

Toilet Phobia and IBS

Chat Room Session on Monday 23rd June with Dr Nick Read

Dr Nick Read is a writer, psychotherapist and physician and has had many years experience of looking after patients who suffer from the Irritable Bowel Syndrome. He is currently writing a Self Management Programme for IBS. Drawing on his experience of working both as a physician and a psychotherapist he has developed strategies for self management.

What is IBS? How does this relate to Toilet Phobia?

Nick suggested that IBS stands for irritable bowel syndrome and that it is a medically unexplained illness with symptoms of abdominal discomfort and bowel disturbance. This might be diarrhoea or constipation or an alternating pattern of both.

Nick mentioned that Toilet Phobia and IBS are linked due to a lot of people with IBS suffering from constipation, and part of the problem is there may be an underlying toilet related anxiety.

It is suggested that anxiety, although not always, goes hand in hand with IBS. In fact, according to a recent study between 50 - 90% of people seeking treatment for IBS also have an underlying psychiatric condition. This may be because people are anxious about the symptoms they are experiencing. However, it has also been found that the more anxious you are the more likely you are to experience IBS. Therefore there is a lot that is still unknown about the link between anxiety and IBS.

Personal Experiences

“Pink” mentioned that due to having diarrhoea it makes her panic if she doesn’t know where the nearest toilet is. Lucy mentioned that she has had IBS and GAD for the past few years and always has to make sure she is near a toilet.

“Pink” mentioned that she thinks it is medical but there are a lot of psychological components.

Nick agreed and suggested that IBS is a mind and body disease, and the symptoms are very real but the meaning of the illness relates to ones personal situation or experience. Lucy agreed with this and mentioned that hers is a vicious circle with her GAD worsening the IBS symptoms and vice versa.

“Loofree” mentioned that when she is having visitors to her house she is worries about smell and noise.

“Pink” suggested that in some people the Toilet related anxiety may manifest itself in the tum and bum.

Lucy mentioned that when her symptoms are particularly bad she sometimes gets the need to go to the toilet urgently soon or while she is eating, which makes her nervous of meals out.

Jodie mirrored this experience and mentioned she cannot go to restaurants and it has ruined her social life. It has also made her scared of starting new relationships due to having to go out to places.

Nick mentioned this is called the gastro-colonic reflex which can be exaggerated in IBS. This is the reflex to use the toilet shortly after food intake to prevent constipation. He mentioned that certain foods can make this exaggeration worse. For example, coffee, spices, and fatty foods, can be dreadful.

What is the treatment?

Nick mentioned that often IBS can express the fear and anxiety you feel in social situations, so it is important to deal with this aspect using relaxation or therapy such as CBT.

Nick mentioned that treatments are often individual. You need to find out what works for you and what the symptoms represent for you. He added that some people can control their symptoms by avoiding food which seems to upset them, but suggested it is important not to overdo it.

Lucy mentioned that she has recently been recommended a PH free diet to help both her anxiety and IBS.

So what is a PH diet?



A PH diet is also known as an alkaline acid diet and consists mainly of fresh fruit, vegetables, roots and nuts. Basically it is the food that our ancestors ate because it was only when agriculture and mining took off an increase of acidic foods into the diet occurred, e.g. meat, cheese, milk, salt and sugar. The theory behind the diet is that our diet should reflect the PH level of the blood and be slightly alkaline. It is suggested that when we introduce too much acid and upset the balance there are a loss of essential minerals such as potassium, magnesium, calcium and sodium as the body tries to restore the balance.

It is this imbalance that is thought to make people prone to illness. People switch to this diet for a number of reasons, including lack of energy, frequent illness, anxiety, nervousness and irritability.

There is a book available on Amazon called: PH Miracle: Balance your diet; reclaim your health by Robert and Shelley Young. For anyone interested this book includes detailed theory, putting it into practice and recipes.

Nick mentioned that there is no scientific evidence behind such a diet, but if it works for you it is unlikely to do you any harm.

I must mention that if you are considering drastically changing your diet in a way such as this you should speak to your doctor.

Does anyone try relaxation that will take the urge away or any other techniques?

“Pink” mentioned that deep breathing really helps her; she suggested that it is simple but very effective when practiced properly. She also mentioned that she has used rescue remedies and distraction techniques. There are details of such techniques on the internet and www.livinglifetothefull.com covers a few well known anxiety boosting techniques.

Lucy mentioned that she is trying our medication and reiki, but only started recently so has not seen any change as yet.

