GUIDED IMAGERY

WHAT IS IT?

Guided Imagery is a mind-body approach that uses the "mind's eye"—one's internal processes—to support healing. Also known as guided visualization, this mind-body practice has been used throughout history to change behaviors, perspectives, and physiology.[1] Other therapeutic interventions may also incorporate the use of images as part of therapy, such as hypnosis, psychotherapy and biofeedback.

HOW IT WORKS

A typical session might start with a person being guided through relaxation exercises. After that, the clinician and the patient begin exploring visual images, as the clinician offers various cues. Initially, a positive image might be created to help the patient relax more; for example, they may be encouraged to visit a safe or beautiful place. Sometimes the patient comes up with the image, and sometimes the practitioner does. Most often, they collaborate. Ultimately, Guided Imagery is controlled by the person experiencing it. This allows for a sense of mastery and control, which can fuel self-directed change efforts.[2]

Guided Imagery promotes an altered state of awareness. It is a means by which a person can communicate with their subconscious, or unconscious, mind. Images can distract from pain or other symptoms, as people work with and even alter imagery related to their discomfort. As well, Guided Imagery is used often in promoting optimal performance. Imagery can also induce relaxation and help people cope more effectively with stress.

As they are working with an image, a person is encouraged to use all their senses such as sight, touch, smell, hearing. Noting emotions that may arise is also encouraged. Different people gravitate more to focusing on certain senses. For example, many people are highly visual, while others may find it easier to focus on sounds or touch during the experience.

Imagery can affect almost all major physiologic control systems of the body, including[3]:

- Respiration, heart rate, and blood pressure
- Metabolic rate
- Digestive system motility and secretion
- Cortisol (stress hormone) levels
- Cholesterol levels
- Immune system activity
- Mood, including levels of anxiety and depression

HOW TO USE IT

Imagery can be taught one-on-one or in groups. A practitioner may record a session so that their patient will be able to do a given activity or exercise repeatedly away from the office.

Imagery can be used in several ways: to bring about general stress reduction (e.g., to feel calmer, less tense), to focus on a specific desired outcome (e.g., improving golf swing), and to gain insight, particularly by interactively exploring imagery. A person might intentionally shift the imagery, and in so doing, shift what the imagery represents.

WHEN TO USE IT

According to the VA HSR&D group, based on a large-scale review of all imagery related studies up to March 2018, "There is moderate-level confidence that Guided Imagery is effective in improving diagnosis-related outcomes in patients with arthritis or other rheumatic diseases. The levels of confidence of Guided Imagery's effectiveness for other conditions was generally low, due to heterogeneity among the intervention modalities, high risk of bias, lack of blinding, and limited generalizability in some studies."[4]

While more research is clearly needed, Imagery has shown particular promise with the following (noting that studies have their limitations).[5-9]

- Anxiety (in multiple conditions)
- Cancer: Better outcomes with chemo- and radiotherapies
- Childbirth
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Improving athletic performance
- Reducing blood pressure, cholesterol, and A1c levels
- Managing chronic illness in general
- Nightmares
- Pain, including from arthritis and other rheumatic diseases
- Parkinson's disease tremors[8]
- Post-operative pain, cancer pain
- Preparation for surgery or procedures, pre-operative anxiety
- Speed up fracture and burn healing
- Stress management
- Tobacco abstinence
- Weight loss

A 2019 study found that a combination of Interactive Guided Imagery and progressive muscle relaxation significantly reduced stress in cancer patients.[10] Several other recent meta-analyses found Guided Imagery to be effective in treating pre-operative anxiety and post-operative pain.[11,12] A systematic literature review of adult critically ill individuals found that Guided Imagery had a favorable effect with regard to decrease of pain, anxiety and length of stay in Critical Care.[13]

It is possible for nearly anyone to use this technique. Some people prefer to work with a trained professional if they are using imagery to guide them through a physical or mental health issue. Professionals can teach patients to do ongoing work on their own. Audio-recordings and online downloads with imagery exercises are widely available. Refer to the Resources section at the end of this document for more information.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR (HARMS)

Guided Imagery is not advised (or should be used with extreme care) for individuals who have psychosis, hallucinations, delusions, delirium, dementia, religious beliefs that might be in conflict with the use of imagery, or a history of unprocessed trauma that might come up during the session.

TIPS FROM YOUR WHOLE HEALTH COLLEAGUES

A number of organizations offer information about Guided Imagery online. The VA Whole Health Mobile Apps and Online Tools suggests Health Journeys for Guided Imagery-related blogs and online imagery sessions.

RESOURCES

VA WHOLE HEALTH AND RELATED SITES

- Integrative Health Coordinating Center SharePoint on Guided Imagery: https://dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/VHAOPCC/IHCC/SitePages/Guided-Imagery.aspx
- Evidence Map of Guided Imagery:[14] https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/management_briefs/default.cfm?ManagementBriefsMenu=eBrief-no153&eBriefTitle=Guided+Imagery%2C+Biofeedback%2C+and+Hypnosis
    - Compilation of systematic review data by VA Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D)
- CIH Listservs. To be added, contact:
    - Guided Imagery listserv: VHAOPCC&CTGuideImagery@va.gov
    - Other listservs: Lana.Frankenfield@va.gov
- National CIH Subject Matter Experts, as of FY 2020:
    - Guided Imagery: David Gaffney. David.Gaffney@va.gov

OTHER WEBSITES

- Academy of Guided Imagery. http://www.acadgi.com/
- Dartmouth College Student Wellness Center. Offers a variety of short, guided meditation exercises, as well as others for relaxation and Guided Imagery. https://students.dartmouth.edu/wellness-center/wellness-mindfulness/mindfulness-meditation/guided-recordings
- University of California-San Francisco (UCSF) Osher Center for Integrative Health. Offers relaxation, imagery and meditation recordings. https://osher.ucsf.edu
- Health Journeys and Health Journeys Guided Imagery Audio Library. Numerous resources involving guided imagery for various health issues and scenarios. http://www:healthjourneys.com

BOOKS

- *Guided Imagery for Groups*, Andrew Schwartz (1997)
- *Guided Imagery for Self-Healing*, Martin Rossman (2000)
- *The Healing Waterfall: 100 Guided Imagery Scripts for Counselors, Healers and Clergy.* Max Highstein (2017).
- *Staying Well With Guided Imagery/How to Harness the Power of Your Imagination for Health and Healing.* Belleruth Naparstek (1994).

AUTHOR(S)

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