

The information provided in this book is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice but as an important supplement to it. If you are experiencing any serious symptoms that you have not yet discussed with your doctor or other health care professional, please seek medical attention.

The patient stories presented in this book come from many years of clinical experience. To protect privacy, all identifying characteristics and data have been changed.

Acknowledgments and expressions of gratitude follow the text. They are found on pages 231-234.

*We dedicate this book to our many teachers: patients, professors, mentors, colleagues, friends, and family. We are deeply grateful for all that you have taught us. You have blessed us. We hope this book honors you.*

# INTRODUCTION

**W**e created this book to empower you to take control of your health.

If you or someone you love is plagued by chronic digestive distress, you know what it's like to be held captive by your gut. You feel increasingly frustrated and don't know what to do next. You've probably seen several competent physicians who have devoted their best efforts to thoroughly diagnose and treat your condition. You may have tried many different medications to treat the symptoms, only to find that they brought temporary relief at best. You have lived in fear of your unpredictable "problem" that forces you to find excuses for canceling events. We wrote this book to let you know there is a way out of this cycle of suffering. We have combined ancient wisdom about the body and mind with the newest findings in medicine, psychology, and neuroscience to create a holistic program that lets you take back your life. All you need to add to the equation is you.

Here is a story that may be familiar to you. We have heard variations of it from hundreds of patients. It is the story of "Maria," who is a composite of many people we have treated.

## **Maria's Helplessness**

*Maria, a married mother of three teenagers, worked full time in a busy office downtown. One day she began to feel pains in her abdomen, followed by a severe bout of diarrhea. She figured it would go away, like it always had before.*

*“I was too busy to care about me,” she said.*

*But it didn’t go away. It got worse. The diarrhea started alternating with periods of constipation. She couldn’t predict what she would experience next. She began missing meetings at work because she was in the restroom. Some days she would call in sick “just in case.”*

*When she realized she was distancing herself from her family and friends, she went to see her primary care physician. She examined Maria and ran all the appropriate diagnostic tests but couldn’t find anything physically wrong. She also assessed her for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and excessive stress. Maria’s doctor recommended fiber and gave her a referral to see a gastroenterologist (GI specialist). The GI specialist gave Maria a colonoscopy and several other tests to rule out serious physical pathology. “The results are all negative,” said the specialist. “This means that your symptoms are not due to something serious like cancer or inflammatory bowel disease. Your symptoms are due to irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS.”*

*She then discussed lifestyle changes and stress reduction, and reviewed the range of prescription drugs that might be helpful. She also suggested that Maria might benefit by seeing a psychologist to address some of the stresses affecting her symptoms. Maria was concerned about the drug recommendations because of her previous sensitivity to medications. And the suggestion to see a psychologist pressed the wrong button in her. Now Maria was really scared. “They think I’m crazy,” she said to herself. “They think it’s all in my head.”*

*The psychologist could not solve her problem either. “It is true that severe depression or acute anxiety can cause intestinal problems,” he told Maria, “but I don’t think you have psychological issues significant enough to warrant treatment. A psychiatrist might prescribe something to help you relax, but otherwise I don’t think my services would be helpful for you at this time.”*

*Maria was back where she started, only worse. She made the rounds of seeing different doctors and getting prescriptions that treated her symptoms, but she felt no hope for successful*

*treatment. “I’ve been scoped from both ends and told that not much can be done for me,” said Maria. “Yet I still have pain and gastric distress. What now?”*

*What Maria didn’t realize was that she wasn’t the only one who felt frustrated and helpless. The health professionals who see patients like Maria often feel frustrated by their limited impact on problems like hers. This can be true even for GI specialists, the physicians with the most training in gastrointestinal diseases. They are the ones we go to for evaluation for the most serious or life-threatening diseases, such as gastrointestinal cancer and inflammatory bowel disease. They have the technologies for diagnosis of organic or structural diseases. But even they get frustrated by the severe suffering experienced by those who have unexplained symptoms, what is termed functional bowel disease. In spite of the diligent and caring work of GI specialists, Maria and millions of others can’t find relief for their chronic digestive distress. Can’t anything be done for them?*

That’s where we enter the picture. Greg Plotnikoff is an MD and a leader in the field of integrative medicine who spent six years in Japan studying traditional medicine. Mark Weisberg is a PhD psychologist who specializes in the treatment of chronic pain and the emerging field of clinical health psychology. Our novel approach extends the range of standard practice in both medicine and clinical psychology. We share a holistic vision of how the body and mind work together, a perspective that allows us to see new ways to solve old problems. As recently as ten years ago, our holistic approach would have been marginalized by the medical profession. These days we are the go-to doctors that other doctors refer their patients to when they run out of answers. We wrote *Trust Your Gut* to share our answers with you, so you can help yourself. This book will help you free yourself from your chronic misery.

# A Revolution in the Treatment of Gut Distress: The CORE Program

We approach the treatment of gut issues from the premise that the mind and body are all part of an integrated system. We know both from our own clinical experience and from research data that the mind-body relationship is interactive in both directions, and we must always look at health from a 360-degree perspective. Otherwise, we miss some of the most important cues and clues to our wellness. In fact, both the latest neuroscience of the gut and the ancient wisdom of Asian medicine agree that the gut is the focal point of human energy and the seat of the emotions. Indeed, scientists are increasingly referring to the gut as the second brain. Although your gut appears to be the cause of all your problems, it is actually the center of hope for relief from your symptoms.

