

Let's talk about mental health

Who am I?

Dr Shubhinder Shergill

- qualified medical doctor with a degree in psychology who specialises in psychiatry
- Consultant Psychiatrist for 15 years after training in London and currently work on a Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit
- trained in a wide number of subspecialties including child and adolescent psychiatry, psychotherapy, learning disability and forensic psychiatry (treating offenders)
- member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and teach at both an undergraduate level (medical students) and have also taught at a postgraduate level.
- lots of experience in explaining mental health problems to lay people, usually patients and their families, particularly in the areas of stress, anxiety and drug use
- I believe passionately in the prevention of mental health problems through education and support of children and young people, having seen the devastating consequences of mental ill health.

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What's important to talk about with children?

- Anxiety & stress
- Building mental resilience
- Modern day problems – technology, social media etc

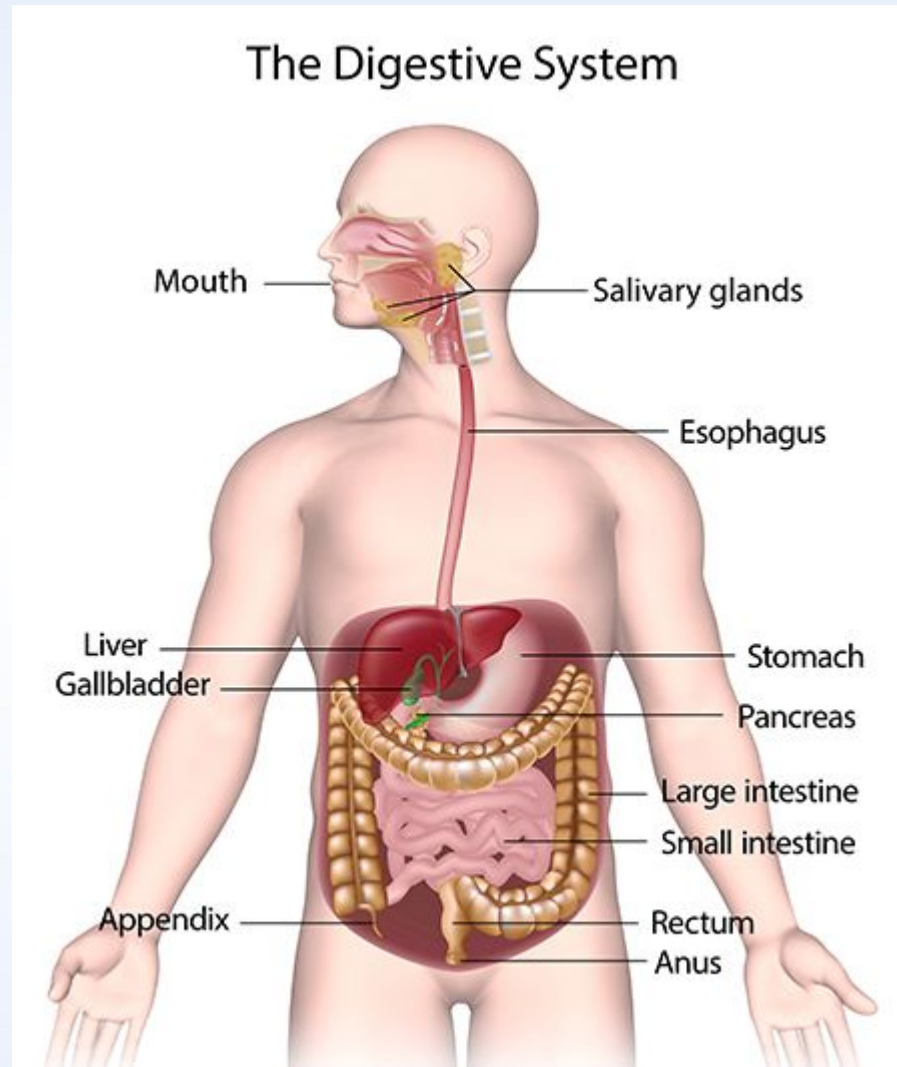
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What do these terms mean?

