



The Importance of Talking About IBS

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Discussing Your Disorder Comfortably and Effectively

Let's face it: irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is embarrassing, and you probably don't want to offer it up as dinner conversation. In fact, it can be difficult to know where to begin, let alone how best to describe the consequences and problems without making you or your confidant cringe.

However, keeping IBS a secret can have all sorts of negative effects for your emotional health, self-confidence and social life. Once you have learned to accept your IBS as a reality (but one that can be controlled), it might be time to share with those in your family and social circle to unburden yourself.

Fortunately, there are ways to do this without drama or humiliation.

How to Broach the Topic With Friends and Family

The people closest to you should understand and support you, but it's natural to worry about how they will react. Friends, acquaintances and lovers pose the biggest challenge: what if it grosses them out, turns them off, or alienates them for good?

Well, first off, you've probably built this up in your head far more, and thought about it far more frequently, than they have (or ever would). Before you even strike up the conversation, consider these mental adjustments and strategies to put things into perspective and make the process easier.

Challenge Your Shame

Shame is a complicated emotion that depends on judgement. It's a reaction that stems from what you think others think, and how you feel others might feel about you.

In truth, it's virtually impossible to know just how someone feels or thinks about a given event or statement, so your shame about your IBS is not very realistic.

By adjusting your perspective, you can shrink that shame considerably. For instance, consider this: everyone has a bowel, so everyone has symptoms related to their bowel function.

Yours may be more difficult to control than others', but they stem from the very same processes. Everyone experiences constipation and diarrhea at certain times in life, so they know what it feels like — your bodies are really not that different.

If they're not ashamed, why should you be?

Offer the Benefit of the Doubt

If you give them the chance, most people will be sympathetic toward your plight once you tell them about it. They know what it feels like to be at the mercy of their digestive tract when they're sick, and it doesn't take a big stretch of the imagination to understand how terrible it would be to have that feeling all the time.

In the cases where people giggle or say something to make you feel awkward, keep in mind they're likely reacting to something inside of *them*, not anything in you. It's said that a person's attitudes towards others are a projection of the things they don't like about themselves; perhaps those people feel even more insecure, ashamed or unhappy about their bodies or lives than you feel about yours.

Ease Into It

If you're just beginning to open up about your IBS, it might be best to start slow by confiding in your most understanding friend, family member or co-worker. After gauging their reaction, you'll better know what to expect when you tell others, and which info helps (or hinders) their understanding.

Divulging your secret to one or two people at first will also give you the opportunity to see how fast word gets around. If you ask them to keep your IBS just between the two of you, and they prove to be good secret-keepers, you'll have some much-needed social support when times get tough.

If they tell some others, well, at least the damage is more limited than it would be if you had told more gossipy friends at the outset.

Discussing IBS With Colleagues for a Better Work Experience

Many people living with IBS will agree that symptoms are particularly hard to handle at work. There's an extra level of social politeness at play, and away from the comfort of your own bathroom, a good deal of stress and embarrassment can arise.

Aside from giving yourself more time in the morning to get ready and calm your stomach, you may want to explain to your colleagues the cause of your peculiar behavior around the office.

A bit of tact and confidence can go far to garner sympathy and support from your co-workers.

- **Talk to your boss or manager.** It can be really difficult to divulge such personal information to your boss, but coming forward with your IBS shows that you want to be open and honest in order to improve your work experience, and by extension, everyone else's.
- **Be straightforward and concise.** You don't need to go deep into details about your IBS, but be honest about how it impedes your life at work. You might need to explain the major symptoms, and mention the fact that you have good and bad days, but the condition is unpredictable.
- **Stand your ground.** Once you bring up your IBS, you might find that people will be *too* supportive, offering lots of advice based on people they know or articles they've read. You can be firm but polite here: thank them for their concern, but remind them that you know your body best, and what works for others may not work for you.

Once you've informed your colleagues about the adjustments you may need to make during your work day, assume everyone is on the same page, and transfer your energy to other thoughts and tasks.

Stressing about hypothetical situations isn't going to do you or your IBS any good.

Reference Resources Can Help Everyone

Casually dropping in your sources of information during the conversation can help strengthen the medical aspect of your condition — the fact that IBS is a real disease that's beyond your control.

The next time you find yourself discussing, or on the brink of discussing digestive issues, mention the insight you gleaned from a recent news article or use a well-informed opinion piece as a jumping-off point for your own take on the condition. As a bonus, it will gently encourage your friends, colleagues and family to educate themselves about IBS a little bit more.