

Guided Imagery: Imagine the Power of Imagination

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Abstract: Guides imagery is a simple but very powerful technique of directed thoughts that guide your imagination towards a relaxed, focused state and help to reduce stress and give a sense of wellbeing. It has been used by many natural or alternative medical practitioners as well as some physicians and psychologists. The concept behind Guided imagery is that your body and mind are connected. Using all your senses, your body seems to respond as though what you are imagining is real. Guided imagery is not just a mental activity. It involves the whole body, the emotions and all the senses.

Key words: *Guided imagery, Stages, Techniques*

Introduction

Imagery is the conscious use of power of the imagination with the intention of activating physiological, psychological or spiritual healing. Imagery has been used as a healing practice since ancient times. Its reemergence in modern medicine began in the second half of the 20th century, when research suggested that imagery could help to reduce patients' pain and anxiety and improve their quality of life and outlook on their illness.

Guided imagery is a way to access the images of the unconscious mind to help resolving problems and to gain greater insights and deeper understanding regarding a specific illness, issues, or situation. It may be or may not be interactive and it usually uses prompted or suggested imagery.

It is a mind-body intervention by which a trained practitioner or teacher helps a participant or patient to evoke and generate mental images that simulate or re-create the sensory perception of sights, sounds, tastes, smells, movements, and images associated with touch, such as texture, temperature, and pressure, as well as imaginative or mental content that the participant or patient experiences as defying conventional sensory categories, and that may precipitate strong emotions or feelings in the absence of the stimuli to which correlating sensory receptors are receptive.

The practitioner or teacher may facilitate this process in person to an individual or a group. Alternatively, the participant or patient may follow guidance provided by a recorded sound, video or audiovisual media comprising spoken instruction that may be accompanied by music or sound.

Meaning of Guided Imagery

Guided imagery has been described as a kind of "directed daydreaming." It is based on the generally accepted idea that the mind can influence the body. So, guided imagery is a method of using

your imagination to help you to cope better with stress, anxiety, cravings and life. The rationale behind guided imagery is that your thoughts give rise to your emotions, which in turn greatly affect your well-being. Visualizing positive images regarding your life can improve your ability to handle stress and even make you feel better physically. Imagining yourself in a safe place can help you to feel calm. The technique is amazingly useful for treating conditions that are caused or aggravated by stress, such as depression, anxiety or addictions.

Thoughts or "images" can affect heart and breathing rate, as well as other involuntary functions such as hormone levels, gastrointestinal secretions, and brain wave patterns. Advocates of guided imagery therefore stress the importance of the image (thought) which, they say, does not have to be real to have an actual, physical effect. Guided imagery takes the next step and asks why the mind can't be used to cause good things to happen within the body. Also called visualization, creative visualization, or creative imagery, this technique teaches how to consciously create positive images to accomplish a desired goal. One neurological explanation of what might go on in the brain during guided imagery is that the image or message is sent from the higher centers of the brain (cerebral cortex) to the lower or more primitive centers that regulate a person's involuntary functions, like breathing and heart rate. Whether or not these images are real, the lower part of the brain apparently responds accordingly as long as there is no contradictory information. Guided imagery is a way to access the images of the unconscious mind to help resolve problems and to gain greater insights and deeper understanding regarding a specific illness, issues, or situation. It may be or may not be interactive and it usually uses prompted or suggested imagery.

Mental imagery in everyday life

There are two fundamental ways by which mental imagery is generated: voluntary and involuntary. The involuntary and spontaneous generation of mental images is integral to ordinary sensory perception, and cognition, and occurs without volitional intent. Meanwhile, many different aspects of everyday problem solving, scientific reasoning, and creative activity involve the volitional and deliberate generation of mental images.

Involuntary: The generation of involuntary mental imagery is created directly from present sensory stimulation and perceptual information, such as when someone sees an object, creates mental images of it, and maintains this imagery as they look away or close their eyes; or when someone hears a noise and maintains an auditory image of it, after the sound ceases or is no longer perceptible.

Voluntary: Voluntary mental imagery may resemble previous sensory perception and experience, recalled from memory; or the images may be entirely novel and the product of fantasy.

Technique:

The term guided imagery denotes the technique used in the second (voluntary) instance, by which images are recalled from long-term or short-term memory, or created from fantasy, or a combination of both, in response to guidance, instruction, or supervision. Guided imagery is, therefore, the assisted simulation or re-creation of perceptual experience across sensory modalities.

