Handout 9.1 (PATIENT VERSION)

Trauma, abuse, attachment and gastrointestinal (GI) illness: Working with complex patients with GI and psychological concerns

There has been a lot more research on how the physiology of our GI systems may interact with psychological factors such as trauma, attachment, and personality. This handout describes what we know and what to do about it.

How do trauma and abuse affect the GI tract?

- A history of trauma, including abuse, often leads to an over-perception of threat that activates the nervous system to be on high alert.
- This high activation affects the brain-gut axis, including more sensitivity to pain signals or even perceiving normal processes like digestion as uncomfortable.
- High levels of anger or anxiety that may be part of perceiving threat or hostility can "turn up the volume" on the nervous system, which also affects GI function.

What is attachment?

- Our experiences as a young child with caregivers can affect how close we allow ourselves to be to others as adults.

Why does attachment matter?

- People with a history of abuse or trauma, especially at the hands of parents or primary caregivers, often have more difficulty forming close attachments.
- A lack of trusting close relationships reduces our support system, which can contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety, and even more anger toward others because we feel like it is hard to trust people in general.
- All of this makes it harder to deal with stress because we feel more alone.

What do we know about personality and GI symptoms?

- We know that some personality traits are associated with more problems with symptoms in people with GI disorders.

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- The most common traits are neuroticism (tendency to overly focus on negative emotions), being a "worrier" and having a high sensitivity to pain sensations and anxiety in general.
- Difficulty identifying and describing emotions can also be a common personality trait that can impact GI symptoms.

So, what do I do?

"Turn down the volume" of the nervous system:

- Physical and mental relaxation strategies can help turn down the volume on a nervous system activated by pain, stress, and anxiety.
- Diaphragmatic breathing (see Handout 13.1) – deep belly breaths – actually puts pressure on the vagus nerve to trigger a relaxation response in our bodies.
- Meditation, even a few minutes a day, helps to retrain the nervous system to stay at a lower volume, and to practice quieting and slowing down racing thoughts like worries.

Cognitive coping

- In many chronic illnesses, the way we think about our symptoms and illness become automatic over time but may not always be accurate; it can help us cope with symptoms better if we challenge how realistic our thoughts are about them.
- GI symptoms especially have been linked with having a lot of worries, and "catastrophising", which means thinking of the worst scenario, causing more anxiety and distress ("That stomach cramp means I'm in a flare-up now"). We can keep a check on these types of thoughts by asking ourselves questions like, "how likely is it that's true?" and "what could be evidence that it's not true?"

Adaptive emotion-focussed coping:

- In people experiencing high levels of negative affect (e.g., anger, anxiety), learning how to manage these emotions can help gut symptoms overall.
- The first step is building a good awareness of emotions (e.g., what am I feeling right now?) and working to tell the difference between feeling an emotion in the body and a physical problem (e.g., heart beating quickly because of feeling anxious, not because of a heart problem).
- It helps to become more in touch with the body, taking time to feel how emotions can be expressed in physical sensations (e.g., I'm feeling angry . . . what is happening in my body?); this can help give us clues about our emotions by listening to our bodies.

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- Meditation and mindfulness strategies can also help turn down the intensity of distressing emotions by practicing labelling the emotion, allowing ourselves to feel it without suppressing or acting out, and then releasing it.

Stress management:

- Since stress levels affect our physical and psychological health, coping with stress is a huge part of living better with a chronic illness.
- Relaxation, cognitive coping, and emotion-focussed coping described above all work to reduce overall stress.
- Building a social network is also key to better stress management and overall well-being; having a strong support system is linked with better outcomes across types of illnesses, including online.

Professional support

- Working with a licensed psychotherapist is important to address a history of abuse and other types of trauma and to work on new ways of managing anxiety, anger, depression, and stress overall.
- A psychiatrist might be helpful for medication support to treat anxiety and mood.

For other recommendations regarding coping strategies to maintain optimal health, see Handout 8.l.

This handout was written by Dr Emily Edlynn and Dr Tiffany Taft based upon their chapter entitled "Working with complex patients with gastrointestinal and psychological concerns" (Chapter 9) from Knowles, S.R., Keefer, L., & Mikocka-Walus, A. (2019). Psychogastroenterology with Adults: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals. Oxon, UK: Routledge Press.

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