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Using hypnotherapy to beat IBS

By Sophie Lee

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Hypnotherapy is one of the best known and most widely used treatments for IBS, and can offer sufferers a drug-free solution to their symptoms of diarrhea, constipation, stomach pain and bloating.

There are now many hundreds of hypnotherapists who offer what is called "gut-directed hypnotherapy" for IBS, which takes the general techniques of hypnotherapy and applies them directly to the abdominal pain and digestive symptoms which IBS sufferers struggle with. This type of hypnotherapy has been clinically tested and found to be very helpful to many IBS patients.

One of the first studies of hypnotherapy for IBS was conducted by Dr Peter Whorwell, a leading expert on IBS and hypnotherapy in the UK. A trial he conducted in the 1980s found that a group of IBS sufferers who had failed to respond to other treatments showed dramatic improvements when treated with gut-directed hypnotherapy. Since then, other therapists have shown similar results.

What hypnotherapy involves

Hypnotherapy in a medical setting bears no relation to the kind of stage hypnosis where volunteers are made to do ridiculous things in the name of entertainment. In fact, patients remain entirely in control of their own actions, and are simply coaxed into a kind of deep relaxation state.

While the patient is in this state the therapist will talk to you and make positive suggestions - one typical method for IBS is to ask you to place your hand over your abdomen and imagine that a healing warmth is flowing from your hand to your stomach.

Some hypnotherapists will record each session for you so that you can listen to them again between your appointments, and therefore increase the effectiveness of the therapy.

Self-hypnosis

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If you don't have the time or the resources to visit a qualified hypnotherapist, you might find some relief in one of the self-hypnosis CDs available, which can be listened to in the comfort of your own home.

While you will not get an individual treatment program from a ready-made CD, you will be able to benefit from the general hypnosis approach, and you can choose to listen to the CDs whenever you have the time.

The IBS Audio Program, developed by the UK hypnotherapist Michael Mahoney, is the most widely used program for IBS sufferers, and is available on audio CD and cassette. The program is designed to be used over 100 days, and includes four CDs and a program booklet. The makers claim that around 80% of listeners experience a significant reduction of pain and bowel dysfunction.

The program consists of three therapeutic session CDs, with an introduction and five different

hypnotherapy sessions. It also includes a bonus fourth CD (the IBS Companion), which explains IBS to non-sufferers.

Sophie Lee has suffered from IBS for more than 15 years. She runs IBS Tales

where you can read hundreds of personal stories from IBS sufferers and self-help tips.

An introduction to irritable bowel syndrome

By Sophie Lee

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Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a very common condition, but in some ways it is still a mystery. There are many different theories about what causes the syndrome, and different doctors will give you different reasons for your illness - anything from stress to bad bacteria to food intolerance. And once you have been diagnosed, there is no set form of treatment - instead, sufferers tend to try two or three supplements or therapies to find a combination that works for them.

IBS is clearly a complicated issue, so here is a basic overview of the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of this disorder.

The symptoms

Although the symptoms of IBS vary from person to person, there are several symptoms which are typical of the illness. The most common symptom is either recurring diarrhea or recurring constipation (although some patients also have alternating diarrhea and constipation).

Additional symptoms can include stomach pain (sometimes relieved by a bowel movement), bloating, nausea and a lot of gas. These symptoms generally go away for a short time before returning again, as

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IBS can work in cycles. Sufferers may experience a few weeks or even a few months of good health before the symptoms come back.

Sufferers sometimes find that their symptoms begin after a bout of food poisoning or an operation. Others date their symptoms back to a very stressful period in their lives, and some patients can see no clear reason for why their symptoms began.

The diagnosis

There is no set test for IBS, and it is often called a diagnosis of 'exclusion'. This means that a doctor may rule out other bowel and stomach complaints such as celiac disease or inflammatory bowel disease before giving you a diagnosis of IBS.

Sometimes patients are given a colonoscopy, where a tiny camera is inserted into the intestines to look for abnormalities. In an IBS sufferer the colonoscopy won't detect any physical signs of disease - IBS is often called a 'functional' disorder, because it seems to be caused by an alteration in the way the body functions rather than an identifiable cause such as inflammation.

However, this does not mean it is any less real than, say, inflammatory bowel disease, it just means that doctors haven't come up with a proper test for it yet!

It is very important that you receive a diagnosis of IBS from a medical professional rather than self-diagnosing, as bowel symptoms can be present in many other health conditions.

The treatment

The first stage of treatment may involve any medications your doctor has given you to try. This could be an anti-spasmodic, which will relax the muscles in the gut walls, or perhaps a low dose of an anti-depressant, which can help to reduce the pain.

You may also be given one of the new drugs specifically developed for IBS - Lotronex for diarrhea sufferers and Zelnorm for constipation sufferers.

If the drugs do not help you then you could try using a fiber supplement such as Citrucel to add bulk to your stool - this can be helpful for both diarrhea and constipation. Also, there are other supplements such as Caltrate Plus which may be useful (Caltrate Plus contains calcium carbonate which can reduce diarrhea).

It may also be worth looking at your diet. A nutritionist can advise on ways to identify any particular food 'triggers' which may be setting off your symptoms, and also on whether you might have a food intolerance to something like gluten or lactose.

Finally, there are several alternative therapies which can be effective for IBS. Hypnotherapy has proved very effective, and a special form called gut-directed hypnotherapy has been developed just for digestive problems. Acupuncture may also be worth looking into.

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Sophie Lee has had IBS for more than 15 years. She runs Irritable Bowel Syndrome Treatment <http://www.irritable-bowel-syndrome.ws> where you can read descriptions and reviews of the treatments available for IBS, from drugs to alternative therapy.

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