Western philosophy and science—starting from the days of Plato and Aristotle—have seen the mind and rational thought as part of some higher reality, whereas the body and emotions are of lesser importance. Classical philosophers taught that reason must control the emotions and that the mind must rise above bodily concerns. Centuries later, French philosopher René Descartes formalized the split by declaring the mind and body to be two metaphysically different kinds of realities. This led to centuries of scientific exploration of the body with little regard to the mind. Although few scientists believe in such dualities anymore, the study of the mind still lags far behind the study of the body. That's because it's much easier to study the body. You can see it, measure it, touch it, and x-ray it. You can do none of those things with a mind.

The problem is that our mind is subjective, but science is only looking for objective truth that can be measured. That's how behaviorism, the theory that all behavior is based on conditioning, became the dominant movement in psychology in the 20th century—it removed the mind as an object of study and focused

only on behavior. This started to change by the 1970s when pioneering scientists integrated the study of psychology, neurology, and immunology—termed psychoneuroimmunology—to create the new science of mind-body interactions. It is still a very new and developing science, and we are among the first wave of health professionals to apply this new knowledge to solve chronic gastric distress. The results we've had are astounding.

Instead of talking about the body and mind as two separate entities, we talk about the body/mind. Each person is a unified system and should be approached as such. This shift in perspective was possible due to the technical advances in imaging that allow scientists to measure the brain's functional activity in living people. The most surprising insight is that our brain does not distinguish between what is physical and what is psychological. It creates the same neurohormonal responses either way. This new perspective allows a completely different way of looking at the problem of gastric distress. More important, it makes it possible to find new solutions.

The Western approach to disease and illness uses a lot of violent metaphors that suggest health care is a huge battle. Doctors fight disease, they wage war on cancer, and patients struggle valiantly to conquer the disease. The medical arsenal includes lasers, radiation, chemicals, and pills. One of the primary goals is to kill pain.

Surprisingly, in other cultures, such as that of Japan, not a single word associated with care is related with violence. In Japanese, the key actions that health professionals take are expressed with words conveying comfort, harmony, and balance. We have pain *killers*, and they have pain *calmers* or *suppressors*.

The Western “us versus them” strategy works well for a lot of illnesses, such as when you need an antibiotic to kill bacteria or chemotherapy to kill cancer cells. But this approach falls short for many gut sufferers. You probably believe that your gut is a problem to be attacked, because that is how you have been taught to think about illness. But as you can see from the title of

our book, we have a totally different approach: we don't want you to *fight* your gut; we want you to *trust* it.

The main theme of this book—and the key to solving your gut distress—is that your gut is not your enemy; on the contrary, it is the center of your body/mind system. It is your core. Your chronic gut problems are signs that your system is out of balance. To restore that balance and become centered, you must learn to listen to what your gut is telling you. Just as heat sensations tell you to take your hand off the stove, and the bad smell of spoiled milk tells you not to drink it, the various symptoms of gut distress are messages that need to be deciphered and acted upon. Instead of killing the pain with a pill, we want you to observe the pain and try to understand what it is telling you.

Think about it. If you killed the pain in your hand when it was on the stove, it would become severely burned. If you killed

***Your gut is not your enemy; on the contrary, it is the center of your body/mind system. It is your core. Your chronic gut problems are signs that your system is out of balance.***

the ability to smell, you could get sick or even worse from eating spoiled food. So why try to kill the pain and discomfort in your gut? It doesn't make the problem go away. It only allows you to forget about it.

Your body is trying to tell you something, and the best thing to do is to listen to it.

Think of all the pills and remedies you have taken over the years. They haven't brought lasting relief. They may have even created other health problems. It's time to quit fighting and start listening. Your gut is not your enemy. Your gut is part of you. You don't need *pills*, you need *skills* to help you observe and respond effectively.

It may feel like your gut is holding you hostage and is trying to sabotage your life. Yet no matter how hard you fight, you don't seem to win. It's like those old Chinese handcuffs you might have played with as a child. The woven bamboo tube slips over both of your index fingers, and the harder you try to pull them

out, the tighter the cuff gets. The solution is to quit struggling and relax. Then it slips off very easily. That's very similar to our strategy. We propose to teach you a nonviolent approach to centering your body/mind system.

*Trust Your Gut* is the first book to address intestinal distress from this perspective—a viewpoint that sees the gut as a vital messenger to *heed and trust*,

rather than as an enemy to fear. Your symptoms are messages from the body to rely on, rather than to ignore or med-

***Your symptoms are messages from the body to rely on, rather than to ignore or medicate.***

icate. We focus on those functional relationships between the brain and the gut—including the neural and hormonal interactions—as well as the interactions with each patient's inner and outer environments. Because we know that everything is connected, we must pay attention to all aspects of a person's life to pinpoint possible areas where the system isn't functioning properly.

## Two Powerful New Tools for Gut Healing

This book introduces two powerful new approaches to reducing chronic gut distress: Neurohormonal Retraining and Ecological Rebalancing. These techniques calm the hypersensitivity of the digestive tract and the nervous system, a key factor that prolongs gut distress into a chronic ailment. Pills may temporarily block the symptoms, but they mask hypersensitivity instead of addressing it. Ecological Rebalancing restores the body's natural harmony by subduing external causes of stress and their internal consequences. Neurohormonal Retraining uses your power of concentration to short-circuit the hypersensitive feedback loop between the digestive system and the nervous system, which reduces both pain and gut dysfunction.

These techniques are effective because they are based on the holistic understanding that everything is connected and your

gut goes haywire when these connections are imbalanced. These two approaches are the foundation of our systematic approach to gut distress that we call the CORE program.