- Anxiety – fear of losing something, whereas depression is a reaction to losing something
- Attachment – the degree to which a child bonds with their care-giver, allowing them to develop normally
- Stress – something that places a strain on us, physically, emotionally or psychologically. Stress can damage our body and mind.
- Trauma – repeated stress over time or a very stressful event beyond our ability to cope
- Mental resilience – something in us that allows us to handle stress and therefore safeguard our health. This could be something we are born with (genes) but can also be something we can learn

How the mind handles stress: the gut analogy

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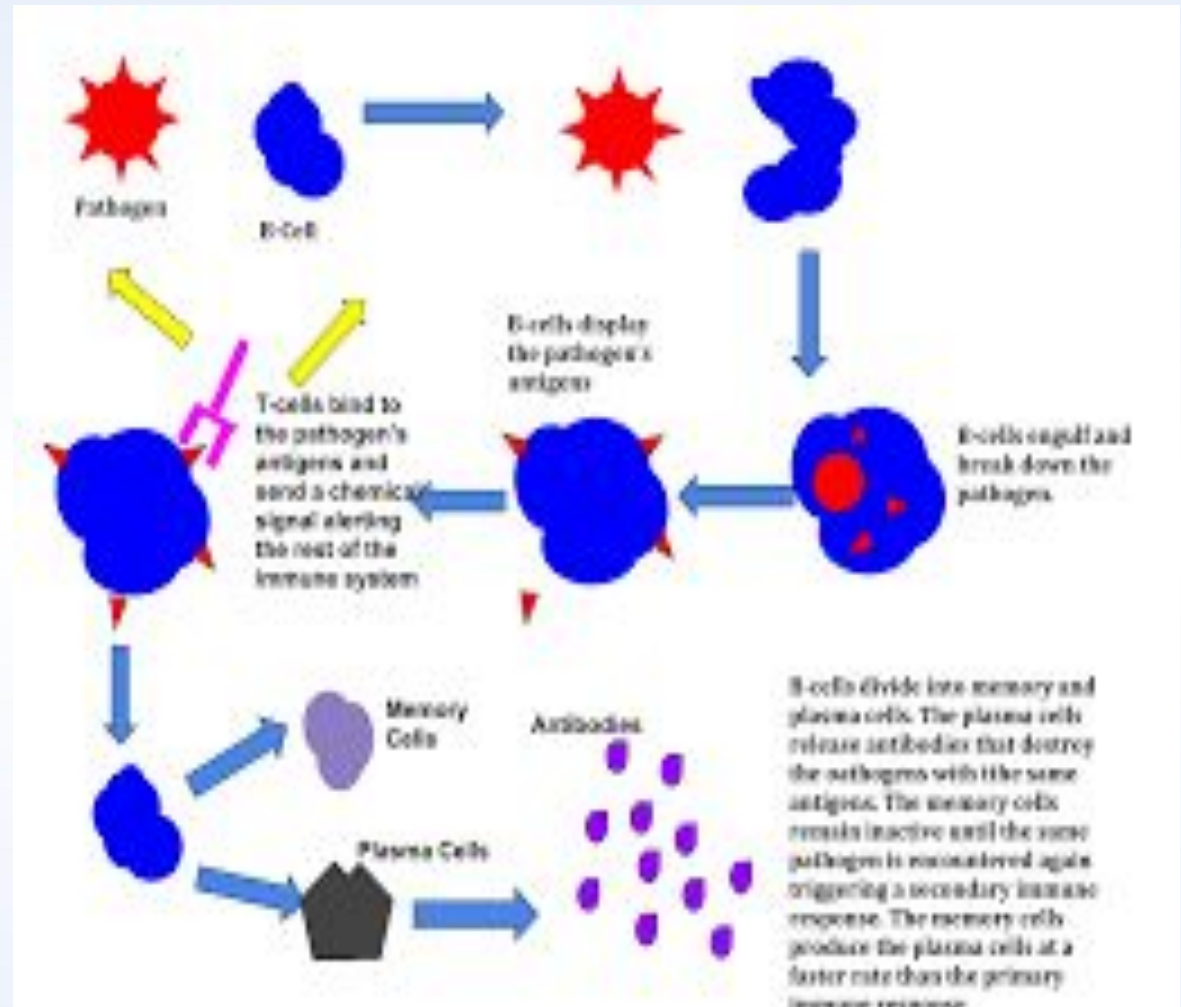


