

Guided Imagery Therapy

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A mental image can be defined as “a thought with sensory qualities.” It is something we mentally see, hear, taste, smell, touch, or feel.

The term “guided imagery” refers to a wide variety of techniques, including simple visualization and direct suggestion using imagery, metaphor and story-telling, fantasy exploration and game playing, dream interpretation, drawing, and active imagination where elements of the unconscious are invited to appear as images that can communicate with the conscious mind.

Once considered an “alternative” “or complementary” approach, guided imagery is now finding widespread scientific and public acceptance, and it is being used to teach psycho physiological relaxation, alleviate anxiety and depression, relieve physical and psychological symptoms, overcome health-endangering habits, resolve conflicts, and help patients prepare for surgery and tolerate procedures more comfortably.

Mental images, formed long before we learn to understand and use words, lie at the core of who we think we are, what we believe the world is like, what we feel we deserve, what we think will happen to us, and how motivated we are to take care of ourselves. These images strongly influence our beliefs and attitudes about how we fall ill, and what will help us to get better.

All healing rituals involve manipulation of these images, either overtly or covertly, and thus guided imagery can be considered one of the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of medicine. The healing rituals of various cultures that have persisted over time all have a certain level of clinical efficacy, and while we may attribute these therapeutic benefits to ‘placebo effects’, they have real and measurable effects with important implications for our understanding of the healing process.

In the early 1970s, inspired by the pioneering work of Irving Oyle, Carl and Stephanie Simonton, Robert Assagioli and others, Drs. David Bresler and Martin Rossman began to develop and research contemporary imagery approaches for patients coping with chronic pain, immune dysfunction, cancer, heart disease, and other catastrophic and life-threatening illnesses.

By integrating techniques originating from Jungian psychology, Gestalt therapy, Psycho synthesis, Ericksonian hypnotherapy, object relations theory, humanistic psychology, and advanced communications theory, these approaches were constantly redefined, expanded, tested, and codified, giving birth to Interactive Guided Imagery, an extremely powerful, yet remarkably safe and rapid therapeutic approach for mobilizing the untapped healing resources of the mind.

In 1989, the Academy for Guided Imagery was founded to provide in-depth training for clinicians and health educators, to raise public and professional awareness about the benefits of imagery, and to support research, professional communication, and the dissemination of imagery-related information.

What Is Interactive Guided Imagery?

Guided Imagery is a convenient and simple relaxation technique that can help you quickly and easily manage stress and reduce tension in your body. Its virtually as easy as indulging in a vivid daydream and, with practice, this technique can help you to better access your inner wisdom.

Imagery Has Physiological Consequences;

Physically, imagery has the ability to directly influence the autonomic nervous system, and the power of imagination can be recruited to promote specific physiological changes as an aid to healing. In addition, many studies indicate that certain imagery techniques may stimulate physiologic processes including immune, nervous, and endocrine responses which can accelerate the healing process.

There are few, if any, physical, emotional or behavioural symptoms or illnesses that are not affected to some degree by the mind. IGI mobilizes the latent, innate healing abilities of the client to promote pain control, accelerated healing, rehabilitation, recovery and health enrichment.

The IGI approach is eclectic, holistic, humanistic and non-dogmatic, incorporating skills from many related disciplines including hypnosis, Jungian Psychology, psycho synthesis, self-actualization and ego-state psychology. IGI techniques are easy to learn with proper instruction, and carry few, if any, negative side effects when properly utilized; thus making them an ideal adjunct to any other type of therapy.

It is our sincere hope that health professionals from all disciplines will begin to utilize these techniques to help their patients and clients more effectively

Biologic Mechanism of Action;

Imagery has profound physiological consequences, and the body tends to respond to imagery as it would to a genuine external experience. For example, if you vividly imagine slowly sucking on the sour, tart slice of a fresh, juicy lemon, you will soon begin to salivate. Another example is sexual fantasy and its attendant physiologic responses. What happens to your body when you bring to mind something that makes you ferociously angry?

Imagery has been shown to affect almost all major physiologic systems of the body, including respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, metabolic rates in cells, gastrointestinal mobility and secretion, sexual function, cortisol levels, blood lipids, and even immune responsiveness.

With respect to producing specific physiological changes that can promote healing, guided imagery represents an important alternative to pharmacotherapy with much greater safety and far fewer complications, precautions, and contra- help themselves.

What is this therapy used for?

Because guided imagery is a mind-body therapy, any stress-related health concern, including high blood pressure, pain related to muscle tension, insomnia, and anxiety or depression, may be alleviated via this approach. Associated conditions, such as skin rashes or irritable bowel syndrome, are also amenable to guided imagery. It has been shown to be beneficial in treating autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn's disease, and can be useful to alleviate chronic allergies, hives and asthma.

