

VIEWPOINTS

New Long-Covid Randomized Controlled Study Offers Hope to Patients

Interview by Sheldon Baker

Ashok Gupta, MSc, is an internationally renowned speaker, filmmaker and health practitioner who has dedicated his life to supporting people through chronic illness and achieving their potential. Gupta suffered from ME, or chronic fatigue syndrome, 25 years ago when he was studying at Cambridge University. Through neurological research that Gupta conducted, he managed to improve his health 100%. He then set up a clinic to treat others and published the well-known neuroplasticity limbic retraining recovery program and app in 2007 known as the Gupta Program. He has published several medical papers including randomized controlled trials showing that the Gupta Program treatment is effective. He is also continually researching these conditions. More information is available at www.guptaprogram.com.

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Integrative Medicine: A Clinician's Journal (IMCJ): You recently completed a study for Long-Covid. Please explain.

Ashok Gupta, MSc: The study was conducted at Luther College in Iowa, with Long-Covid patients. The study found that a neuroplasticity-based treatment using an online program significantly reduces fatigue and increases energy levels among Long-Covid patients when compared to a general wellness program.

Today, patients with Long-Covid don't have many health options. Long-Covid patients, if they utilize their health services generally, there's a six-month wait to see a specialist, and when they do see a specialist, they essentially are given general wellbeing advice. Things like having the importance of a good diet, sleep, and exercise. That would be for people in the U.S. or UK. There's no specific medical treatment that's been shown to be effective for people with Long-Covid (until now).

We have operated a clinic for 20 years. The focus on chronic conditions has been difficult for mainstream professions to treat. The unusual conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and mold illness that occurred during the pandemic. We've had success

with that. We've published randomized, controlled trials in that area. When the pandemic hit, there were the first reports of people having lingering symptoms with Long-Covid. We found patients coming to us just naturally using our program for Long-Covid. They were healing and getting better. So, we thought it would be good to have a study to show this objectively and scientifically.

IMCJ: What was your relationship with Luther College?

Mr. Gupta: The lead study author Laurent Toussiant, PhD, and professor of psychology at Luther had previously been involved with a study which was published in 2012 on the Gupta program and conducted at the Mayo Clinic. Because we had that relationship with him it was a natural collaboration.

IMCJ: In your study abstract, you note 10-to-30% of individuals with Covid have experienced Long-Covid. Is that globally?

Mr. Gupta: Yes, that is globally. In studies that they've done in Europe and the U.S., they have noticed that this percentage of patients have lingering symptoms, but when they say lingering symptoms that depends on the study. It might be four- six- or eight-weeks as their barometer. Now in terms of having it longer than three months, which is now the new barometer for Long-Covid, that generally brings it down to about 2-to-5% of people still having lingering symptoms.

IMCJ: Your study was based on your AIR program, which stands for amygdala and insula retraining.

Mr. Gupta: Let me be clear, I'm not a medical doctor. My background is in various complementary and alternative techniques. We developed this neuroplasticity and brain retraining treatment called AIR or *amygdala and insula retraining*, as a custom designed approach. We had lots of patients coming to us with Long-Covid, so we decided to start this study.

The study was a three-month study to see whether a treatment could be effective compared to a control group. In that control group people were enrolled in a general wellness program which is often prescribed for people with Long-Covid. That included information on sleep,

diet and exercise as well as mind calming the mind relaxation. It's quite a comprehensive package of things that were in the control group. We were seeing if there could be more effective solutions than generalized wellness treatments.

After three months, the study found that the Gupta Program was four-times more effective at reducing fatigue and exhaustion than the basic wellness treatment and twice as effective at increasing levels of energy compared to the control group. We also found that many of the patients with our treatment program got people back towards normalized fatigue levels within the population.

IMCJ: Just what is the Gupta Program?

Mr. Gupta: Gupta Program Brain Retraining™ is a revolutionary neuroplasticity program for chronic conditions. The program was first established in 2001 and specializes in treating disorders such as ME/CFS, fibromyalgia and MCS, as well as other associated health conditions.

We were one of the first neuroplasticity programs that existed. Before that I was treating people one-on-one in the clinical environment. We then decided to make the treatment available globally through patient participation. It originally started as a DVD program and then became an online program. And now an App and involves 15 interactive video sessions. People can take the interactive video sessions, along with 20-plus audio exercises. It's all delivered through the App or online. People don't have to travel anywhere or go to see anyone. I also present weekly webinars and it provides people with an opportunity to personally ask me questions and stay engaged with the content and program knowledge. We've also trained over 30 coaches around the world, who now can give people one-on-one sessions and support.