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How the mind handles stress: the gut analogy

- Food as stress: need to ingest it, chew it, swallow it, digest it, metabolise it, detoxify it and excrete it
- Good food and bad food, cf good stressors and bad stressors
- Too much or too little challenges the system
- What happens when we can't do this efficiently? Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, cf headache, lethargy, tension, psychosis

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How the mind handles stress: the immune system analogy

- When we absorb stress our body needs to fight it with the mental equivalent of an immune system
- Minor exposure to stress can inoculate us like a vaccine
- When our “mental immune system” breaks down we succumb to the mental ill effects of stress – anxiety, depression, fatigue, psychosis

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Resilience: the immune system analogy

- The “mental immune system” is our resilience
- Some people are born with stronger immune systems, ie more resilient
- We can train our immune systems by exposure to smaller, manageable levels of stress if we are supported
- We can use psychological techniques to build our immunity, ie our resilience
- Meditation / prayer / gratitude exercises
- Preparation for future stressors, eg preparing for a new job, moving house, having a child
- Support is like herd immunity
- Exercise boosts our mental power

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How can we use this to help our children?

- Expose them to manageable levels of stress – don't mollycoddle them, but don't throw them in at the deep end either!!!
- Teach them to:
 - Meditate
 - exercise faith that everything will work out ok in the end
 - appreciate what they have
- Help them prepare well for the stressors we can predict, eg exams, illness / bereavement
- Seek mutual support from the school, other parents, their friends – transparency about problems makes us realise we're all in it together!
- Physical exercise!!!

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What are stressors for our children?

- Family problems, illness, stress, trauma
- Growing up – coping with change, making friends, not being a baby anymore
- School problems – academic work, bullying, sport, peer pressure
- The constant infiltration of the outside world – bad news stories are unavoidable online!
- Technology: good or bad? – social media, violent gaming, the problem of screen time vs mutual support, infinite sources of information & stimulation, self-help

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Spotting signs of stress in children

- Not wanting to communicate over a prolonged period
- Not wanting to go to school
- Mood swings or tantrums
- Agitation, restlessness, inattention, poor focus
- Physical symptoms:
 - Headaches, muscle tension, neck or back pain.
 - Upset stomach.
 - Dry mouth.
 - Chest pains, rapid heartbeat.
 - Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
 - Fatigue.
 - Loss of appetite or overeating “comfort foods”
 - Increased frequency of colds.

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Technology as a stressor

- How do older people help children navigate this world? Do we get it? Can we keep up? Can we protect them?
- Social media as an ill
 - ❑ Exacerbating peer pressure
 - ❑ Exposing children to harmful influences – pornography, violence, self-harm
 - ❑ Bullying
 - ❑ Unknown influences from anywhere in the world
- Protecting children
 - ❑ Managing screen time
 - ❑ The “right exposure”
 - ❑ Staying fit and active

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Some practical tools

- Regular family time and discussion
 - Specific questions – what was the most interesting thing that happened today?; anything new that you've learnt?
 - Encourage reflection and practice reframing a worry (eg, "I'll fail my exams and ruin my life" could be reframed as "I can learn from failure and get better")
 - Relate to your own previous experience to normalise the situation
- Cyber solutions
 - Restricting access to gadgets / internet (I once put my son's X-box in the back of my car for 2 months!!!)
 - Parental controls
 - Checking phone if concerns re cyber-bullying: for messages and certain apps (eg whatsapp, facebook etc)
 - Set clear guidelines and expectations

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Some practical tools

- Creative & spiritual activities help us deflect from stress, regenerate the mind and process stress
 - Play a music instrument
 - Write a story
 - Artwork
 - Meditation – breathing exercises
 - Reading can be a creative exercise, as well as educating: studies show that self esteem improves