The main components of our program are summed up in our acronym: CORE.

Center

Observe

Restore

Ensure

The CORE self-help program provides a new set of tools beyond the pharmaceutical shelves, beyond tests and conventional wisdom—tools under your control. True primary care is not what a physician does for you but rather what you do for yourself, and this book will enable you to do that. CORE will teach you new ways to deal with your gut and to break the vicious cycle of symptoms, fear, and pain.

## Are You Ready to Use This Book?

If you have not yet seen your primary care physician and/or a GI specialist to have your intestinal pains and discomforts evaluated, you are not ready for this book. Some potential problems are extremely serious and even life threatening, and the health care system is excellent at recognizing and treating them. Your doctors or specialists can run tests to find out what is wrong, and then they can work with you on the problem. That is why you should first go to your physician and be thoroughly examined. (Please see our website [www.trustyourgutbook.com](http://www.trustyourgutbook.com) for a list of conditions that require other treatments before beginning the CORE program.)

After you have been comprehensively tested and all organic, structural physiological problems have been ruled out, *then* you are ready to use this book. When your doctors tell you that they

find nothing wrong on your diagnostic tests—yet your symptoms, pain, and discomfort continue—that’s when we can help you. Clearly, you know something is wrong after you’ve been suffering for five, ten, or twenty years. The good news is that these chronic maladies are not life threatening. The great news is that there is something you can do to diminish your distress or make it go away altogether. You are ready to start trusting your gut!

This book is for you if you have been diagnosed with:

- IBS—Irritable bowel syndrome
- GERD—Gastroesophageal reflux disease (the type caused by functional disorder)
- Dysfunctional bowel

Or have any of these chronic symptoms:

- Bad breath despite good dental hygiene
- Burping, belching, hiccuping
- Esophagitis, reflux, heartburn
- Stomach upset, gastritis
- Nausea, with or without food
- Food intolerances
- Appetite concerns (too much, too little, hungry but can’t eat, full too quickly)
- Bloating
- Abdominal cramping, spasms
- Diarrhea: urgent, frequent, even incontinence
- Constipation
- Alternating diarrhea and constipation
- Undigested food in stools
- Mucus in stools
- Gas: frequent, bothersome, noticeable

- Food avoidance
- Food craving

## How to Use This Book

*Trust Your Gut* is organized according to the guiding CORE principles.

### Part I: Center

Chapter 1 addresses the foundational concept of centering, a notion closely tied to the ancient idea that your gut is the center of your emotions, energy, and intuition. As you learn to trust your gut, you begin to realize that it is the source of healing power and can help your body/mind system to regain its balance. Proper function replaces dysfunction, and symptoms begin to go away—sometimes very quickly. You will also learn specific strategies for centering practice as well as ways to identify your own strengths and inner resources. Centering is the prerequisite for the skills that follow.

### Part II: Observe

To begin the healing process, you must first become aware of yourself, your bodily sensations, and the various forces that keep you out of balance. Only then can you restore your balance. However, many gut sufferers tend to ignore their pain, mask it with medications and painkillers, or distract themselves from their physical sensations by worry and anxiety. Chapter 2, “Observe Your Gut,” teaches you how to pay attention to the unpleasant sensations in your gut with greater acceptance and how to interpret them as meaningful clues about your problem. The very act of shifting the focus of your attention helps you to become more centered and calm.

Chapter 3, “Observe Your Stresses,” looks at the five main sources of stress on your body/mind system: environmental,

physical, emotional/spiritual, pharmaceutical, and dietary. Most gut sufferers carry a negative connotation of the word *stress* and take it to mean “your digestive problems are all in your head.” Stress is actually a normal part of life, but it can directly affect your gut distress. We will guide you through a self-assessment of the five forms of stress in your life. From this will come the awareness necessary for effective and lasting change.

Chapter 4, “Observe Your Diet,” presents ways to start tracking how the food you eat may be correlated to your symptoms. These results can help pinpoint foods that need to be removed from your diet.

Chapter 5, “Observe Your Sleep,” examines the very close relationship between chronic gut distress and sleep problems. Abdominal pain, cramping, and diarrhea during sleep hours keep you awake, and the lack of sleep makes you more vulnerable to gut distress the next day. This chapter features a self-assessment of the most important dimensions of sleep along with specific solutions to guide you out of this vicious cycle.

Chapter 6, “Observe Your Life: Your Health and Wellness Autobiography,” will teach you how to write your own medical biography. The better you know your own health backstory, the better prepared you are to write the next chapter—one featuring health. The key point of observation is that the more aware you are of your physical sensations, stresses, emotions and thoughts, and lifestyle, the more you can activate self-healing resources. Writing your medical biography is a vital tool for this healing awareness.

## **Part III: Restore**

You need new rebalancing skills to restore harmony to the systemic dysfunctions that are causing your intestinal problems. These skills will bring lasting relief as opposed to the use of pills and pharmaceuticals that cover up the symptoms. Chapter 7, “Ecological Rebalancing for Inner Peace,” and chapter 8, “Harmonizing Your External Environment,” show you ways to restore

your interior and exterior ecological systems. These chapters include the newest scientific findings regarding the microbiome, the trillions of microbes that coexist in our gut and elsewhere in our body. Tools to manage your interior ecology include special diets, probiotics, and supplements. Balancing your exterior ecology examines such things as the need for rest and rejuvenation as well as your relationships with work and with other people.