Nick mentioned that it is good to make a list of what makes your symptoms worse and what makes them better and have strategies that can work and give you confidence. He mentioned that distraction, relaxation and medication can all help, but it is ultimately what works for you.

What about Medication?

Imodium?

Lucy mentioned she gets very nervous about flying and now has to take Imodium.

Jodie mentioned she takes Imodium to give her some control during driving lessons.

Nick mentioned that Imodium is a good drug for urgency and restoring confidence but it often gives some people pain. He added that it is as if the gut is having its say.

Questran?

Nick mentioned that another good medication for urgency is Questran. It works by binding to bile acids, which are nature's laxative. He mentioned however that unfortunately many GPs will not prescribe for IBS but it can be very useful.

Probiotics?

Lucy mentioned that she has taken various Probiotics but then found out that they can potentially do more harm than good. *Is this true?*

Nick mentioned that Probiotics help some people and not others. He mentioned there is no objective evidence that they work in IBS but the PR is excellent “good bacteria and bad bacteria”.

Nick added that they are not so much harmful, but some people, have told him that they can make their gassy symptoms worse and even make them looser.

Lucy mentioned that it is all down to trial and error. Nick agreed and suggested it works for some and not for others. **He suggested that about sums up the treatment for IBS.**

Does IBS make Toilet Phobia worse?

Lucy mentioned that her Toilet Phobia came about as a result of IBS.

Nick mentioned that he thinks CBT and Clinical Hypnotherapy can be very useful, but mentioned it depends much or more on the therapist. If you have faith in the therapist, treatment will often work.

Does anyone think if they could manage their IBS their Toilet Phobia would be manageable?

“Pink” suggested that she hates anything when she is not in control and can’t get out. She mentioned that the conditions are so interlinked and in her case it is the anxiety that is the problem. Jodie agreed and suggested it is all in the head!

Lucy mentioned for her IBS, Toilet Phobia and GAD all came in one big unhappy bundle.

“Pink” mentioned if she feels conformable in her environment it doesn’t cross her mind at all. She also mentioned that she has not had a relationship for so long now and would rather be on her own than have to explain it to others.

Nick posed the question, many of you identify the panic about getting to the loo on time or having to go in social situations is particularly bad. *But where did this come from?*

“Pink” mentioned it was a small accident when she couldn’t get into her boyfriend’s flat loo at university as his flat mate was in the bath. She thinks that that started the whole, “where is the loo”, “I need to get in the loo”, and in case it happens or happens worse next time.

Lucy mentioned for her it was when a tube she was on stopped in a tunnel. She experienced a terrible panic attack and awful urgent toilet needs. She added that she luckily didn’t have an accident but the experience had left a terrible long term effect.

Nick asked if anyone has received any help with these memories.

Lucy mentioned she had CBT for a while which helped a bit.

Jodie mentioned CBT is her next step.

“Pink” mentioned she has just finished CBT and is due to start a course of hypnotherapy, she mentioned that both helped but were not solutions as such. She added that when it is in the mind and not medical it is so much harder to treat.

What are the commonalities of someone suffering from Toilet Phobia and IBS?

Nick mentioned it is panic, anxiety and social phobia. He mentioned that the gut problem is like the “alarm bell” - we need to find out what is setting it off.

Further sources of information

Nick mentioned that people should join the Gut Trust and read their self management programme. This lists lots of strategies that might adopt or therapies you might try to deal with this problem.

Nick also mentioned he has written a book called Sick and Tired, healing the illnesses doctors can't cure. This book has received some very positive reviews and is available to buy second hand on Amazon and new from many good book shops.

What do we do at Anxiety UK?

As Nick mentioned one of the therapies that is recommended for specific phobias such as Toilet Phobia is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Through our nationwide network of trained therapists we are able to offer CBT both face to face and over the phone at much reduced rates. If you would like to find out more about the benefits of the society you can visit: <http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/membersservices.php>.

As many of you may already know we have specific funding to help with Toilet Phobia and due to this we offer a monthly specialist chat room with an emphasis on Toilet Phobia and related conditions. We also have a host of other online services including a forum with a specific section dedicated to Toilet Phobia sufferers. To find out more you can visit: <http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/members.php>.

I would strongly recommend you use all of the online service as they are an excellent means of support. Joining the mailing list will enable you to be kept informed about these services and be reminded of further chats and events.

If anyone would like any help or support don't hesitate to call (08444 775 774) or email Anxiety UK (support@anxietyuk.org.uk).

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