

Soothing A Sensitive Gut

Summary of an article by Kathleen Cahill Allison & Lawrence S. Friedman, MD –

It's probably happened to you. You remember some stressful issue and your gut clenches, your intestines twist and before you know it your feeling ill. One person in four ends up seeking medical attention for a gastrointestinal problem such as heartburn or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). When doctors examine these patients, their blood tests and abdominal X-rays are usually normal. However the absence of ulcers or tumours doesn't mean that nothing is wrong. The brain and gut communicate through an impressive network of hormones, peptides and neurotransmitters. When emotional distress disrupts this dialogue, the effects can be seen on a brain scan. An area known as the midcingulate cortex goes into overdrive – and the gut suffers potentially devastating consequences.

Stress-related digestive problems often defy conventional treatments, such as antacids and anti-diarrhoea medications. However mind-body techniques such as relaxation and hypnotherapy can provide a safe effective alternative. When the brain perceives pain, it tends to fret over the sensation and amplify it.

In therapy a trained hypnotherapist helps patients quell that amplification by reorienting negative ways of thinking. Instead of tensing up at the first sign of abdominal pain the patient is taught how to manage the pain so they can live a normal life. Stress stimulates the autonomic nervous system, a part of the nervous system that controls such involuntary functions as heartbeat and intestinal contractions. Hypnotherapy and relaxation techniques can calm the autonomic nervous system by tuning out stress-induced thoughts, feelings and sensations.

This technique can help create a long-lasting state of relaxation and may help calm painful muscular motion in the intestine. A trained hypnotherapist can teach patients self-hypnosis and the steps needed to enter a hypnotic state. The patient focuses on their breathing and what it feels like to be completely relaxed and calm. Once the patient knows the steps they can use the technique to lower their tension and pain perception whenever symptoms strike.