



# That gut feeling

A psychotherapeutic counsellor shows how what goes on in our brains can affect what happens in our stomachs

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**O**ur digestive system has become big news in both physical and mental health.

It seems that this gut/brain connection can account for everything from feeling nervous before a presentation, to all out low mood and depression.

Google searches on gut health have more than tripled in the UK in the last three years. As a counsellor focused on anxiety and depression, I have seen an increasing amount of clients complaining about IBS related symptoms: stomach cramps, constant embarrassing trips to the loo, feeling exhausted, highly anxious and irritable. Sometimes they are unable to carry on working at their jobs. Are the digestive problems being caused by a dysfunctional lifestyle or diet or are they originating from deeper psychological issues?

It can take time to uncover the true reasons behind how a client is feeling and how their gut is reacting. Often clients have endured many trips to the

**ABOVE:** Take into consideration things going on in your life to help your gut

GP involving blood samples, ultrasounds and colonoscopies, none of which have come up with anything conclusive.

When we feel anxious or under stress, the brain-gut axis, or line of communication between the two, is disrupted and that in turn affects the microbiome in our gut. I work with clients to develop a greater self awareness and understanding of the triggers that can propel them into this freeze, flight or fight mode and to develop healthy coping strategies.

Often clients are unaware of how much their energy is being directed outside of themselves. Their resilience is depleted, they feel more anxious, which can then manifest in IBS. It's about rebalancing and refocusing their energy in ways that enrich their wellbeing, like exercise, yoga, or meditation.

'It often becomes clear that there is not only a huge imbalance in a client's emotional approach to life, but also in their nutritional one too,' says nutritionist Afifah Hamilton.

'The brain and all its functions is physical as well as interpretative and therefore will be influenced by food. It is important to consider the effect of adrenal overdrive in response to eating foods that cause a reaction, and the stress that this produces, which will negatively affect the mental state of the individual.'

She says that the most important nutritional approach for gut related symptoms is the removal of all cereal grain from your diet. 'It is proven that 80% of IBS is due to cereal grain intake and 90% of acid reflux. You need to remove wheat, rye, barley and oats from your diet for a minimum of a month, ideally six.'

The good news is this often debilitating condition is being talked about more openly. Alison Reid, CEO of The IBS Network, says: 'Gut health is often considered as a last taboo to be borne in silence, but this is changing. People are being encouraged to talk more openly about IBS.' ♦

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