

FEATURES

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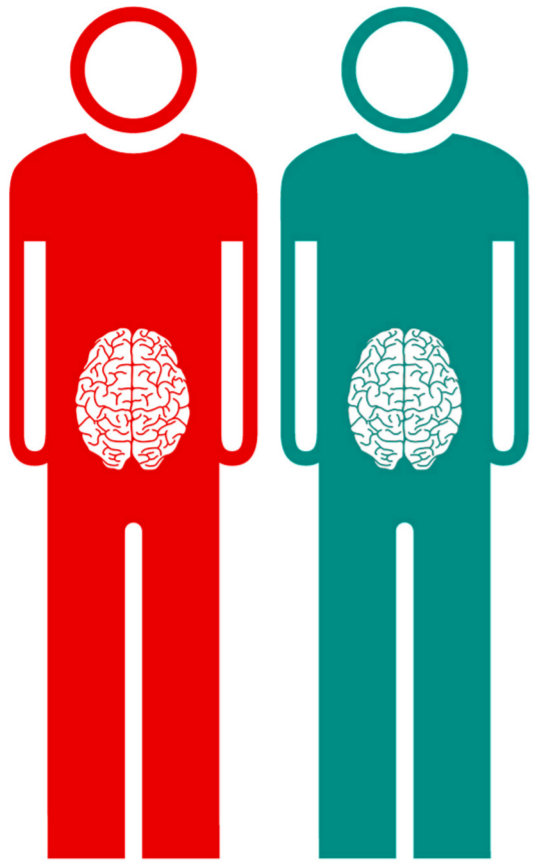


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Gut feelings

While there may be no cure for irritable bowel syndrome, recent research suggests that learning to minimize stress and emotional disturbances can reduce symptoms, perhaps more effectively than medications

BY JANE E. BRODY
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

If you've ever had butterflies in your stomach or an attack of nerves that sent you racing for the bathroom, you already know that the intestinal tract has a mind of its own. The millions who suffer from irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, perhaps know it best.

IBS, with its symptoms of bloating, abdominal pain, flatulence, diarrhea or constipation or an alternating cycle of the two, can seriously impair the ability to work and enjoy leisure activities. Up to 15 percent of the population is affected, though only half seek medical help.

The gut and brain are intimately connected, with more nerve cells in the intestines than in the central nervous system. The gut has been called the body's second brain, containing 95 percent of the body's neurotransmitter serotonin and direct nerve connections to the brain.

So it is no surprise that this common disorder of intestinal function has a strong mind-body connection. This does not mean IBS is a psychosomatic condition caused by emotions, but rather that emotional upsets can aggravate symptoms in someone with a hyper-reactive bowel.

It also means that learning to minimize stress and emotional disturbances can reduce the symptoms of IBS, perhaps more effectively than medications, recent research has indicated. Yet much educational material about this condition underplays the mind-body connection and the vital role that emotional retraining can play in controlling it.

This is perhaps an overreaction to the past when most patients with IBS were told there was nothing physically wrong with them — it was all in their heads. After all, they had no obvious organic cause like a tumor, infection or ulcer.

In the modern era of medicalization, the pendulum swung the other way. Gastroenterologists now recognize that IBS is a real physiological, or "functional," disorder, though no specific cause has been discovered.

Recent studies have implicated serotonin as one factor, since patients with IBS have reduced receptors for this chemical. And studies have shown that low levels of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors can sometimes relieve its symptoms.

In many patients, symptoms can be set off by large meals or certain foods, among them wheat, rye, barley,

chocolate, milk products, alcohol, coffee, tea and colas. By keeping a food diary and recording symptom flare-ups, patients can identify their sensitivities and avoid the culprit foods.

REUNITING MIND AND BODY

A small but growing number of specialists are seeking to reunite mind and body by treating patients with a combination of medications, dietary precautions and emotional re-education. Their early studies indicate that this mind-body approach is more effective than either alone.

Charles D. Gerson, a gastroenterologist affiliated with Mount Sinai Medical Center, works with his wife, Mary-Joan Gerson, a psychotherapist, and their daughter, Jessica, a hypnotherapist, at the Mind-Body Digestive Center in New York.

Gerson said in an interview that for patients who are seriously impaired by IBS, medications help but "there is no magic pill that solves the whole problem. Patients need a more holistic approach. Those who accept emotional as well as physical causes of their condition do better."

