



A Voyage into the Gut

By Stephanie Pollock, MA, CHC, EPC, CYT

My journey into the gut began at a very young age. My grandmother and aunt silently suffered with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis my entire life. I was completely unaware of their digestive and bodily pain. My mother finally explained to me, when I was around the age of 13, why my grandmother was in the bathroom all morning on our family beach vacations and why my aunt's health had declined over the years. So I have known and feared the possibility of having digestive troubles.

I was diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Syndrome around the age of twenty. When the doctors told me that there was nothing I could do and to just stay away from fiber, I realized that this diagnosis of I.B.S. was, to be honest, BS. Thus began my journey into my bowels. If you had asked me at that point in my life to imagine what my digestive tract looked like all I saw was black. A large black balloon was all that existed in my gut. It was a mysterious place that I didn't understand. The only thing I knew was that I was angry and frustrated with my gut for failing to do the one thing I thought it was meant to do: digest. Yet, I have learned over the years that digestion is so much more than just how we digest our food.

In our gut lies a second brain called the Enteric Nervous System. Some research suggests that it can

operate separately from the brain in our head (Gershon, 1998; Mayer, 2011). So your head might be sending you messages saying one thing, while your gut is saying something entirely different. For example, your head might be yelling at you, "I want chocolate, I want sugar, and I want cake," while your gut is craving nutrient dense food (as opposed to simple carbohydrates) and high quality protein. I am not saying that one message is better or not to listen to over the other, but they both offer information that we can utilize and learn from each time we make choices on what to eat. Our food choices reflect our internal physical and emotional state.

As a body psychotherapist and nutritional counselor, I have worked with individuals dealing with digestive issues, eating disorders, body image issues, addiction, and

weight gain. I have observed patterns within my clients and their relationship with food, and I have found that most individuals have not been taught how to listen to the brain in their gut (myself included). It took me years to learn how to listen to my gut's messages and that I was digesting my emotions as well as my food on a daily basis. Most of us have heard the colloquialisms, "I have a knot in my stomach" or "I have butterflies in my stomach." We eat our emotions almost every day, at every meal. This is not a "bad" thing. There is no such thing as emotional eating because we are emotional beings and we eat, thus eating will always be an emotional experience.

Our Enteric Nervous System is exquisitely designed and when given the chance, it knows how to digest our food, as well as our past and present experiences. But pain,



biological need for the energy to function. Emotional hunger is felt as emptiness in the body yet one does not need food. Thus, no matter how much food one eats when feeling emotional hunger they will never feel filled, satiated, nourished. The wires get crossed when it comes to properly satisfying physical and emotional hunger very easily and at a young age. This is because, in my opinion, food is love. Food is one of the first forms of love we receive from a parental figure at the time of birth. Thus, for the rest of our lives food can be connected to love. When I began to understand this

wanted everything to slow down. It wanted to be held, to be appreciated, to lie on the ground and feel the earth beneath it and know that it was being supported. There was pain in my gut that went beyond the physical and when I finally did take the time to slow down the emotional release happened bit by bit. I gradually began to hear what it wanted to be fed. One day I spent until two o'clock in the afternoon committed to hear what my body wanted to eat. Did it want warm or cold? Smooth or chunky? Raw or cooked? It finally spoke. It was so randomly clear: baked asparagus. I laughed out loud. It was so simple, and I have no idea what nutrients or qualities were in asparagus that my body might have needed in that moment, but it was crystal clear: my gut wanted a vegetable; it wanted it baked; it wanted something wholesome and warm.

suffering, and disappointment happen in life, and the body can put up strong protective walls. It was those protective walls that needed to come down for me to be able to get into my gut and release the pain held there. Growing up, I felt that I needed to firmly keep myself together lest someone try and get inside my emotional fortress that I thought was protecting me. Yet, in doing so I was trapped within myself and caused my body to stiffen and become armored. My anxiety about being emotionally invaded shut down my ability to digest (physically and emotionally). It felt contradictory at times that the way out of my digestive issues was to go into my body, to go into my digestive tract, and begin to listen.