Chapter 9, “Neurohormonal Retraining to Rewire the Gut-Brain Connection,” teaches you a powerful new technique to retrain the way your brain responds to sensations in your gut. For many gut sufferers, the very anxiety of dealing with their chronic problem conditions the brain to overreact to each little digestive gurgle and twinge. Neurohormonal Retraining short-circuits this misdirected feedback loop and helps restore the natural harmony between brain and gut. Over time, our body becomes conditioned to experiencing chronic pain, which alters and distorts the communication between the brain and the gut. You will learn how to take advantage of neuroplasticity, the amazing ability of the brain to create new nerve pathways.

Whatever the nature of your particular imbalance, certain skills are universally applicable. Chapter 10, “CORE Calming Techniques,” presents additional tools for calming and balancing your body, your nervous system, and your emotions so you can heal more quickly. These skills include meditation, breathing exercises, and self-hypnosis—a scientifically proven tool for easing digestive distress. This daily regimen will help your system run more smoothly and be more responsive to the powerful techniques of Ecological Rebalancing and Neurohormonal Retraining.

Chapter 11, “Resolve Difficult Emotions and Their Physical Effects,” covers the crucial but often misunderstood topic of how emotions negatively interact with gut symptoms. Stressful emotions don’t cause IBS, but they certainly are a contributing factor and can worsen your symptoms. We will guide you through a self-assessment of stressful emotions and will provide specific

solutions for gaining better control over them. It will also help you respond to stressful emotions as helpful signals to take better care of yourself.

## **Part IV: Ensure**

Life never stops, and the world keeps changing. Once you have centered, observed, and restored your body/mind system, you will constantly need to adjust to unexpected obstacles and traumas in your life that may upset your balance. Chapter 12, “Maintain Your Gains and Achieve Sustainable Lifestyle Change,” provides ways to handle these bumps on life’s road. Sometimes people feel so good after their gut distress goes away that they become overconfident or complacent and return to their old ways of life—only to see their symptoms return with a vengeance. The elements of the CORE system need to become habits, a sustainable and natural part of your life so you can bounce back from occasional flare-ups and setbacks. Finally, we provide you with specific solutions to help you push past the normal resistance to change and awareness, so you can move ahead with your progress.

We wish you well on your journey to reclaim control over your life. We are confident that the techniques and skills you learn from this book will significantly reduce your suffering. We would also like to gently remind you that in the CORE program, your most important healing partners are your own body, mind, and spirit.

*—Greg Plotnikoff and Mark Weisberg  
Summer 2012*



## PART I

---

# Center

---

*Centering is the first step on your path to recovering a life of balance, harmony, and comfort.*

*Like the vertical balance of stacked stones, if we are in harmony with our environment, we are balanced. Like the horizontal balance of a teeter-totter, if we are centered, balance is nearly effortless.*

*Balance a pen on your finger. Notice the effort it takes to find its center and achieve balance. Notice also how effortless that balance is once you have found this center. The same is true in our life. Once we have discovered our own center, balance follows almost effortlessly.*

*Notice also that if the pen is not balanced on its center, it takes significant effort to make the pen appear balanced. It is possible to keep the pen horizontal, but does this feel natural, elegant, or easy?*

*This is where many people find themselves. Great effort goes into appearing balanced, rather than actually being balanced. This struggle takes its toll on health and well-being.*

*This is especially true for all people whose lives are disrupted by gastrointestinal symptoms. You, like so many others, may put great effort into appearing balanced and in control. You may use words like struggle, battle, and try.*

Natural, elegant, and easy are probably not words that come to mind. By centering, however, balance is inherent.

*Centering is the foundation and the goal for everything you will learn throughout this book. Let us begin our healing journey with centering.*

---

# Find Your Center

---

*Flow with whatever may happen and let your mind be free. Stay centered by accepting whatever you are doing. This is the ultimate.*

—Chuang Tzu, Chinese philosopher

**Y**our mind and body make up an integrated system, and when it goes out of balance, you become dysfunctional. The results of this imbalance are obvious in people who perform for a living. An Olympic gymnast who is uncentered crashes on the floor. An actress forgets her lines. A juggler drops the balls. A batter can't hit the baseball. That's why such performers always prepare themselves with some sort of centering technique before the curtain rises or the first pitch is thrown. They get psyched up before the big game to keep their mind calm and focused, and their body flexible and alert. The mind and body must become one. When they stay centered, they perform perfectly—the slugger gets a hit and the gymnast gets a 10.

It's no different if you suffer from chronic intestinal distress. You have an imbalance in your body/mind system, and you can only find lasting relief by becoming centered. No one sees your problem, but you know it preoccupies you way too much of the time. Whenever you walk out the door to go to work or out on a

date, you are on stage. The problem is you don't always understand how to center yourself beforehand. You lack the techniques to keep your mind sharp and your body under control. You have been given various pills and been told to relax, but it

***You need to know where you are headed—and why—before you can become centered.***

doesn't exactly work. You never stop worrying, and you never feel in charge of your life.

Centering is the first step in our CORE program. You need to know where you are headed—and why—before you can become centered. That's why we begin the CORE program with centering.

