

# A Deeper Dive into IBS Relief



## IBS Relief Now!

### Session Seven: Changing our Connection to the Past and for Good

#### When Yesterday is Still Today

This is a sensitive **Deeper Dive** to compose. I created it to address an uncomfortable truth. IBS affects men and women, young and old. But, it affects women to a far greater degree than men. Also, among the women impacted by IBS severe enough to significantly disrupt their daily lives, there is a very high rate of personal histories of abuse, including sexual abuse.

Everyone's history shapes their physical and mental health. Research findings show that even while still in our mother's wombs, the kind of environment she lives in influences which hormones and genes get turned on or off in the developing fetus. The conclusion is that even as we are developing, genetic and hormonal "decisions" are being made to help us emerge into life most prepared to contend with the kind of environment we are likely to face in our tender first days and weeks.



But, personal histories of physical and sexual abuse are unfortunately more common among women. Those histories exist more commonly in environments that lack consistent feelings of safety, stability, security, and love (Session Four's **Deeper Dive**), and they strongly impact our newly developing attachment patterns. In turn, attachment patterns are etched into how our stress response systems get

wired. Abuse histories are translated into patterns of increased stress reactivity and high rates of a host of inflammatory and immune system compromises.

A series of landmark studies called the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) studies showed a clear connection between the number of adverse or negative experiences to which children were exposed and their higher rates of developing diabetes, cardiac and respiratory illnesses, drug/alcohol use, depression, obesity, and other health challenges in mid-life.



These studies make it clear that yesterday's experiences can and do continue to *show up* in our todays for many years. Our past can remain our present...unless we take active steps to put our past in our pasts.

#### Neuroplasticity: A Key to Putting the Past in the Past

There is good news here. The past does not exert an unchangeable impact on our future mental and emotional health. As we said in Session Five's **Deeper Dive**, our brain and body are designed to learn – to adjust, to adapt, and to grow when challenged. Old habits, which may have protected us in the past, such as learning to avoid and escape from threatening events, or learning to suppress or shut down uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, may no longer

serve us as adults. But, learning new habits, including how to translate stress and discomfort in health-enhancing, IBS-reducing responses and habits takes work and lots of practice.

Fortunately, our brains – both our central and enteric brains – are capable of neuroplastic change. Everything we do, from thoughts, to emotions, to the motility of our digestive tracts, to the level of pain



sensitivity that we show, represent dynamic patterns of electrical firing within the vast web of nerves in our neural networks. Those firing patterns are NOT

fixed. They are CONSTANTLY changing every time we activate them. They can either become strengthened so they are more likely to fire again in the future, or they can be weakened as a different network pattern gets strengthened instead.

The adaptability and flexibility that is built into how our nerve networks operate is what allows us to grow and learn. We learn from new experience, and that learning gets encoded in electrical maps that influence how we are likely to respond when then map gets referenced in the future. However, we can transcend old habits and relying on outdated maps by learning to choose novel ways of perceiving and responding to interpersonal, environmental, or emotional triggers going forward each day. New learning can replace old learning.

### History and IBS Reactivity

In Session Two, our **Deeper Dive** highlighted how the inner lining of the gut is chock full of immune cells. We likened these cells to a vigilant border patrol, constantly checking to assure that molecules have the proper ID to be allowed to pass through this lumen and into the sacred inner world of our blood stream and body's cells and vulnerable tissues.

Early trauma, neglect, emotional abandonment, and chronic environmental instability function as constant activators of immune system responses throughout

the body, including the immune cells lining the gut. Over time, the efficiency and effectiveness of the digestive system is compromised or dysregulated, right along with depletion of the immune system's healthy response-abilities. The resulting loss of regulatory control can go in one of three directions: Overactive immunity, which is associated with chronic inflammation and other auto-immune illnesses; under-active immunity, in which the immune system's efficiency is compromised, allowing an overgrowth of bacteria that are normally kept in check, which also introduces a range of illness conditions; or unstable immunity in which the immune system oscillates between over- and under-responding. Regardless of the path followed, overall health is compromised. The doors to IBS flare-ups are opened wide.

Until old patterns of coping with trauma are addressed and modified, those old patterns are rigidly held to, even when they have become outdated. Renowned neurologist Robert Scaer, MD views IBS as a condition where the “freeze response,” which is one type of response to threat, gets over-learned and over-used. Rather than retain the flexibility to adjust motility, acid levels, and nutrient absorption patterns, the gut “freezes” into old and inefficient digestive responses that define the particular form of IBS experienced by each IBS sufferer.

Anodea Judith, author and healer, goes further. Trained in eastern energy medicine practices, she describes links between early trauma and physical disorders involving eating and digestion. She notes the frequency with which IBS sufferers, despite experiencing a spate of physical symptoms, are also emotionally disconnected from their bodies and their emotional selves. She noted her clients' frequent struggles feeling safe in their worlds, trusting their bodies, feeling empowered to make their own choices, to take calculated or reasonable risks, to exercise their will, or having the strength and courage to pursue their own desire.

The findings are consistent are clear. For far too many IBS sufferers, their personal past histories have carved out a set of stress or threat response patterns that have become over-learned and habitual, and which perpetuate patterns of IBS.

