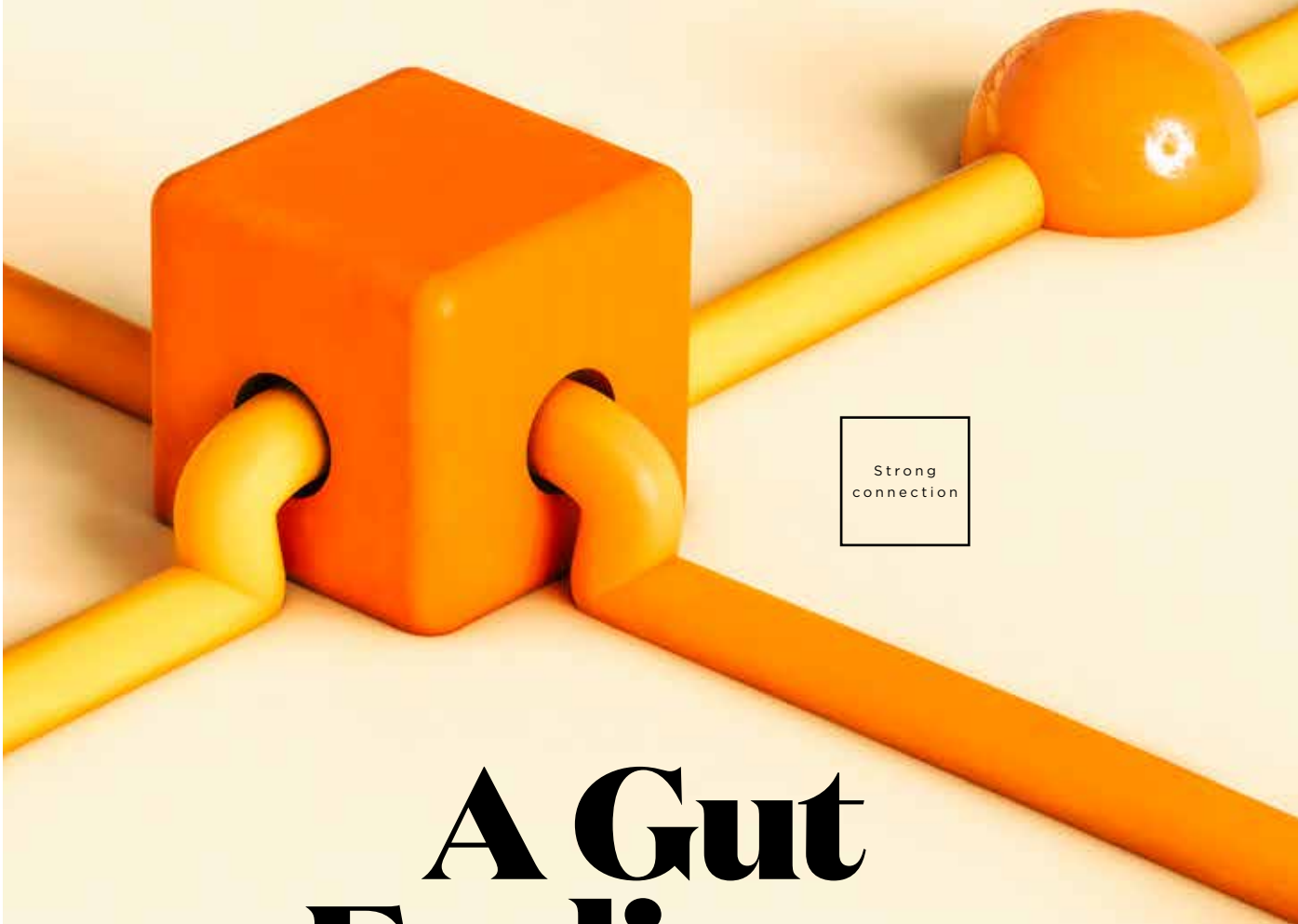


HEALTH




Strong
connection

A Gut Feeling

With many of us reporting an increase in gastrointestinal woes lately, could the rise of gut-directed hypnotherapy be the key to relief?

By Alex Davies





You're sitting on the deck of a wooden cottage. The sun is yet to rise, the cold air feels fresh and birdsong peppers the quiet around you. You step off the deck and walk down a path to a river. The water is flowing gently and smoothly, with no obstructions from rubble or rocks. It's moving along at just the right pace...

Suddenly, your eyes snap open as your train neighbour spills coffee down his shirt. Headphones out; you'll come back to this scene later. Ah, yes, sorry, this isn't the start of a nature retreat story. The peaceful river is part of a specific guided hypnosis, one that's designed to help settle your bowel troubles.

"That's an example of a visualisation I'd use with my patients - the flow of the river acts as a representation of the flow of their gut, allowing the patient to change it according to their needs. Another example would be asking them to imagine going to a pharmacy and swallowing a specific medicine

that provides a protective coating in the gut, thus resulting in reduced symptoms," says Dr Simone Peters, founder of the Mind + Gut Clinic in Melbourne and a gastroenterology researcher at Monash University. A leading expert in hypnotherapy that targets gut issues - known as gut-directed hypnotherapy - she is also the head of clinical content at Nerva, a digital therapeutic that delivers a six-week program of the approach via an app.

