

## *Using Guided Imagery*

### **What is guided imagery?**

Medical diagnoses, surgery, and treatments can often be scary and overwhelming. Guided imagery is a practice that can allow you to tap into your inner strength. You can take an active role in your healing instead of being passive when unpleasant things are happening to you. You can also use guided imagery to better understand a situation or prepare for it in advance.

In guided imagery, you use your “mind’s eye” to picture the disease or other challenge you are facing. It encourages you to relax and solve a problem in your mind. When your eyes are closed and you are picturing something in your mind, the brain “sees” the images as real. In this way, you can encourage your body to make actual physical changes just by imagining them.

### **What is guided imagery used for?**

The beauty of guided imagery practice is that it can be used when you are facing any number of challenging life situations. The list below is from Martin Rossman MD in the book *Integrative Medicine*.<sup>1</sup> Guided imagery can be used...

- To help reduce stress and anxiety
- To prepare for surgery
- To help reduce side effects of medications or procedures
- To help you and your clinicians understand why symptoms are happening
- To help you cope with difficult illnesses
- To improve your body's own healing
- To help manage fear and pain
- To help you prepare for life changes (habits, sickness, and even death).

### **How does guided imagery work?**

Guided imagery can be practiced three ways:

- Alone
- By listening to recordings
- In a session with an experienced guide.

First you picture a safe, peaceful place. Then you imagine how you might approach the problem you are facing. While relaxed in a safe place, it is easier to see the true nature of the problem. People often find an idea, which works for them, that they might not have thought about before. By picturing your problems and some solutions during these sessions, you practice problem-solving in your “mind’s eye.” In this way, you can learn to heal your body using your own inner strength. At times, this might help you avoid medication or other treatments. You become active in the healing process. We all have this inner strength, but we may have lost touch with it during the everyday stresses of life.



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Dr. Rossman has described using guided imagery with a patient of his.<sup>1</sup> (This is slightly reworded from his original story.)

*A 28-year-old woman who often had headaches went to her doctor when she had a severe migraine. He guided her through a simple relaxation exercise. Then he asked her to focus directly on her pain and invite an image to come to mind that could tell her something useful about the pain. She pictured a large bird. It was sitting on her head and pecking away in the area of her pain.*

*“Why’s he doing that?” she asked. Her doctor suggested that she ask the bird and imagine that he could answer in a way she could understand.*

*To her surprise, the bird answered, “Why not? You let everyone else pick on you!” The woman said that the day before she had accidentally overheard a fellow employee making fun of her. She started to get angry, but then got sick to her stomach and felt a migraine coming on. The migraine developed into the headache that brought her in to her doctor. In the story that unfolded in the patient’s mind, the bird agreed to work with her to understand and prevent her headaches more effectively. She left the office feeling 90% better without any medication or medical treatment.*

*The patient continued to imagine conversations with the bird. She discovered that she had a long-standing pattern of low self-esteem. The bird told her that her low self-esteem was causing her to become angry with herself, which led to her headaches. She eventually saw a good therapist, and after 18 months she was much happier, more successful, and no longer having headaches.*

### **Who can benefit from guided imagery?**

One of the best things about guided imagery is that anyone can easily learn to do it. Children are often very good at learning how to use guided imagery. That is because they use their imaginations more than they analyze and reason. Guided imagery may be more difficult at first for adults since we often think more than imagine. But as with most things, practice makes perfect! If you have severe mental illness or hallucinations, use guided imagery only with the support of a trained professional.

### **How is guided imagery used in surgery?**

Programs can vary. If you will be having surgery, you may be given CDs to take home and listen to for a few days before the operation. You may be encouraged to practice the guided imagery sessions a few times each day until the day of surgery. These sessions may help you

- Decrease anxiety related to the upcoming surgery
- Picture an easy operation without problems or
- Imagine that the healing process happens quickly.



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### **What are the benefits of using guided imagery in surgery?**

Many studies have been done to look at how guided imagery practice helps patients who have surgery. A study at the Cleveland Clinic found that patients who used guided imagery before, during, and after surgery had better outcomes. They had less anxiety and pain after surgery and even needed smaller amounts of strong painkillers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, those patients were more satisfied overall with their surgery experience. Another study from Southeastern Louisiana University School of Nursing showed that guided imagery can reduce the stress of surgery and improve wound healing after surgery.<sup>3</sup>

### **Are there risks to using guided imagery?**

Because guided imagery is something you choose to do and are in complete control of, there are almost no risks involved. It is possible (but unlikely) that you may have uncomfortable thoughts while practicing guided imagery. If this happens, you can simply stop the practice by focusing your attention on something else. Most people find that guided imagery helps them. Patients who have tried guided imagery often recommend it to others.

### **How can I find someone trained in guided imagery to work with me?**

Many psychologists are trained in guided imagery. It would be best to ask your clinician for recommendations first. He or she will be able to point you in the right direction of a trained professional who will be a good fit for you. Be careful about information found on the Internet. Often people charge fees for their products and may not be true guided imagery teachers. The website of the Academy for Guided Imagery is one excellent source of information:

<http://acadgi.com/>. Others are listed below.

### **Where can I find more information on guided imagery?**

<b>Websites</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://acadgi.com/">http://acadgi.com/</a> (Academy for Guided Imagery)</li> <li>• <a href="http://drmillier.com/learning-center/guidedimagery/">http://drmillier.com/learning-center/guidedimagery/</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.thehealingmind.org">www.thehealingmind.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.healthjourneys.com">www.healthjourneys.com</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Guided Imagery podcasts--Health videos and podcasts--Kaiser Permanente</a></li> </ul>
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**Note:** Some online resources charge a fee for their products/services.

### **References**

1. Rossman, ML. Guided imagery and interactive guided imagery. In: Rakel D, ed. *Integrative Medicine*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders, an imprint of Elsevier; 2012:856-862.e1
2. Tusek, DL, Church JM, Strong SA, Grass JA, Fazio VW.. Guided Imagery: a significant advance in the care of patients undergoing elective colorectal surgery. *Dis Colon Rectum*. 1997;40:172-178.
3. Holden-Lund, C. Effects of relaxation with guided imagery on surgical stress and wound healing. *Research in Nursing & Health*. 1998;11:235-244.

***The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your health.***



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