



Relaxing the Mind and IBS

by NEWLIFEOUTLOOK TEAM

Importance of Stress Relief for Managing Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Stress isn't just a passing concern for some IBS patients: up to 60% suffer from psychiatric disorders, including depression or anxiety, and almost one-third of patients do not get better without some psychological intervention. The problem lies in the cyclical nature of mental and physical stress: worsening IBS symptoms can trigger more stress, the stress can aggravate symptoms, and the cycle continues. Whether IBS symptoms or stress comes first, their coexistence demands attention and a properly structured treatment plan.

How Stress Affects IBS Symptoms

Most health experts accept that there's a strong connection between the body and mind, and physical ailments can wreak havoc on emotional states. However, mental distress can also affect physical health, and that means more pronounced bloating, pain and sudden GI changes in people with IBS.

Some theories outline specific ways that stress affects physical functioning:

- Episodes of stress may increase awareness of spasms in the colon and abdominal pain, so even if it doesn't technically increase pain, stress can make it seem worse.
- Dwelling on the potential for an embarrassing social situation can increase the possibility that it will happen. If your thoughts spin out of control, your body processes could follow suit.
- Stress affects the immune system, and there is some evidence that immune responses trigger IBS symptoms.

It's important to remember that stress doesn't cause IBS, so even a completely stress-free life can't eradicate your intestinal symptoms. On the other hand, reducing stress is bound to bring some improvement in your symptoms, as well as your outlook on life.

The Best Stress Relief Therapies for IBS

No one technique promises a calm and relaxed demeanor, but every IBS patient can find a few stress relief exercises that bring noticeable results.

Mind-body Techniques: Meditation, visualization and progressive muscle relaxation are examples of techniques that connect the state of mind to the physical processes of the body. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) incorporates many mind-body exercises that have proven effective for decreasing pain, improving mood and even increasing muscle function.

Lifestyle Changes: Better quality of sleep, more exercise and a diet tailored to IBS can bring enormous improvement to your quality of life. A stronger body and sharper mental faculties are powerful stress-reducing tools, so even a few small changes are important steps in the right direction.

Social Support: The embarrassing nature of IBS symptoms and their impact on self-esteem can be isolating, but a good support network can keep emotional and physical symptoms in check. Turn to family and friends when you need to, without minimizing your illness: those who don't suffer from IBS won't automatically understand what you're going through, but honest and direct information will help them empathize and help in whatever ways they can.

It's common to assume that, since there's no cure for IBS, you might as well keep up your routine and avoid stress as best you can. But acknowledging your chronic illness shouldn't mean giving up on your body, your personal growth or your quality of life. Take more time to pursue your favorite activities, get comfortable and confident in your abilities, and try not to stretch yourself too thin. Remember that stress is manageable, and you have dozens of resources to help you take control of your emotional and physical well-being.