History of Guided Therapeutic Imagery

Various forms of guided imagery have been used for centuries, as far back as ancient Greek times, and the technique is an established approach in Chinese medicine and American Indian traditions as well as other healing and religious practices. Jacob Moreno's technique of psychodrama, developed in the 1940s, can also be linked to guided imagery, as the enactment of the person in therapy's unique concerns can be understood as a method of directing a person's own imagery. In fact, Hans Leuner, who further developed psychodrama, called the approach guided affective imagery. In the 1970s, Dr. David Bressler and Dr. Martin Rossman began establishing support for guided imagery as an effective approach for the treatment of chronic pain, cancer, and other serious illnesses. Their work led them to co-found the Academy for Guided Imagery in 1989. Throughout the 80s, a number of health advocates and professionals began to publish materials exploring the positive impact of guided imagery on health concerns both mental and physical. Ulrich Schoettle, Leslie Davenport, and Helen Bonny were a few such individuals. Currently, guided imagery is an established approach in complementary and alternative medicine, and studies show it is frequently helpful when used as part of the therapeutic process.

Principles of Guided Imagery

Guided imagery works because of 3 very simple mind-body principles.

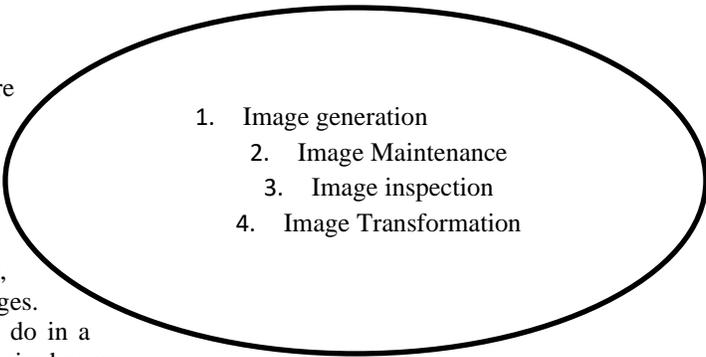
First Principle: The Mind-Body Connection

To the body, images created in the mind can be almost as real as actual, external events. The mind doesn't quite get the difference. That's why, when we read a recipe, we start to salivate and get hungrier. The mind is constructing images of the food — how it looks, tastes, smells, and feels in the mouth and the body is thinking "dinner is served".

The mind cues the body especially well if the images evoke multi-sensory memory and when there is a strong emotional element involved as well. These sensory images are the true language of the body, the only language it understands immediately and without question.

Second Principle: The Altered State

In the altered state, we're capable of more rapid and intense healing, growth, learning and change. We are more intuitive and creative. In this ordinary but profoundly powerful, immersive, hypnotic mind-state, our brainwave activity and our biochemistry shift. Mood, sense of time and cognition also get changes. We can do things we wouldn't be able to do in a normal, waking state – write a dazzling, inspired poem; replace our terror of a surgical procedure with a calm sense of safety and optimism; abate a life-threatening histamine response to a bee sting.

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1. Image generation
 2. Image Maintenance
 3. Image inspection
 4. Image Transformation

The altered state is the power cell of guided imagery and meditation, the special sauce for rapid change. When we consciously deploy it, we have an awesome ally, a force multiplier of great strength and range.

Third Principle: Locus of Control

The third principle is often referred to in the medical literature as the "locus of control". When we have a sense of mastery and control over our own experience, this, in and of itself, is therapeutic, and can help us feel better and do better.

Feeling a sense of mastery, agency and efficacy is associated with higher optimism, self-esteem, energy, and ability to tolerate pain and stress. Conversely, a sense of helplessness lowers self-regard, our ability to cope, and our optimism about the future. Because guided imagery is entirely internally driven, and we can decide if, when, where, and how to use it, and it puts us in the driver's seat and affords us a therapeutic sense of control.

Stages of Guided Imagery

According to the computational theory of imagery, which is derived from experimental psychology, guided imagery comprises four phases:

1. Image generation

Image generation involves generating mental imagery, either directly from sensory data and perceptual experience, or from memory, or from fantasy.

2. Image maintenance

Image maintenance involves the volitional sustaining or maintaining of imagery, without which, a mental image is subject to rapid decay with an average duration of only 250 ms. This is because volitionally created mental images

usually fade rapidly once generated in order to avoid disrupting or confusing the process of ordinary sensory perception.

The natural brief duration of mental imagery means that the active maintenance stage of guided imagery, which is necessary for the subsequent stages of inspection and transformation, requires cognitive concentration of attention by the participant. This concentrative attentional ability can be improved with the practice of mental exercises, including those derived from guided meditation and supervised meditative praxis. Even with such practice, some people can struggle to maintain a mental image "clearly in mind" for more than a few seconds; not only for imagery created through fantasy but also for mental images generated from both long-term memory and short-term memory. In addition, while the majority of the research literature has tended to focus on the maintenance of visual mental images, imagery in other sensory modalities also necessitates a volitional maintenance process in order for further inspection or transformation to be possible.