While it is destructive for patients with IBS to be told it is all in their heads, it is also wrong to ignore the psychosocial factors that play a role, he said.

"I tell patients that if they don't deal with the emotional factors that relate to their problem," Gerson said, "they are likely to continue to have symptoms."

NEW WAYS OF THINKING

Personal relationships can have a major impact. Symptoms are worse if there is conflict in the family, better if relationships are supportive, the Gersons have found. When a person is in a bad marriage, divorce can become a cure.

The brain has the ability to inhibit sensations from the gut. But, as Gerson put it, "IBS patients tend to be hypervigilant — too aware of what is going on in their gut." Through techniques like hypnotherapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy, it is possible to change how the brain perceives what is happening in the body.

In hypnotherapy, patients learn to visualize their colon as functioning more normally. In cognitive-behavioral therapy or short-term psychotherapy, patients can learn to change symptom-provoking beliefs, like thinking that their colon will always be abnormal or that a given circumstance will provoke symptoms.

In a British study of 204 patients in which more than two-thirds of them were initially helped by hypnotherapy, 81 percent of those maintained the improvement up to six years after the treatment. Learning to practice stress-reduction and relaxation techniques can be as helpful as learning which foods to avoid.

QUESTIONS, NOT TESTS

The medical profession tends to emphasize the physical aspects of the condition rather than patient insight, putting patients through a series of tests that focus on the colon, like colonoscopies.

But an international panel of experts concluded that in the vast majority of cases — the exceptions are patients who warrant a full physical work-up — questioning patients about their condition is enough to arrive at an accurate diagnosis.

The panel's criteria, published in *The Journal of Family Practice* in February, include recurrent abdominal pain or discomfort for at least six months and symptoms for at least three days a month in the past three months that may improve with defecation or are associated with a change in the frequency of bowel movements or in the form or appearance of stool.

Tests are indicated if a patient's symptoms began after age 50, if there is a family history of inflammatory bowel disease or cancer, or if the patient has blood in the stool, fever, jaundice, a weight loss of more than 10 percent, anemia, symptoms that occur during the night, extreme abdominal tenderness, enlargement of an abdominal organ or profuse diarrhea.

In the journal article, Neil T. Moynihan and his co-authors emphasized that in the absence of the above "red flags," "extensive testing, including the routine use of blood tests, stool studies, and imaging is not required."

They described the role of various drug options, among them low doses of antidepressants, antibiotics for patients with an overgrowth of intestinal bacteria, the over-the-counter drug Imodium for patients with diarrhea, water-absorbing laxatives for patients with constipation, and probiotics, a nonprescription combination of healthful bacteria.

But they also noted that hypnotherapy helped "even those whose conditions were refractory to other forms of therapy." They pointed out that while there may be no cure for IBS, symptom relief is possible for most, if not all, patients.

[EDUCATION]

New British school caters to children of Kazakh elite

Haileybury Almaty, the first British private school in Central Asia, is a concrete sign of the economic prosperity brought to Kazakhstan by oil and gas

BY OLZHAS AUYEZOV
REUTERS, ALMATY

Kazakh businessman Serzhan Zhumashov says some of his friends laughed when he came up with the idea of opening a British school in his home country five years ago.

Last week, some brought their children to the opening of Haileybury Almaty, the first British private school in Central Asia and a concrete sign of the economic prosperity brought to Kazakhstan by oil and gas.

About 300 students and their parents attended the opening ceremony at the school, a stylish glass-and-concrete building in a newly developed area of Kazakhstan's commercial hub Almaty.

"We decided to do it so our children could stay here and at the same time get the education that would allow them to enter any university," said Zhumashov, the chairman of construction firm Capital Partners.

Regular schools, offering tuition mostly in Kazakh or Russian, are free in Kazakhstan but many school buildings are in need of repair and a shortage of space means children have to study in three shifts in some areas.

The graduation certificate that students in the mainstream system receive is only recognized by local

universities, so those wanting to study abroad have to arrange exams themselves.

Zhumashov and six other Kazakh businessmen, including Nurzhan Subkhanberdin, the chairman of Kazkommertsbank and Margulan Seisenbayev, the key shareholder of Alliance Bank, spent about US\$100 million on the project.

Haileybury, a private British school founded in 1862 in Hertford Heath, 32km north of central London, was the most enthusiastic of the foreign private schools the group contacted for advice. Its best-known alumnus was the UK's post-war Labor prime minister, Clement Attlee.