A 2022 review in *Gastroenterology* found gut-directed hypnotherapy (GDH) can be an effective tool for people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and potentially some other gut conditions. (The authors also highlighted how it

can be successfully delivered via digital or video platforms as well as IRL.) Last year, the American College of Gastroenterology included the practice on its first set of IBS treatment recommendations. Meanwhile, Nerva continues to make digital waves since its 2019 launch, accompanied by an Instagram grid with more memes than medical jargon.

The rise of this therapy couldn't have come at a better time. If you're reading this between bathroom trips, chances are you can testify to the impact of #pandemic-problems on those with gut woes. A *Journal of Clinical Gastroenterology* survey of 55 people with IBS, as well as anxiety or depression, revealed that around half have seen an uptick in gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms during this time, while most have felt more stressed. So, if you're on GI Struggle Street, could hypnotherapy add a boost to your toolkit?

What Happens in Vagus

First, a little bit of background for you. "Hypnotherapy is the use of hypnosis for treatment. It helps a person achieve an altered state of consciousness... where they're better able to focus and absorb information

to create cognitive and physical change," says Dr Jim Kantidakis, a gut-directed clinical psychologist, hypnotherapist and founder of The Gut Centre, which offers both face-to-face and Zoom appointments from clinics in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. We actually experience this sort of state all

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A study of this many weeks revealed women were more likely than men to respond to GDH

SOURCE: THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF CLINICAL HYPNOSIS



the time, he adds – daydreaming, for example. “Hypnosis is the process of inducing that state.”

When you’re in this super chilled, trance-like mode, a therapist presents different metaphors and scenarios to “give suggestions to the subconscious part of the mind, which is more receptive when you’re really relaxed and comfortable,” says Peters. “The suggestions are targeted towards improving whatever problem the patient presents with, so in gut-directed

hypnotherapy, [they’d be about] improving IBS symptoms and normalising of gut function.” (FYI, both experts emphasise that you don’t lose control in hypnotherapy – having no memory of dancing like a chicken, this certainly isn’t.)

The key to tackling gut issues in this way lies in something you’ve likely heard of before: the brain-gut axis, or the vagus nerve, the highway connecting your brain and digestive system

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IBS affects up to this percentage of people in Australia, the majority female

SOURCE: DIETITIANS AUSTRALIA

that sees them communicating with and influencing each other. This power-couple connection affects everyone (think about the way a

stressful meeting can turn your guts into a washing machine, or how an uncomfortable tummy also leaves you feeling sluggish) but some of us experience more sensitivity than others.

“Things going on at either end of the axis can contribute to symptoms,” explains Peters. “People’s mental state can have an impact on their physical symptoms. But there are things happening at the gut level too – for example, often motility is altered in people with irritable bowel, so food moves through the gut too quickly and they might have

diarrhoea, or too slowly and they have constipation.” The other common thing is ‘visceral hypersensitivity’, “where the nerves in the tummy are too sensitive, which usually means symptoms like pain and bloating. So, one aim of hypnotherapy is to get the brain and gut communicating with one another better,” she says.

Uncrossed Wires

Exactly how hypnotherapy works on the gut is still somewhat TBD (“we believe it influences certain parts of the brain,” says Kantidakis. “It’s that brain-body connection that helps the brain process and control what’s going on in the body”) but the research – dating back to the 1980s – is impressive.

A 1984 study in *The Lancet* saw IBS patients who had hypnotherapy experience an improvement in abdominal pain, bowel habits and overall wellbeing. Then in 2016, Peters and the Monash team found hypnotherapy to be as effective as the low FODMAP diet, an intervention where you manage intake of certain

trigger foods. In the six-week study of 78 people with IBS, 70 per cent of those who did hypnotherapy responded positively and saw symptoms improve, often for up to six months after treatment.

(A 2003 paper in *Gut* suggests this period can stretch to five years.)

GDH is just one piece of your potential arsenal, not a cure-all. But, with research often finding that participants enjoy a quality-of-life boost, it’s a piece worth considering.

A Flush Future

A green flag to look for in a hypnotherapist? Being nosier than a tabloid journo about your digestive life story, including any prior investigations or testing by a GP or gastroenterologist. (That’s important to rule out underlying medical issues.) This all helps to inform the best GDH approach for you, as well as whether it might *not* be the best path – hypnotherapy generally isn’t recommended for those with certain trauma histories or dissociative disorders like schizophrenia. “Remember hypnotherapy is an altered state of

consciousness,” adds Kantidakis.

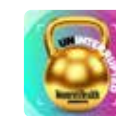
Otherwise, curious minds can start by looking for a trained practitioner who specialises in gut issues – at both experts’ clinics, for example – although Peters acknowledges that waitlists can be long and finding someone trained in the space in other

parts of the world can be hard. In fact, making GDH more accessible is what inspired her to create Nerva in the first place. This rise in digital options, and our collective obsession with gut health, are likely factors in the recent awareness increase.

Peters recalls presenting the idea of gut-directed hypnotherapy

while doing her PhD more than a decade ago. To say her colleagues were sceptical is an understatement. “But now there’s so much good quality science to support its use in people with IBS,” she says. “There’s been lots of research which shows this therapy works. That’s really gained the attention of the medical community.”

A past patient sticks in Kantidakis’ mind. A woman in her 50s who finally found some relief after living with IBS for 20 years. Seeing someone’s quality of life improve – being able to go on holiday or leave home without worrying about bathroom locations – is what fuels his passion for this work. “I believe it saves lives,” he says. Now, let’s get back to that river. **WH**



Use the QR code to tune into the full chat with Dr Peters on our podcast, *Uninterrupted by Women’s Health Australia*