At first, I had no idea what I was listening for from my guts. I had no idea what hunger or satiation felt like to my unique body; I ate by what time it was. If I felt emotional emptiness, I figured I was hungry because I had no idea there was a difference between physical and emotional hunger. I now define physical hunger as my body's

concept, I realized that every time I sat down to eat, I brought along every idea of love and nourishment I had ever received. Food is not just food, and a meal is not just a meal. It is possible to tap into the ignored feelings you might have been experiencing throughout a day just by noticing what you are eating at a meal and how you are eating it. Food and our relationship with food are metaphoric. Investigating our relationship with food can help us travel down the rabbit's hole into a slew of information about how our relationship with food is indicative to how we relate to everything else in life.

As a teenager, I was a fast eater. I did everything else in life quickly, too. I had a hard time feeling fulfilled by life and a difficult time feeling satisfied by food. I had to get to the point of exhaustion and tears to slow down. This continued into my undergraduate years. My gut had been waiting long enough to be heard. I did not feed it what it wanted both physically and emotionally. Emotionally my gut

It can be incredibly hard to hear these messages when we are bombarded by external information telling us what to eat and what will feel nourishing. Commercials, fast food, diets, contradictory information can overwhelm us. I do not live in your body. I do not know what you need but you do, and I love and feel inspired by supporting others in learning how to hear these messages and trust them. Additionally, no matter what place we choose to eat from (our head telling us to eat sugar or our gut telling us to eat some vegetables), there is no "wrong" way to eat. Sugar cravings can be a sign of protein or mineral deficiencies or a sense that sweetness is lacking in one's life. But, no matter if you decide to eat that piece of chocolate cake or cook yourself a piece of chicken and some vegetables, either way, it will be useful information and a way to tap into your internal state.

I have learned that it is not just what I eat, but how I eat that contributes to a satisfying eating experience. If I eat a "healthy" salad every day for lunch,



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but I do not enjoy it, my guts will cramp, digestion will shut down, and I will not absorb all the nutrients from this supposed “healthy” salad. Have you ever been on vacation and decided to eat whatever you wanted in a relaxed manner and you actually lost weight? This has happened to me countless times, and I am always in awe of how feeling relaxed in our viscera and eating with pleasure and enjoyment can help our body to do what it naturally does and allow us to feel healthy and vibrant in our body.

Lastly, I want to add that there is no such thing as perfect digestion. When I feel uncomfortable in my gut, I have learned that I need to slow down and listen. Every ailment experienced in the body is the body’s way of communicating. Within every digestive complaint is a message waiting to be heard. Perhaps I am eating too fast, or eating things I know don’t sit well in my body, or I am trying to fill an emotional hunger with food. No matter what place I am eating from, I can view my digestive upset as information and not judge myself for doing something “wrong.” Our experience with food is a practice of compassion and self love.

Here is an experiment you can begin today: sit down with your meal without any distractions (no book, no phone, no computer, no talking, no television) and delve into the experience of eating. Smell your food before you take a bite. Notice your mouth salivate. Chew your first bite, notice the sensations happening in your body and the thoughts as well. Does a voice say hurry up and finish this meal as fast as possible? What is happening within and around you in this moment? What is your external environment like while eating this meal? Notice how the texture and the taste change with every bite. Pause between each bite. Set your fork or spoon down and notice what is happening in your body? Does your gut want more? Is your head saying eat more when your gut has had enough? When you reach the point of feeling full, observe what that feels like in your body. Do you sense any tingles, warmth, calm, clarity? Additionally, take a moment to notice what it feels like to give yourself nourishment. Every time you eat you are engaging in the same act that your parents did when you were born. Every time you eat you are committing to be here on earth, to keep yourself alive, and you are

giving yourself love on some conscious or unconscious level.

Be sure to read Stephanie’s related article, *The Enteric Nervous System and Body Psychotherapy: Cultivating a Relationship in the Gut Brain in the International Body Psychotherapy Journal*, Volume 13, Number 1, Spring 2014

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Stephanie Pollock MA, CHC, EPC, CYT is a Certified Nutritional Counselor, Eating Psychologist, Certified Yoga Teacher, and has her Masters degree in Body Psychotherapy. She encourages every individual to be an active participant in their own healing; and to find nourishment that will work for you and only you. Stephanie stresses bio-individuality and works with her clients to foster intuitive eating. You can [e-mail her at ActiveTherapy@Live.com](mailto:ActiveTherapy@Live.com).

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