The requisite for practice in sustaining attentional control, such that attention remains focused on maintaining generated imagery, is one of the reasons that guided meditation, which supports such concentration, is often integrated into the provision of guided imagery as part of the intervention. Guided meditation assists participants in extending the duration for which generated mental images are maintained, providing time to inspect the imagery, and proceed to the final transformation stage of guided imagery.

3. Image inspection

Once generated and maintained, a mental image can be inspected to provide the basis for interpretation, and transformation. For visual imagery, inspection often involves a scanning process, by which the participant directs attention across and around an image, simulating shifts in perceptual perspective.

Inspection processes can be applied both to imagery created spontaneously, and to imagery generated in response to scripted or impromptu verbal descriptions provided by the facilitator.

4. Image transformation

Finally, with the assistance of verbal instruction from the guided imagery practitioner or teacher, the participant transforms, modifies, or alters the content of generated mental imagery, in such a way as to substitute images that provoke negative feelings, are indicative of suffering, or that reaffirm disability or debilitation for those that elicit positive emotion, and are suggestive of resourcefulness, ability to cope, and an increased degree of mental and physical capacity.

Outcome of image generation, maintenance, inspection, and transformation

Through this technique, a patient is assisted in reducing the tendency to evoke images indicative of the distressing, painful, or debilitating nature of a condition, and learns instead to evoke mental imagery of their identity, body, and circumstances that emphasizes the capacity for autonomy and self-determination, positive proactive activity, and the ability to cope, whilst managing their condition. As a result, symptoms become less incapacitating; pain is to some degree decreased, while coping skills increase.

Mechanism of Guided Imagery

When we are worried about something, our mind is full of thoughts of danger, and our nervous system prepares us to meet that danger by initiating the fight, flight, freeze response. The levels of stress hormones shoot up, breathing and heart rate accelerate, muscles tense, and we end up tired and nervous, rather than calm and rested. Studies show that envisioning positive images can help you disarm this stress response before it gets going. It can help you feel in control and better able to cope with pain, fear, cravings, life.

Issues Treated with Guided Imagery

Guided therapeutic imagery is now widely used and supported by research. The technique is commonly used for stress management, with the person in therapy encouraged to picture a place that instills a sense of relaxation. Research shows guided imagery to be helpful in the treatment of a number of concerns, including:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Substance Abuse
- Relationship Issues
- Diminished Self care
- Family and Parenting issues
- Post-traumatic stress
- Grief

In addition to emotional and behavioral issues, guided imagery is also often used by medical professionals to address pain management, high blood pressure, and the reduction of unwanted behaviors such as smoking. Guided imagery is also commonly used among athletes in order to enhance performance. Guided imagery techniques are generally used to target specific problems. A person with cancer, for example, may use guided imagery to visualize healthy cells and strong, powerful organs.

Pros and Cons of Guided Image

Pros of Guided Imagery

This technique is generally considered to be safe for use by most people,

Imagery can provide relaxation, insight, and wisdom. It helps to relieve physical tension and psychological stress at the same time, distracting a person from what may be stressing him/her, and getting into more positive frame of mind.

Guided imagery is a free stress-relieving therapy and, with practice, can be done just about anywhere.

It can also be useful in disrupting patterns of rumination and help to build resources in life that increase the resilience toward stress by engaging an upward spiral of positivity.

Cons of Guided Imagery

It can take some practice to master autonomous guided imagery. Working with a professional therapist to get to that point can be somewhat costly.

Some studies suggest it can lead to false memories.

Guided imagery may not work for every individual, and some people may prefer to address their concerns with other approaches.

The initial guidance of a therapist is encouraged, and when a person experiences a serious concern, the support of a mental health professional is always recommended.

Techniques

Guided imagery techniques work to help people relax for several reasons. As is the case with many techniques, they involve an element of distraction which serves to redirect people's attention away from what is stressing them and towards an alternative focus. The techniques are in essence a non-verbal instruction or direct suggestion to the body and unconscious mind to act "as though" the peaceful, safe and beautiful (and thus relaxing) environment were real. Finally, guided imagery can work through the associative process described above, where scenes become a learned cue or trigger that helps recall memories and sensations resulting from past relaxation practice.

Imagery techniques can be thought of as a form of guided meditation. As is the case with other forms of meditation, one of the goals and desirable outcomes is to help people learn how to detach themselves from their moment to moment fixation on the contents of their minds, and instead cultivate a relaxed detachment from which it is easy to watch (but not become embedded in) the various sensations and thoughts streaming through the mind. The repetitive practice of imagery techniques can help this meditative learning to occur.