IMCJ: It seems like quite a comprehensive infrastructure.

Mr. Gupta: It is. And recently, we've just launched something called the *Daily Guptacize* which are daily Zoom calls where people can engage with brain retraining techniques in a supportive community. It's a great way of encouraging people to be inspired every day, to be motivated daily and to engage in the practice.

IMCJ: What does it cost if somebody wants to be involved?

Mr. Gupta: The program costs consumers \$349 for a one-year subscription. That's \$29 a month, which we feel is very reasonable for the support and content that people get. On top of that, until we complete large-scale Phase 3 trials, we will offer anybody a one-year money back guarantee. In other words, if it doesn't help them in any way they can return it, get a refund, and then also use that for some other treatment.

If doctors are interested in their patients using it, it's quite easy to go to the App or Play store. Just download the free App and start retraining your brain. There is lots of free content, videos, audios, and more. It's a great way for patients to dip their toe in and see if it's right for them.

IMCJ: What's a doctor's investment.

Mr. Gupta: We offer free one-year program access to all doctors and health practitioners. Interested health professionals should visit www.guptaprogram.com/health.

IMCJ: To date how many folks have signed up?

Mr. Gupta: We've had thousands of people go through the treatment and the program. And that's what's made it more popular amongst doctors now that awareness is building as more people use the program. I think we're on the cusp of our neuroplasticity approaches becoming a mainstream treatment. That's what's exciting about this area of medicine.

IMCJ: Regarding the current research, what did you hope the outcome of the study would be?

Mr. Gupta: Keep in mind, this was a small scale, randomized, controlled trial study with 42 patients. Although it's not any kind of scientific proof, it nevertheless provided a groundbreaking result because there had been no studies showing effectiveness for treating Long-Covid, as far as we are aware. Therefore, it's promising. It was published July 2023 in the *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine Journal* (<https://www.hindawi.com/journals/ecam/2023/7068326/>).

The randomized control trial that we previously published on fibromyalgia showed that our treatment compared to a control group treatment reduced fibromyalgia scores by 40% in just eight weeks, anxiety and depression halved, pain halved, and functional capacity increased by 50% compared to the control group. So, that was also a groundbreaking and promising result. What the Long-Covid study has done is built up a scientific base of evidence that our neuroplasticity and brain retraining approaches can be effective for treating these types of chronic illnesses.

IMCJ: What has been the reaction from the medical community?

Mr. Gupta: It's been a cautious and positive reaction in the sense that these are small-scale studies. Of course, we are looking to do larger Phase 2 and 3 trials with hundreds of patients. We're cautiously optimistic and at the same time positive that this program can make a difference. The medical community has tried a whole suite of remedies and there's not much that really helps. What we find is a lot of functional and

integrative doctors are especially interested in what we're doing as well as the complementary alternative practitioners. Functional medicine doctors, compared to mainstream health professionals and the medical community understand the importance of the brain aspect or the software aspect, if you will, which could be causing Long-Covid. Therefore, we have a lot of functional and integrated medicine doctors who are now making this a core part of their treatment protocol. They may use medications and supplements but encourage people to undertake brain training as well.

IMCJ: I see you're treating dysautonomia. That occurs in Long-Covid as well.

Mr. Gupta: Absolutely. We always say that dysautonomia essentially is a downstream symptom of what we believe is going on in the brain. There's a dysregulation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems which then cause temperature changes as well as changes to the heart rate. So dysautonomia is a byproduct of the brain, overstimulating the body through two mechanisms. First, nervous system stimulation. That's a sympathetic nervous system approach or overload, and then secondly, immune dysfunction. The immune system starts triggering itself unnecessarily, causing widespread inflammation which then goes on to creating all the downstream symptoms and dysregulation.

IMCJ: I think maybe you have experienced Covid?