## Uncentered Kevin

*It was hard for Kevin to make it through his day's work because he just couldn't concentrate. His mind was preoccupied with the dread of an imminent attack of gut pain, bloating, diarrhea, or constipation. It was hard to sit still, and if he did sit still and happened to notice a sensation in his gut, he'd get quite angry. He would urgently start strategizing how to respond to this latest attack. Should I take a laxative? Should I go for a walk? What the heck am I going to do?*

*He was so off center that he couldn't even focus when he was at home with his family. His anxiety and worry about his symptoms took over his entire day. All he could do was anticipate the worst.*

*His bloating was so bad, he bought extra pants to accommodate his expanding waistline. He had a thirty-six-inch waist, but he kept a thirty-eight- and a forty-inch pair on hand to wear on any given day, depending on his level of bloating.*

*Kevin increasingly saw himself as being damaged. He had no hope that his symptoms could get any better. These cumulative anxieties kept stirring up his nervous system and made the bloating and the pain even more intense. Kevin was totally*

*off balance, but he never even thought about it that way. His physician kept giving him medications for his symptoms and his psychologist kept telling him to relax. Nothing worked, and that just made it worse.*

## **Becoming Centered Is a Process**

Telling people to relax doesn't make them relaxed, unless they already know how to relax. If an angry parent is yelling at his son's little league coach during a game and you tell him to relax, he's more likely to punch you than to mellow out. But if you ask a Buddhist monk who has practiced meditation for thirty years to relax, he could easily produce ultra-calm theta waves within a minute or two. Likewise, you can tell a professional opera singer to get centered, and she could become poised with a few deep breaths. But if you told Kevin to get centered, he'd only get more frustrated. He'd be more likely to resemble the angry parent than the Buddhist monk.

Learning how to become centered requires a change of attitude and the acquisition of new skills. It's not a mere intellectual process that only requires thinking—it's an experiential process, an activity. The Olympic gymnast may not be able to verbalize what it is to be centered, but she certainly knows how it *feels*. Being centered is a psychophysiological state—both physical and emotional. It is also embodied; you can feel it in your gut. If you keep thinking too much and a worrisome dialogue keeps replaying in your head, you're never going to finish your routine.

If you are a gut sufferer and find yourself in a hopeless dead end, the most important step on your path toward centeredness is to learn to trust your gut. This means getting a new attitude to replace the current mixture of hate and fear you have for your gut. As we mentioned earlier, ancient wisdom tells us that the gut is the seat of the emotions and the focal point of human

energy. We can all learn much from this idea of the gut as a kind of second brain.

## The Ancient Wisdom of the Gut as Center

Our everyday language uses phrases that depict the gut as a source of power, emotions, and intuitive intelligence. We say a person with a strong will has a lot of guts. A brave person performs gutsy actions. We praise one's intestinal fortitude. But those who show great fear and run away at the sight of danger are gutless cowards or yellow bellied. Even a slight fear such as stage fright before a performance can give you butterflies in your stomach. And when we know something through an intuitive hunch, we attribute it to our gut feelings or our gut instinct.

When you exercise or play sports, you can feel that your gut is your center of gravity. Balance is everything when you perform well. In traditional Asian medicine, the gut is the center of the body in another way: it is the source of your life energy. That center also requires a balance, because it is when our energies become imbalanced that we become ill. The gut is our battery, and we must live a lifestyle that keeps it well charged with energy. Because everything in your body/mind system depends on this energy, a lack of chi can affect your mood as well as your performance. In Japan's *kampo* tradition of medicine, the diagnosis of all illnesses begins with examining the gut.

If you've ever done yoga, Tai Chi, or any of the martial arts, you know what it is to feel that energy course through your body. It has different names—*prana* in Sanskrit, *chi* in Chinese, and *ki* in Japanese—but it all means the same thing: the vital, life-giving, and life-sustaining force necessary for health. This flow of energy from the center is the basis for success in the martial arts, Zen meditation, flower arranging, Zen archery, and every other mindful activity. Centered practitioners perform in

a relaxed and effortless manner with calm and focused minds. Like the best actors and dancers, they make it look easy and natural.

Asia wasn't the only place where the gut was seen as a major center of vitality and emotion. Some translations of the Bible also depict the guts as the seat of strong emotions such as compassion, mercy, intuition, and empathy. For example, in the story about the wisdom of King Solomon, in which he proposes cutting a baby in half to solve an argument between two women who both claim a child, the Cambridge edition of the King James version says "her bowels yearned upon her son" (I Kings 3:26). In our effort to restore your faith in your gut, we are harking back to the wisdom of the ages.

#### CENTERED

Relaxed  
Effortless  
Focused  
Functional  
Aware  
In control

#### UNCENTERED

Anxious  
Struggle  
Scattered  
Dysfunctional  
Confused  
Out of control

## The Breath Connection

Everyone knows that the gut is the center for the ingestion and digestion of the essentials for life—food and water. But the gut is also the center of our breathing apparatus. Sure, the lungs are what fill with air, but the abdominal muscles are what provide the strength of the bellows that keep us alive. If you watch a baby breathe, you will see her belly expand and deflate. That is natural deep breathing. Asian medicine acknowledged this truth by naming the energy that flows from the center after the breath. *Chi*, *ki*, and *prana* all literally mean "breath." Actors and

singers around the world are taught to breathe from the gut. They know that you get more air that way and need to pause for a breath less often. Breathing from the chest is a human invention that takes in less air. Gut breathing is deep breathing, while chest breathing is shallow.

Breathing is one of the few bodily processes that run automatically when we are not paying attention, but yet we can take control of our breath when we want to. This is useful because our rate of breathing correlates directly to our state of mind. Deep breathing makes us calmer and more centered, but when we are uncentered, confused, and anxious, our breath rate and pulse both become more rapid. This breath connection is evident in the case of Carol.