## Turning the Neuroplastic Keys for Positive Change



The case has been made. The results are in. Our past can influence our present and derail our best future. Therefore, the all-important next question is: How do you

learn the core skills that make the future brighter, safer, and that make IBS reactivity a periodic inconvenience instead of a daily reminder involving pain and suffering?

Healing old wounds and recovering our resilient life's birthright rests on several pillars for vital living.

1. The first pillar involves attending to basic survival needs. You have the inalienable right to live in a safe and secure environment. Does that describe your life? If you are under verbal attack, experience domination and aggressive manipulation or coercion in your personal or professional life, attending to necessary change at this level of being can make a major difference in quieting IBS reactivity.
2. The second pillar involves attending to our emotional life. We have a rich of emotions. They orient us to the world around us and within us. Being able to feel and to be aware of our feelings positions us to make decisions and take actions that enhance and enrich our lives. What are the main emotions you experience? To what or with whom do those emotions get aroused? Learning to connect with your emotions links you to an important source of information that, like a GPS, orients you to what is safe, healthy, and affirming, and away from what is dangerous or shrinks your spirit.
3. The third pillar supports becoming a separate and unique self. While we live in relationship to others, there is no one else like us. There is no other being who gets to live our life. The important task connected to this pillar is to define who are unique self is, and to begin forming our sense of specific purpose and mission. This is not simply an adoption of

someone else's beliefs about what and what you are.

4. The fourth pillar involves self-acceptance. We are unique in all the world. We are also as imperfect and incomplete as everyone else in the world. That is the irreducible nature of being alive. Holistic health invites us to learn to wrestle with our imperfection, but to eventually accept it. Then, with open-hearted acceptance, we can actively grow beyond the restrictive social roles (e.g., excessive caretaking, "perfect" spouse, etc.), we've assumed. We grow beyond believing these roles will deliver the love and acceptance we otherwise lack.
5. The fifth pillar relates to showing fidelity to your values and commitments. When we act in ways that align with our word and our values, we unleash the creative power of an energized self. Fear, doubt, and excessive negative self-judgement begins to fade. Are you true to your commitments?
6. The sixth pillar involves growing across time. Healing from trauma's wounds involves looking into what happened in the past and transforming it into something good that impacts your future. A childhood lacking in love and material means can translate into living with generosity of spirit and compassion for others. A childhood with violence and pain can translate into expanded empathy for those who suffer or are vulnerable, like volunteering at a neonatal intensive care unit to hold and rock premature infants, as one of my clients chose to do. What are your transformative choices?
7. The seventh pillar connects us to the world that is bigger than we are. This is the world of our spiritual selves. We are here for a flash of time. Our lives can feel so small. But, by combining humility with and energetic expressing of our individual uniqueness, we positively impacting others' lives, which really transforms our past.

# Facts & Acts

## FACTS – Summary of important points

- Irritable Bowel is a “syndrome.” This means that clinicians and researchers recognize that many factors interact to create the pattern of symptoms we call IBS.
- One of those factors, found in up for 40% of women, is a history of trauma in their early personal histories. For those individuals, their past history remains all too present. Learning to “put the past in the past” is an important skill in developing effective IBS self-control.
- The landmark ACE studies show that early life trauma increases the lifetime risk of many health challenges and illnesses, including IBS.
- Habits forms while coping with traumatic experiences become deeply engrained in our physiology, getting retriggered when we encounter new stressors that are perceived as threatening. This is one pathways by which early trauma can activate later IBS.
- Thankfully, our enteric and central nervous systems are designed to learn and rewire that in-born capacity for neuroplastic change. When we develop new ways of responding to present-day challenges, we build healthier habits that gradually weaken the old stress-response patterns, which include IBS.
- Trauma does not have to result in permanent IBS any more than it necessarily causes perpetual health problems. Trauma can be healed. This **Deeper Dive** identified 7 pillars of holistic healing that you can read through again. Check out the video tutorial, too!

## ACTS – What you can begin doing NOW

Healing the lingering effects of trauma is imperative to restoring balance to mind, body, and soul. There is no “quick fix” for healing trauma, but here are tangible steps that put you onto a healthier path, which also benefit IBS management.

- Our relationship to our body is like the relationship between horse and rider. Our body is powerful, can take us far, is highly attuned to the environment, but it requires us to respect its needs. Practices like yoga, certain forms of dance, and even gentle walks in nature help to coordinate and heal our mind-body relationship.
- Trauma impacts our core sense of self. Regular time spent in quiet reflection helps us become aware of emotions and thoughts that whirl in our minds out of conscious awareness. Learn to identify your thoughts and feelings so you are in a better position to challenge and change them, with professional help, if needed.
- Trauma also alters our connection to others – what we deserve, what we offer, and what we receive. Clarifying and modifying our core values helps us recognize when our relationships to others align with those values, and prepare us to take action in those relationships, as needed.
- Life works best when aligned with authentic meaning and purpose. Do the work to discover yours. There is no shortcut here. Wise counsel with trusted friends, clergy, or health professional helps.

**Stay Tuned:** In the next **Deeper Dive**, (Session Eight) we will put outline the six dimensions of focus that are necessary for creating a truly holistic, IBS self-management program that is personalized to your specific needs. I have really enjoyed working with you to date. And, I so look forward to wrapping up our work together in our 8<sup>th</sup> and final session. See you soon!