Mr. Gupta: Yes. I have had Covid once. It was just a short-term thing. But what I did notice in my personal experience, and the experience of many of our patients with Long-Covid, that there can be lingering symptoms in many people. This is not like a cold, although some people say it is. I had a moderate infection, but then afterwards there was a trail of symptoms that took at least 7-10 days to disappear, and what I did notice was that many of our clients say that if they pushed themselves too hard or went back to work too quickly in that post viral phase, that may have contributed to their Long-Covid. And that makes sense as part of our hypothesis as to how the immune system responds to any kind of infection. The brain is designed to appropriately trigger the immune system into the on position to fight off the infection and go back to the off position. Our brain's priority is survival. The brain thinks this person is now pushing themselves quite hard in terms of getting back to work or another task too quickly. What happens if the infection comes back, or what happens if they push themselves too hard, what happens if there's still remnants of the infection that haven't been fought off. We therefore need to trigger the immune system and nervous system at a heightened state to ensure survival. Because that's the number one priority of our system, to then be able to pass our genes onto the next generation. And we believe what happens is that a conditioning effect happens in the insular

and the amygdala parts of the brain where these brain structures now learn to overstimulate continuously. So, even once the Covid infection has disappeared, it's left a legacy in the brain, a hypersensitive hyper-vigilant brain that believes we may still be in danger.

Let's error on the side of caution and continue with overprotective responses. And that is the core of our hypothesis. Brain retraining convinces the immune system and nervous system that we are no longer in danger, and therefore they can switch off these hyper defensive responses.

IMCJ: What else would you like to cover?

Mr. Gupta: Our audience is mainly health practitioners, in terms of the hypothesis. I've mentioned it in a scientific way. *InnoVision* readers might benefit from an analogy that we sometimes use to make it easier to understand what the underlying cause of Long-Covid is.

We use a fairy tale analogy. Imagine that you are the king, or the queen of the kingdom and the Army is the nervous system that protects the kingdom, and the Navy is the immune system protecting the body in a slightly different way. What we have is a kingdom defended by the Army and Navy against threats.

Now the threats are other invading armies. So those invading armies represent infections, pathogens, and chemicals. The Army and Navy know exactly what to do to defend against those things, and they have specific defensive machines and mechanisms to defend. Now imagine that that kingdom experiences a drought. So now the kingdom is weaker than normal, and an invading Army comes over the hill and the Army and Navy are in a weakened state. Somehow, they managed to fight off the invading Army. They fought valiantly, but of course the Army nearly fell. The Navy nearly fell, so now they are traumatized.

They come to you as the king or the queen of the kingdom and say, "We nearly lost the kingdom. If we lose, the kingdom falls and everyone suffers, so we now need all the resources. We need wheat, corn, iron, metal, all those resources, and all the clean water. Then the king and queen agree because that makes logical sense - that there could be an invading Army at any moment, and the kingdom could fall, so all resources should go to defense.

And now the Army and Navy, even with a little child walking over the hill, will fire off their defensive weapons because they are in that hyper-vigilant and hyper-defensive state. The effect this has on the kingdom is that it becomes weaker and weaker. The kingdom is now doing a logical thing, and that's why I believe that these illnesses are not illogical. They are just appropriate for a certain time and place. The kingdom is doing the right thing in hyper defending itself, but the experience of that is unwellness, fatigue and exhaustion.

In the case of the human body, the immune system may continue to be aroused in some shape or form as we replenish the system, for several weeks. But imagine now,

that goes on for months or years. That would be inappropriate. So, when the generals come in for their weekly check-in with the king or queen, brain retraining is when the king or queen says, "I know that it was bad three months ago, but we don't need you to continue to hyper-defend the kingdom, because the more you hyper-defend, the weaker the kingdom becomes. Some of those arrows fall back into the kingdom. Some of those war machines that are being triggered and the missiles are coming back to the kingdom." That's the idea of inflammation being a positive thing in terms of defending against pathogens. But a negative thing in terms of how it has semi-autoimmune effects or full-blown autoimmune effects on the body that can create secondary challenges and be a contributor to all kinds of illnesses. Therefore, brain retraining is telling the generals to stand down. The war is over. You can let go.

This is applicable, not just for these types of chronic illnesses where there's chronic inflammatory response, but also for degenerative diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and immune conditions like Lupus and various other health issues. We're using our program for those types of conditions and illnesses. And then there's also illnesses where the immune system is attacking our own joints, and there can also be illnesses where the immune system is not functioning correctly because of psychoneuroimmunological effects where there's too much stress in the system, and therefore the immune system's effectiveness is lowered. All of these can be shifted, we believe, with neuroplasticity and brain training approaches.