## Carol Gets Calmed

*Carol was a senior executive who suffered from a long list of medical conditions—constipation, bloating, fatigue, poor concentration, and much more. She sought the advice of many doctors but to no avail. She felt hopeless, and she blamed herself for her condition. “I am a mess. My gut is a mess,” she said. “After I eat, I bloat so much, I look six months pregnant. I am so sensitive to everything—if I could just get calmed!”*

*She was finally referred to Dr. Plotnikoff, who had Carol keep track of her diet and symptoms for two weeks. When she began to read her notes to him, she was so scattered and nonlinear that her efforts to please even sent Dr. Plotnikoff off center. He was too distracted by her frenzied effort to hear what she was trying to say.*

*After ten minutes, he realized Carol was so agitated that he needed to interrupt. He sensed that she needed to focus. He moved on to the physical exam and told her he wanted to check her pulse. “I took her right hand in mine and placed my left hand over her right wrist to feel her pulse. I noticed that she closed her eyes. I felt her pulse for one minute. Her hand was not cool or damp, as I*

*had expected. Her pulse was a very reasonable seventy-four beats per minute. I switched to her left hand for another thirty seconds.”*

*The energy in the room changed significantly with that simple act of checking her pulse for a minute and a half. They were both able to center. He asked what she was feeling, and Carol reported a sense of calmness and hope, of actually feeling better. He then led her in some breathing exercises focused on breathing into her center. She left the clinic having discovered one approach for centering and grounding herself.*

## **The Emerging Science of the Gut: The Intestinal Brain**

Western science has increasingly come to consider the gut as much more than just a digestive tract. In the last twenty years, scientists have researched the neurohormonal complexity of the gut, and more and more are now referring to it as the second brain. The intestinal nervous system (or enteric nervous system) is composed of a cluster of more than 100 million neurons. It has receptors for more than thirty neurotransmitters—the hormones such as epinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine that allow a neuron to send a message to another neuron. In fact, more than 90 percent of the serotonin receptors and more than 50 percent of the dopamine receptors are in the gut.

Of course, the brain in our head is vastly more complex and has a thousand times more neurons than the intestinal brain. However, like the main brain, the intestinal brain receives, organizes, and transmits information. That means that both brains allow rapid and coordinated responses to changes in the environment, and both brains can regulate our internal organs.

The intestinal brain has two main connections to the main brain: a calming route along the vagus nerve and an energizing

route along the spinal cord. Both connections operate automatically as part of the autonomic nervous system. When your body/mind is balanced and centered, the calming and energizing parts of your nervous system are likewise balanced. They are complementary. But when these two systems are out of balance, the result is often major intestinal problems like pain, bloating, diarrhea, or constipation.

For chronic intestinal problems in which all the life-threatening diseases and maladies have been ruled out, one major cause of

***When your body/mind is balanced and centered, the calming and energizing parts of your nervous system are likewise balanced.***

dysfunction is that your two brains have somehow gotten their wires crossed. They have become conditioned—just like Pavlov’s dog—to react to a threat when no threat exists. That’s

why it can’t be fixed by a pill. The problem is not a disease but rather something closer to a computer virus. It is a system gone awry. The problem is not in your head; it’s in your wiring.

Imagine a feedback loop that is out of control—such as a sound system in an auditorium when someone talks into the microphone and you hear a squealing feedback sound. The problem in this loop is that the microphone is oversensitive and picks up not just the normal voice but also the amplified voice over a loudspeaker. Then the microphone sends the amplified voice back through the amplifier and out the speaker again, only louder and more shrill than ever. In a fraction of a second, the shrieking sound gets so loud, it hurts your ears. The speaker has to stop because nobody can hear her anyway, and then you have to turn down the microphone or move the loudspeaker farther away to interrupt the feedback loop.

In the case of an attack of digestive distress, instead of an oversensitive microphone you have a hypersensitized amygdala—a primitive part of the main brain that decides whether a threat exists. It can take a small, harmless sensation and encode it as threatening. This sends a danger signal to the gut, which reacts by

tensing up and causing distress. The intestinal brain sends these amplified distress signals back to the amygdala, which totally freaks out and sends more emergency signals back to the gut, so then the gut goes bonkers as well. The feedback loop has gone berserk and keeps accelerating, but instead of a terrible noise in an auditorium, you get awful pain and distress in your gut.

## Sally Sees a Tums

*Sally was a young professional who suffered from IBS and had recently gone through a painful diarrhea and constipation cycle. She was on her way to a date and stopped in a convenience store for lip gloss. While there, she saw a shelf of Tums and other digestive remedies. Almost instantly she felt a minor rumble in her abdomen. What just happened?*

*The main brain and the intestinal brain just had a little scene together. The main brain took in visual input of Tums, which sparked memories of recent diarrhea and constipation, and automatically assigned an emotional evaluation of threat. The oversensitized amygdala exaggerated the severity of symptoms and sent an alarm message via the spinal cord to the intestinal brain, which activated her gut. If the threat is seen as a crisis, the system releases stress hormones such as cortisol or adrenaline—which cause a series of reactions including tightening of the gut muscles, resulting in pain, bloating, cramping, and more. Sally ended up canceling her date—not because she was sick but because she saw a Tums and that set off a feedback loop gone bad.*

## Neurohormonal Retraining

The good news for Sally and all gut sufferers is that there is an adjustable link in this automatic chain of events. The part of the brain that decides whether a threat exists, the amygdala, is retrainable. On the negative side, the amygdala can be falsely

conditioned to arouse a fear response when there is no actual danger, thus setting off a feedback loop gone awry. But on the positive side, the amygdala is the loophole in the main-brain/intestinal-brain circuitry that provides an opening to fix the erroneous programming. The process of fixing this feedback loop is called Neurohormonal Retraining, a key skill you will learn in this book.

