention?
3. What is your response to what you find as you pay attention?

Let’s look at each element. Minding your health involves developing a broader panoramic attentional perspective. This type of attention focuses not only on what might feel bad or off but on the whole scene. Panoramic attention takes in the good with the bad. In my experience, this shift in focus is critically important. When clients feel overwhelmed by their IBS symptoms, adopting a panoramic focus helps them recognize there is more to them than just their IBS symptoms. Yes, they have symptoms, but they also have much more going on, and not all of it is symptom-related.

The second element involves the shift in attitude you can bring to whatever it is to which you are paying attention. If you direct your attention with a fear or worry-driven attitude, lo and behold, that is likely all that you will find. You will notice tension or pressure in your belly. You may notice what feels like bowel urgency. You may notice that your abdomen is gurgling. And, the fears about what may happen next are likely to intensify. And, the worries or fears will be perceived by your enteric brain, leading to an increase in bowel urgency or abdominal pain. Worry begets response, which begets more worry, ad infinitum.

On the other hand, when you bring to bear an attitude of curiosity, acceptance, and calm presence, the messages that begin to fly around your enteric and central brain nerve networks are reassuring, settling, soothing, and pleasing. Things no longer must be perfect to be just fine! Over and over, when I work

with clients to cultivate this attitudinal lens through which they can pay attention to their bodies, they consistently report, with a sense of wonder, that:

- My belly feels quieter.
- I feel less pressure.
- I am not as worried.
- I feel more relaxed and comfortable.
- I believe I will be okay.

Lastly, as you notice the benefits of an attitudinal shift in how you pay attention, a third benefit arises: You learn that your response to whatever you notice can be more thoughtful, more patient, more accepting, less reactive, less fear-driven, and ultimately, a more authentic reflection of your best self.



IBS is a condition affecting both the enteric and central brain systems. These systems developed in connection to one another and continue to influence each other through intricate feedback systems. Sometimes, they end up reinforcing negative symptoms patterns in each other as when IBS symptoms drive worries, which drive symptoms, which drive still more worries. Learning to use your mind to redirect this negative cycle into a positive one takes time, but is not difficult to activate.

Like learning any other new skill, the more you practice the better you get and the faster you get where you want to go. Here are key elements I have found that have helped my clients to “mind their health.”

- ✚ I can breathe in and out, settling in and settling down, as my whole body becomes quieter.
- ✚ I can learn to notice without reacting with alarm. When I just notice and observe with less reaction, my body becomes physically calmer.
- ✚ While my belly may feel uncomfortable now, other parts of my body can just remain at ease.

- ✦ My body will listen to whatever message I offer. I can learn to invite physical comfort and calm.
- ✦ When I can accept what my body offers, my body can accept being guided by a quiet mind.

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Facts & Acts

FACTS – Summary of important points

- Our digestive system (enteric brain) and emotional system (central brain) evolved together and form an integrated whole. Whatever impacts one ends up impacting the other.
- Both brain systems are oriented to make a basic decision: if a social situation is safe, we can approach; if the situation is dangerous, we should avoid it. This is the level of functioning of our reptilian brain.
- Our more sophisticated emotional brain processes much more information in every moment of time. We use emotions to guide our brain as to what is most important in any instant. More basic, life-saving emotions trump lower priority secondary emotions.
- IBS sufferers tend to operate with more high priority fears in the backs of their minds. Their higher base rate of chronic worries tends to have a negative impact on their digestive health, which in turn drives more worrying.
- With training, our minds can become a powerful resource for redirecting the focus of our attention, our attitudes, and our responses to what happens in our bodies and our lives.
- Training our minds is a powerful way of restoring healthy communication between our brain, our bodies, and especially our digestive systems.

ACTS – What you can begin doing NOW

- Learning to “mind your health” to better manage IBS involves making shifts in
 - What you focus on
 - How you focus
 - How you react to what you notice
- Here is a simple, portable technique for training your mind to become a more powerful ally as you seek to manage your IBS more effectively.
- Find a quiet place to sit where you won’t be interrupted to 15 minutes. Direct your attention to your abdomen as you slowly breath in to a count of 4, pause, and then breath out to a count of 6. Do this for 5 minutes.
- As you do this breathing, repeat silently to yourself: My belly is settling in and settling down. My fears are settling in and settling down. My worries are gently dissolving and floating away.
- Direct your attention to your chest and shoulders. Breath in to a count of 6, pause, and then breath out for a count of 8. Do this for 5 minutes.
- As you do this breathing, repeat silently to yourself: My mind and body are learning to support each other and support me. My mind and body can become a source of confidence and calm. My mind and body are growing stronger. Take 5 more minutes. Sit and notice the changes.

Stay Tuned: In Session Five's **Deeper Dive**, I will be introducing you to important tools for managing life's stressors differently. You'll learn how facing stress differently actually builds healthy resilience. Developing a sharper mind plays a significant role in becoming more "stress hardy." See you soon!