The practice of guided imagery is extremely portable, as it relies on nothing more than one's imagination and concentration abilities which people always have at their disposal (provided they aren't exhausted). However, like most techniques requiring mental concentration, it is usually most successfully practiced without interruption in a setting that is free from distracting stimulation.

There is no single correct way to use visual imagery for stress relief. However, something similar to the following steps is often recommended:

- Find a private calm space and make yourself comfortable.
- Take a few slow and deep breaths to center your attention and calm yourself.
- Close your eyes.
- Imagine yourself in a beautiful location, where everything is as you would ideally have it. Some people visualize a beach, a mountain, a forest, or a being in a favorite room sitting on a favorite chair.
- Imagine yourself becoming calm and relaxed. Alternatively, imagine you are smiling, feeling happy and having a good time.
- Focus on the different sensory attributes present in your scene so as to make it more vivid in your mind. For instance, if you are imagining the beach, spend some time vividly imagining the warmth of the sun on your skin, the smell of the ocean, seaweed and salt spray, and the sound of the waves, wind and seagulls. The more you can invoke your senses, the more vivid the entire image will become.
- Remain within your scene, touring its various sensory aspects for five to ten minutes or until you feel relaxed.
- While relaxed, assure yourself that you can return to this place whenever you want or need to relax.
- Open your eyes again and then rejoin your world.

Guided Imagery - Meditation Tips & Techniques, for Users and Practitioners

Here are some general facts and user-friendly tips about how to best use guided imagery, and what to expect from it.

- Your skill and efficiency will increase with practice. Guided imagery functions in a way that is the opposite of addictive substances: the more you use it, the less you need for it to work.
- Imagery works best in a permissive, relaxed, unforced atmosphere. Don't worry about "doing it right". There are many ways to do it right.
- Your choice of imagery content needs to be congruent with your values, so don't try to impose imagery on yourself that doesn't sit right with you, just because you think you should. There are many ways to do this, so find your way.
- It's best to engage all the senses, especially your kinesthetic or feeling sense.
- Imagery is generally more powerful in a group setting, mainly due to the contagious nature of the altered state. So a support group, study group, class or healing group is great way to start.
- Music, when properly chosen, will increase the effects of imagery. You will intuitively know what music is right for what you need. A small percentage of people prefer no music at all.
- Imagery that elicits emotion is generally more effective than imagery that doesn't. Responding with emotion is a good sign that the imagery is working for you in a deep way.
- If you're using self-talk with your imagery, try to avoid the imperative verb form on yourself, so that inadvertently "bossy" language doesn't marshal unnecessary resistance and interfere with your ability to respond.
- You do not have to be a "believer" for it to work. Positive expectancy helps, but even a skeptical willingness to give it a try is enough.
- Touch is a powerful accompaniment to your guided meditation. It will both help with relaxation and receptivity, and increase the kinesthetic impact of the images. Imagery combined with therapeutic massage, Therapeutic Touch, or even the placement of your own hand on your belly is very potent.
- Using the same posture cues, gestures or hand-positioning with each mind-body meditation session creates an "anchor" that conditions you to respond immediately to the posture. You condition yourself to relax and heal at will.
- If you aren't used to being both relaxed and awake at the same time, you are likely to drop off to sleep during a session. If you want to stay awake, you might try sitting up, standing against a wall, walking or listening with your eyes half-open.

- Even asleep, you'll benefit from repeated listening, as demonstrated in test results with sleeping diabetics and unconscious surgery patients.
- Don't worry if you space out or lose track of a guided imagery narrative. You're not listening wrong – a wandering mind comes with the territory.
- You may tear up, get a runny nose, cough, and yawn, feel heaviness in your limbs, get tingling along the top of their scalp or in your hands and feet, or experience minor, involuntary muscle-twitches. These are normal responses.
- Other strong responses to guided imagery are unusual stillness, increased coloring in the face, and an ironing out of lines and wrinkles. The voice will be deeper and lower afterward, and breathing slower and more relaxed.
- Often after an imagery meditation, aches and pains are gone.

Conclusion

Guided imagery is a convenient and simple stress management and relaxation techniques that can quickly calm our body simultaneously relax our mind. Imagery has found physiological consequences, and the body tends to respond to imagery as it would be a genuine external experience. It is widely accepted practice among mental health care providers and is gaining acceptance pain reduction technique across a number of medical disciplines. It doesn't have any adverse side effects. It is a source of positive energy that can heal your body and mind, and helps to empower yourself in your life.

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