## **Ecological Rebalancing**

Because everything is connected, a variety of imbalances in your body/mind system can have negative effects on the function of your gut. Your connections outside your body comprise your exterior ecology—everything from your personal relationships and home life to your workplace and environmental surroundings. Your interior ecology includes the food you eat, the levels of vitamins and minerals in your system, and the health of your microbiome—the 100 trillion microbes that live inside you. These are the bacteria that help you digest food, strengthen your immune system, and keep you in a good mood. While you may not find it amusing that several pounds of microbes are dwelling in your gut—far outnumbering your human body cells—if your microbiome is imbalanced, it could be a cause of your gut distress. Throughout this book you will discover techniques for balancing your inner and outer ecological systems.

## **How to Start the Process of Getting Centered: A Three-Step Exercise**

Now that you know the importance of centering for your gut health, it's time to begin putting it into practice. Here are a few steps you can take right now to begin the process of centering and the journey of your CORE healing:

1. Get grounded.

2. Identify your strengths.
3. Set your intention.

## Get Grounded

*Grounded* is a common term used to describe being calm, centered, relaxed, and focused. Yet most people don't know how to deliberately achieve this experience. Here is an exercise to help you get grounded:

1. Sit in a comfortable chair.
2. Take slow, easy breaths for 30 to 60 seconds. Breathe in through your nose, into your center, and slowly exhale through your mouth.
3. Pay close attention to your senses (visual, auditory, sensory/kinesthetic) in your body and what they take in. Spend 1 to 2 minutes on each of your senses.

For example, start with your vision. Simply sit in the chair, look around the room, noting any visual details you can see. What do you notice? You may see a plant sitting on a table. A piece of artwork on the wall. The clock. A couple of table lamps. The tiles in the ceiling. And so on. Just notice how many visual details you see, without analyzing or making any judgments.

After a minute or two, switch to auditory (sound) awareness. Do the same thing. Perhaps you'll notice the sound of the ventilation system, cars driving by, a muffled voice in the next room, and so on. Next, switch to sensory/kinesthetic awareness. Notice the sensation of the bottom of your thighs being supported by the chair. Feel the temperature of the air on your skin, the weight of your jewelry, or the tightness of your clothes. Don't judge or analyze; just feel.

That's all there is to it. What do you notice? Among other things, you'll feel calmer, your mind will be quieter, and your attention will land more in the present moment and not stuck in the past or the future. This comfortable feeling is good

preparation for the next step in the centering process. Remember how good it feels to be grounded.

## Identify Your Strengths

Think of a time in the past when you encountered a situation that was challenging or downright difficult, but you ended up successfully achieving your goal. Take a minute to close your eyes and breathe slowly and gently. As you calm down, it becomes easier to identify your strengths. Let yourself drift back to an earlier time in your life when you overcame a big challenge.

Remember as many details as possible about the obstacles you faced. Now, review everything you did to attain your goal. As you reflect, try to identify the skills and abilities, both mental and physical, that helped you succeed. Don't be shy or modest. Feel free to acknowledge all the positive attributes that you were able to bring to bear on the problem you faced. If it is hard for you to see your own strengths, ask your friends, family, or coworkers. They are in a position to be open and honest about your strengths.

There seems to be a direct correlation between being centered and feeling confident about your strengths. If you are ungrounded, you may be temporarily blinded to your strengths. Some people perceive themselves as so weak that the very mention of personal strength evokes grief and shame. On the contrary, the more grounded you become, the greater your personal power becomes. The fact is that we all have strengths, and when we are calm, we can call upon those strengths more easily and build upon them to achieve our goals. For example, some of Dr. Weisberg's patients become so grounded and adept at self-hypnosis that they can undergo surgery using only a very small amount of anesthesia. Their centered concentration is so focused that they can voluntarily shut off the feelings in the nerves near the site of the operation.

As you review your personal resources, have something to write with nearby and list all the strengths and skills you used.

Take that list and keep it in a safe place. Refer back to this list frequently as you participate in the CORE program, as you'll be using these same strengths and skills.

The following example illustrates how you can use this valuable exercise to identify your strengths and resources for healing.

## Jim Identifies His Strengths

*Jim was a carpenter in his thirties who suffered from chronic indigestion, gas, bloating, and abdominal pain. Dr. Weisberg invited him to remember a difficult situation when he ended up being successful so we could identify his strengths. He had no trouble coming up with an example.*

*Jim had been overweight all his life, but he just accepted it because his entire family was overweight. However, when Jim turned twenty-five, his new primary care physician, Dr. Taylor, changed his attitude. He convinced Jim to act by gently explaining the various health risks of being forty-five pounds overweight: a greater chance of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, immune system problems, and so on. Jim accepted Dr. Taylor's recommendations for dietary changes—including exercise and Weight Watchers—and kept at it until he lost thirty-five pounds. What's more, he's kept that extra weight off ever since.*

*Jim wrote down his recollections of this challenge and the inner and outer strengths that helped him reach his goal:*

*Once I realized I needed to lose weight, I decided to stick with this plan [decisiveness]. I stayed with it even when I didn't want to [determination, persistence]. I felt good about the helpers I had chosen to assist me: Dr Taylor, a nutritionist, personal trainer, and psychologist [faith and trust in my team]. I was able to look rationally at the problem, study the research, and understand the importance of sticking with this regimen [intelligence]. As I got used to the new diet, I'd make jokes about how*

