

Understanding *Who You Really Are*



Dr. Gupta

In all parts of her life, personally and professionally, Dr. Mona Gupta focuses her training, talent, and energy on promoting mental and emotional health—for herself, for her family, and for her many patients.

As a doctor of osteopathic medicine, she is a board-certified psychiatrist who guides scores of people of virtually all ages to more peaceful and productive lives. “It’s true that I tend to approach my patients in a more intuitive and holistic way, considering and adjusting to such lifestyle issues as diet, exercise, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation techniques to ease anxiety, such as yoga, and even ADHD and mood disorders. It is, I think, fair to say that I work with my patients to attain, regain, and maintain healthy balance in mind, body, and spirit.

CLEARING THE MIND

“Clearing the mind is an important objective, and I often feel like a coach for my patients, encouraging them to use the skills that I know intuitively that they have, that perhaps haven’t been in use for some time. I will, for example, when it is a good fit, encourage my patients to eat less processed food and faithfully engage in natural restorative activities; to engage their body in an appropriate physical movement program; and to understand and achieve the benefits of sound, restorative sleep.

“Medication,” says Dr. Gupta, “can get my patients just so far—perhaps 60 percent along the road to healthy functioning—but there is so much each patient can do on their own. I always tell my patients if they want to work on their emotional health—their sadness, their depression—they have to invest the time and energy to get the results they want, and they need to understand and care about the relationship between their physical bodies and their emotional and mental health.

“I also tell my patients that it takes time, energy, and commitment to move from emotional pain to emotional health. To a large extent, I serve as a coach and a navigator along this journey to balance and good health. Together we explore the fact that there’s normal anxiety in response to many life events, and then there is anxiety that is pathological where we can intervene in creative and effective ways.”

THE POWER OF LABELS

Often, says Dr. Gupta, “people get labels—they have a mental health disorder—and subsequently every life event, major or minor, is attributed to the label they bear.

When considering a life event, they may conclude ‘That occurred because of my bipolar disorder’ . . . or ‘that must be a result of my depression.’ And I coax them back to a healthier reality: ‘*You* are experiencing a series of life events . . . you do get sad and you do get angry as the result of certain life events. And in fact, these emotional responses may be and often are perfectly normal responses to many situations.

“Because what often happens is that when a patient gets a label, they no longer believe that any feeling they are experiencing is normal. Rather, the feeling needs to be treated, to be medicated. My goal is to educate my patients to understand that not every single emotion deserves or requires a medicated response. Together, my patients and I need to determine what thoughts and behaviors are normal or abnormal and proceed with our healing journey accordingly.”

NAVIGATING LIFE’S EVENTS

Listening to people’s histories and life stories, says Dr. Gupta, “is the truly fascinating part of my work. It’s often also challenging when you have your own children and family—and we have three children—and we often move through these life events in very similar circumstances. At times a patient will relate a typical household life event, and I’ll respond ‘I totally get it—I’ve been through these same circumstances, as well.’ One reason that group therapy is often effective is because of this process of sharing of similar life events.

“In the past, psychiatry as a discipline was quite Freudian. Our teachers would say that it was important for therapists to keep their emotional distance from a patient, and not share personal information about oneself. In fact, I am very different in my approach to my patients, and have been since my earliest days in training. And I’ve come to believe that my patients actually like the fact that I’m a real person, sharing life’s mysteries and challenges with them.

“My message is often very simple: ‘Listen, I truly understand your pain, I’ve been there with you. Let’s try to navigate this life event together.’ My patients typically appreciate this approach because they recognize that it is sincere.

“And that is true beyond the support needs of the patient. There is the need to attempt to educate the family or caretakers about the patient’s full range of needs. I’ve seen and worked with quite a number of 18-to-25-year-olds with schizophrenia. You spend time with them and quickly realize

that they are truly sick—and quite often, their parents are devastated by this life event. Often, the patient simply is unaware of the severity of their condition.

“But the family is often emotionally distraught. Often they feel a reasonable future for their children is perhaps gone forever—or at least severely compromised. And I share with them the fact that we now have great medications, and we are in an exceptional area with UNC and Duke and ongoing research right here where we live and work. You no longer have to be on disability just because you have schizophrenia—which was true in the past, but is no longer true.

“In fact, I’ve worked with young people with schizophrenia who, with a good deal of family support, have completed their college work and are engaged in a satisfying career.”

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EXERCISE AND DIET

In her own life and in the lives of her patients, Dr. Gupta consistently spreads the word about good food and healthy exercise

“I encourage all of my patients—just as I encourage myself—to engage in a regular, well-designed exercise program. The simple truth is that a lot of the patients who come to me with fairly significant mood disorders do extremely well by getting good quality sleep, getting enough of the right supplements, eating good healthy foods, especially fresh vegetables, and getting a good amount of regular exercise.

“I prescribe these choices not only for my patients, but for myself and my family. I see the benefits of these simple changes profoundly. For the sake of my work and my family, I need to keep myself healthy. So I try to eat well, exercise and get a full night’s sleep.

“I feel the same way about my patients. I tell them, ‘Go run, go walk, exercise, do weight training, take a good hard look at your diet. Are you eating a lot of processed food? Perhaps it’s time to start cleaning up your diet.’ I find that talking about this with people is often very helpful – and in many instances, it leads to a real sense of rehabilitation and rejuvenation.”

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