I'd like to add a little about the vagus nerve. There are a lot of people talking about vagus nerve and vagal tone. It is obvious that the vagus nerve is involved in parasympathetic wellness responses. I believe that the vagus nerve itself is a red herring, because it takes instructions from the brain and the limbic system parts of the brain. I don't believe that the vagus nerve has its own intelligence, and needs to be treated in isolation, that once again, is getting stuck in a reductionist mindset. Through brain retraining you naturally calm and train the brain to not stimulate the sympathetic nervous system. Naturally, the parasympathetic nervous system then kicks in at rest, triggering healing and digestive systems. Inflammatory responses switch off once again through the vagus nerve, and therefore we can reach balance. So, the vagus nerve is involved in what we're talking about but is not the central cause or the central player.

IMCJ: You mentioned several health issues regarding Long-Covid. I think others may be obesity as well as being of senior age.

Mr. Gupta: There's certainly some evidence for that. There are two risk factors for increased mortality from the Covid infection, and chances of having Long-Covid. Those are obesity and high blood pressure. There is some evidence that you're more likely to get Long-Covid effects if you

have those underlying health conditions. And thirdly if you're female. There's about an 80 to 20 split in terms of women to men getting Long-Covid, or at least who visit our clinic. And this is the same thing that we see with chronic fatigue syndrome, and fibromyalgia. Maybe the percentages are even higher, and our underlying hypothesis for this is that the immune system in men and women is different. It operates differently. And in women, it's more prone to these types of defensive conditioning effects.

We have a hypothesis as to why that might be. But yes, obesity can be a risk factor to go back to your original question.

IMCJ: I guess Covid is here to stay, or at least some form of it.

Mr. Gupta: When the pandemic first hit, it created a lot of anxiety amongst people. There was almost a siege mentality, and that lowered people's natural immunity. Also, the media played a role. Therefore, the hope that I would give to people is that infections have been part of our civilization, part of our human history as a species. We shouldn't fear it.

Instead, we should do whatever we can to strengthen our immune system so that these things no longer have an impact. And that means all the different things that impact our immune system. So, the mind being the most important, I believe. We can make sure that we rest and relax and de-stress ourselves every day to boost our immune system, and making sure that we exercise and take up a good program of daily activity to strengthen our immune system. In fact, there is some evidence that people who are athletes or worked out had far lower mortality from Covid-19 than those people who did not work out.

So, let's take charge of our own health. Let's get enough sleep. Sleep is a big mediator of our immune system. Let's make sure we get at least seven or more hours of sleep and good quality sleep. And it is also about prioritizing a healthy diet that boosts good bacteria in our gut. Boosting our gut biome is powerful for our natural immunity, as most of our immune system sits in our gut. So that's an important aspect. All these elements are things that we can do to strengthen our immune system so there's less chance of lingering effects from Covid itself and of contracting Long-Covid.

Those are the things that we can really do for ourselves. And the second positive thing to note is that now most of the world's population has contracted Covid-19, and that boosts our inherent immunity. That means that over time, our immune system gets stronger in recognizing this infection and it has a lesser and lesser impact. Just like a cold is not something that may have affected us at such a deep level as to when colds first arrived in the human experience.

Unfortunately, what we have noticed is that the strength of the Covid infection or the viral category that it comes

under doesn't necessarily predict whether someone gets Long-Covid or not. A lot of people got Long-Covid even from the lighter Omicron version. People still can get Long-Covid, even if they have a mild infection or mild experience.

Therefore, we still encourage people to reduce their chances of getting infected, but if they do get infected, it's very important to rest and allow the body time to fully fight off the virus. We encourage people to only get back to normal levels of activity and exercise once that are at least 95% better. We want to support the body in clearing the infection fully and reducing the chances of Long-Covid, and that is the health advice that we've put out there.

IMCJ: That's something we should be doing all the time, and should have been doing it, but it's not always easy to do.

Mr. Gupta: It isn't. And that's where health systems now need to reorganize themselves around something we're calling the *MEND* protocol. M is for mind, E is for exercise, N is for nighttime routine, and D is for diet. Those are the four components. And there's a fifth component, which is S for social. Our social engagement with friends and family around us is also a big predictor of mortality and our general health. The Covid pandemic has taught us that we can't purely rely on the medical profession when something goes wrong. We go and see a doctor and get them to fix it. But our own immunity for our own health is our sole responsibility because mainstream medicine has its limitations.