*I didn't even miss what used to be my favorite foods, like ice cream, bread, potato chips, and beer [sense of humor]. My girlfriend, Jill, who is now my wife, really encouraged me and cheered me on, as did my fellow members of Weight Watchers [relationship and social support]. I also realized that this was a process that was going to take some time and that the changes weren't going to take place overnight [patience, good perspective of time and change]. I also found new and interesting ways to make exercise more enticing, rewarding myself different ways for each week that I stuck with my workout schedule [creativity, giving himself positive reinforcement].*

*Afterward, Dr. Weisberg recited the list of strengths he found in Jim's story.*

*"I've known on some level that I've accomplished things before," Jim replied, "but it's really helpful to list my strengths so directly. I'm going to be even more able to call on great resources to reach my goals this time!"*

## **Set Your Intention**

Once you have identified your strengths and resources, it's time to set your intention for healing. Many successful performers, athletes, and businesspeople use visualization and intention setting as part of their success regimen. They know that if they can set their intention and picture it, they can achieve it!

Here's how you do it. Have some paper and pen nearby. Sit in the same comfortable chair where you just got grounded. Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. Now, ask yourself: how do I look and feel in the future when I'm healed from my gut distress?

Many people never even imagine this because they think it's impossible or they fear disappointment. But it is possible, and

you can do it. Picture a time in the future when your gut feels

***Picture a time in the future when  
your gut feels better.***

better. What do you look like in this future image? What is your facial expression? How does your body feel when you finally have the relief you desire? What are your emotions? What activities do you see yourself enjoying? What do you notice about your level of energy when you feel this way? Pay very close attention to the details of these images. When you've finished visualizing, write down what you just pictured. You are starting the centering process, the first step in the CORE program for healing. You have already made this outcome more likely by having the courage to picture your successful outcome.

## The Centered Kevin

*After successfully emerging from the CORE program, Kevin was calmer and happier. He was less exhausted and had more energy. He was more hopeful about himself and his future. The bloating was significantly reduced, and he was able to stay with just one size of pants. He took great pleasure in the activities of daily living. He felt a sense of pride and accomplishment that he had learned how to regain control of his life.*

*“You know,” said Kevin, “I always used to hate my own guts, but now I can find that when I have a gut sensation, I can listen to it without being afraid. Sometimes my rumbling is simply telling me that I am hungry. Sometimes cramping is a sign that I ate some food that was not good for me. If my bowel movements are a little bit different, I may have been working too many hours. Now I feel more connected and more able to enjoy little things around me. I can sit and listen to music, and I hear enjoyable things in it that I never noticed before. I'm no longer preoccupied with fighting my gut.”*

## Back to the Center

So what do we mean when we say trusting your gut is the key to becoming centered? Our patients who have successfully gone

through the CORE program have learned to respond to their intestinal sensations in such a way that they no longer experience them as threats. The sensations have become friendly sources of information, helpful messages rather than something to fear. These people have broken out of the vicious circle of pain and distress, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation. They have learned to trust their gut, and they have changed their attitude, allowing their body/mind system to become more centered. These people are now more aware and observant of many aspects of life. Because they have changed their habits, their intestinal suffering is greatly diminished and often eliminated. You can do the same.

---

---

## ***The Five Most Important Supplements to Support Centering***

Centering may be unnecessarily difficult if our nutritional status is compromised. To ensure a strong and healthy metabolic core, we recommend supplementing your diet with the following:

1. Vitamin D (also called vitamin D<sub>3</sub>): This is a crucial hormone that turns on or off more than 2,000 key genes in our body. There are vitamin D receptors on every cell of our body, including throughout the brain and the intestines. Low levels of vitamin D in the blood stream are associated with increased risk of an incredible array of diseases as well as severity of multiple others including nonspecific musculoskeletal pain, muscular weakness, asthma, allergies and autoimmune disease. Get tested and take supplements as need. Aim for a blood level of 40–60 ng/ml.
2. A good multivitamin: For us, a good vitamin is absorbable, gentle, and made of high quality ingredients. Watch out for vitamin E as DL-alpha tocopherol. If you see this *DL* on the label, think “don’t like.” Choose mixed tocopherols (and tocotrienols, if possible) that include alpha, beta, delta, and gamma forms.

3. Fish oil or krill oil: These supplements are rich in omega-3 fatty acids (EPA and DHA). Low levels of omega-3 are associated with gut distress including pain and cramping. A fish or krill oil supplementation blocks excessive inflammation associated with the high levels of omega-6 fatty acids found in most modern diets. Our recommendation is 1,000 milligrams a day of EPA and DHA. Check the label and add these together to understand how many capsules a day to take. Here's a secret: refrigerate to prevent fish burps.
  4. Magnesium in absorbable forms (citrate, glycinate, taurate, or malate): Take 400–800 milligrams a day to support over three hundred key chemical reactions in the body. These include reactions relevant to energy, mood, memory, sleep, and general oomph power. Magnesium oxide at a dose of 400 milligrams relieves constipation. This can be taken along with the more absorbable forms of magnesium. Caution: All magnesium forms can cause loose bowel movements. Start with a low dose, approximately 120–200 milligrams a day and slowly increase as tolerated.
  5. Probiotics: These will be described in great detail later. Choose a product that provides at least 20 billion CFUs (colony-forming units) and multiple lactobacillus and bifidobacterial species. Take with cool, unchlorinated water at least thirty minutes away from warm food or drink.
-