Time Required: 10-15 Minutes

Here's How:

1. Get into a comfortable position, like one you would use for meditation or self-hypnosis. If a lying-down position would likely put you to sleep, opt for a cross-legged position, or recline in a comfy chair.
2. Use diaphragmic deep breathing and close your eyes, focusing on breathing in peace and breathing out stress.
3. Once you get to a relaxed state, begin to envision yourself in the midst of the most relaxing environment you can imagine. For some, this would be floating in the cool, clear waters off of a remote tropical island, where attractive people bring drinks and smooth music plays in the background. For others, this might be sitting by a fire in a secluded snow cabin, deep in the woods, sipping hot cocoa and reading the latest bestseller while wrapped in a plush blanket and fuzzy slippers.
4. As you imagine your scene, try to involve all of your senses. What does it look like? How does it feel? What special scents are involved? Do you hear the roar of a fire, the splash of a waterfall, or the sounds of chipper birds? Make your vision so real you can even taste it!
5. Stay here for as long as you like. Enjoy your 'surroundings', and let yourself be far from what stresses you. When you're ready to come back to reality, count back from ten or twenty, and tell yourself that when you get to 'one', you'll feel serene and alert, and enjoy the rest of your day. When you return, you'll feel more calm and refreshed, like returning from a mini-vacation, but you won't have left the room.

Tips:

1. You may want to use ambient sounds that compliment your imagery. This way, you feel more immersed in your 'environment', plus the sounds of real life will be obscured.
2. You may also want to set an alarm, just in case you lose track of time or fall asleep. This way, you'll be more able to relax and let go, knowing that your schedule won't be in jeopardy.
3. As you get more practiced, you'll be able to go more deeply and quickly. You may also want to communicate with your subconscious mind, with the help of a tape you record for yourself or purchase, or a therapist.

Guided Imagery's Effects on the Body:

Guided imagery has been found to provide significant stress reduction benefits, including physically relaxing the body quickly and efficiently and even helping participants get in touch with deeper levels of wisdom (held on a subconscious level) that would help them better manage their lives in ways that would reduce stress. The studies demonstrating the health benefits of imagery are so numerous that many hospitals are incorporating imagery as an option to help with treatment.

What's Involved?

With the help of an imagery tape, a professional helper, or just one's imagination, those who practice guided imagery get into a deeply relaxed state and envision, with great detail relating to all of the senses, a relaxing scene. They may also imagine a wise 'guide' with them, answering their questions and asking them questions that they must ponder in order to get to a better place in their lives. (This 'guide' is a representation of their subconscious mind that they aren't generally able to access.)

What Are the Pros?

Imagery can provide relaxation, insight and wisdom. It is a free stress relieving therapy and, with practice, can be done just about anywhere.

What Are the Cons?

Like self-hypnosis, it can take some practice to master autonomous guided imagery. Working with a professional therapist or even tapes to get to that point can be somewhat costly.

Forms of Therapy:

The term "guided imagery" is used to describe a range of techniques from simple visualization and direct imagery-based suggestion, to metaphor and story-telling. The service-marked term "Interactive Guided Imagery" (IGI) refers to the specific approach taught by the Academy in which imagery is used in a highly interactive format to tap inner wisdom and evoke greater client/patient autonomy.

IGI is usually practiced by licensed health care clinicians in diverse specialties, health educators, and lay practitioners who have been trained and certified by the Academy for Guided Imagery through its Professional Certification Training Program.

IGI is also applicable as a self-care technique, in a group or class, or as part of an individual counselling relationship. Self-help imagery books and tapes are also an inexpensive option for many clients who are capable of learning and utilizing these techniques on their own.

How does it compare to other stress reduction methods?

For the benefits it provides, it's an excellent stress management option. It can be easier than exercise or even yoga for those with physical limitations. It has no risk of side effects like some medical and herbal therapies. Using it for simple relaxation is easy and can be done by just about anyone, but accessing an internal 'guide' takes more practice than other methods like progressive muscle relaxation or breathing exercises. It's similar to self-hypnosis in that you're getting into a deep state of relaxation and dealing with your subconscious mind. However, with self-hypnosis, you're more often implanting ideas into your subconscious mind, whereas imagery focuses more on extracting ideas from it.

Are there any side effects or indications where guided imagery should be avoided?

There are no known contraindications for using guided imagery. This is not a technique, however, that should be incorporated into patient care when a client is uncomfortable about using it for personal or spiritual reasons. Mind-body approaches should be used in conjunction with, and not in place of, indicated physical therapies.

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