It is among several British private schools opening affiliates abroad to generate new income, including top names such as Harrow, Repton and Shrewsbury.

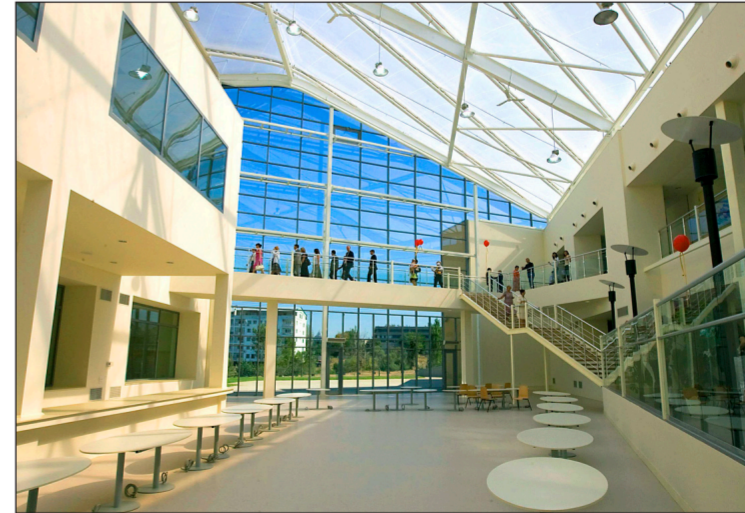
Fiona Rogers, general secretary of the Council of British International Schools, said British education is popular internationally and there are roughly 2,000 schools abroad teaching parts of the English curriculum.

"UK independent schools that choose to tap into this market can find that opening a branch abroad provides an important source of income which, in turn, can help the parent school in the



Left: A Haileybury Almaty school first-year student cries during the opening ceremony of the first British private school in Central Asia, on Sept. 1.

Right: The Haileybury Almaty school is a stylish glass-and-concrete building in a newly developed area of Kazakhstan's commercial hub, Almaty.



PHOTOS: REUTERS

UK provide more bursaries and contribute more to their local community," she said.

She said her organization was receiving a growing number of enquiries from individuals, companies and governments outside the UK seeking British independent schools interested in opening an international branch.

Haileybury was already a favorite among wealthy Kazakhs who started sending their children to Western schools in the 1990s.

"Haileybury always had Kazakh children," said school governor Jean Scott. "One of the parents

was Serzhan."

Zhumashov said he and his partners were not trying to make a profit and the school would charge fees that would only cover its costs.

Still, costing students between US\$16,000 and US\$20,000 a year, the school is off-limits to most Kazakh families. The average monthly wage in Kazakhstan, a resource-rich former Soviet republic, is US\$500.

"We plan to provide about 10 scholarships for students from families with low incomes, starting next year," Zhumashov said.

Kazakhstan, which with a population of 15 million people is home to seven billionaires according to *Forbes* magazine, is seen by Western economists as the most successful market reformer in Central Asia.

The government spent about US\$3.8 billion or 3.6 percent of gross domestic product on education in 2007, compared with 5.8 percent in the US.

The global liquidity squeeze has dented the economy, with growth officially forecast to slow to 5.3 percent this year from 8.7 percent in 2007.

Nonetheless, the school's opening ceremony looked like a demonstration of what petrodollars can buy, with new SUVs lining up outside the building just across the street from a gleaming Marriott hotel.

Parents, many of them former or current government officials, exchanged hugs and handshakes and fretted about whether their children would be able to understand the teachers, most of whom were foreigners.

One parent, who asked not to be identified, said he was worried about how the offspring

of Kazakhstan's rich and powerful — used to having their own way — would behave.

"It might be pretty hard with so many children from rich families — they need to be very strict right from the start," he said.

Those who cannot afford the fees see the school as just another elitist club. "This is how they separate themselves from us," said a taxi driver taking a reporter to the school.

The growing gap between rich and poor has become more visible in Kazakhstan and many families struggle to cope with rising food prices. Official unemployment is running around six percent but people say jobs are harder to find.

Seeking to soften potential criticism of the school, Almaty's Mayor Akhmetzhan Yesimov, who attended the opening ceremony, said his office would finance several scholarships for children willing to study at the school.

Zhumashov said investors in the Kazakh capital Astana were interested in setting up a second British school: "We could manage a school there if they build it themselves."

He has other plans, too. "We are in talks with an Ivy League university," Zhumashov said. "We are thinking about setting up a business school here."