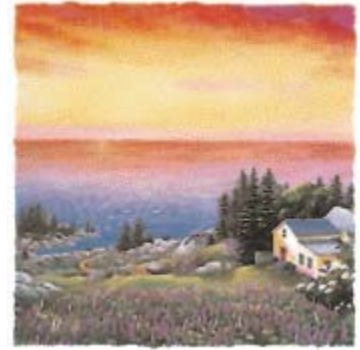


# Guided Imagery



Guided imagery is a gentle but powerful technique that focuses and directs the imagination. It can be just as simple as an athlete's 10-second reverie, just before leaping off the diving board, imagining how a perfect dive feels when slicing through the water. Or it can be as complex as imagining the busy, focused buzz of thousands of loyal immune cells, scooting out of the thymus gland on a search and destroy mission to wipe out unsuspecting cancer cells.



Although it has been called "visualization" and "mental imagery", these terms are misleading. Guided imagery involves far more than just the visual sense and this is a good thing, given the fact that only about 55% of the population is strongly wired visually. Instead, imagery involves all of the senses, and almost anyone can do this. Neither is it strictly a "mental" activity it involves the whole body, the emotions and all the senses, and it is precisely this body-based focus that makes for its powerful impact.

When properly constructed, imagery has the built-in capacity to deliver multiple layers of complex, encoded messages by way of simple symbols and metaphors. You could say it acts like a depth charge dropped beneath the surface of the "bodymind", where it can reverberate again and again.

Over the past 25 years, the effectiveness of guided imagery has been increasingly established by research findings that demonstrate its positive impact on health, creativity and performance. We now know that in many instances even 10 minutes of imagery can reduce blood pressure, lower cholesterol and glucose levels in the blood, and heighten short-term immune cell activity. It can considerably reduce blood loss during surgery and morphine use after it. It lessens headaches and pain. It can increase skill at skiing, skating, tennis, writing, acting and singing; it accelerates weight loss and reduces anxiety; and it has been shown, again and again, to reduce the aversive effects of chemotherapy, especially nausea, depression and fatigue.

Because it is a right-brained activity, engaging in it will often be accompanied by other functions that reside in that vicinity: emotion, laughter, sensitivity to music, openness to spirituality, intuition, abstract thinking and empathy.

And because it mobilizes unconscious and pre-conscious processes to assist with conscious goals, it can bring to bear much more of a person's strength and motivation to accomplish a desired end. So, subtle and gentle as this technique is, it can be very powerful, and more and more so over time.

One of the most appealing and forgiving features about imagery is that almost anyone can use it. Although children and women probably have a slight, natural advantage, imagery skips across the barriers of education, class, race, gender and age - a truly equal opportunity intervention.

Even though it can be considered a kind of meditation, it is easier for most westerners to use than traditional meditation, as it requires less time and discipline to develop a high level of skill. This is because it seduces the mind with appealing sensory images that have their own natural pull. And because it results in a kind of natural trance state, it can be considered a form of hypnosis as well.

People can invent their own imagery, or they can listen to imagery that's been created for them. Either way, their own imaginations will sooner or later take over, because, even when listening to imagery that's been created in advance, the mind will automatically edit, skip, change or substitute what's being offered for what is needed. So even a tape, CD or written script will become a kind of internal launching pad for the genius of each person's unique imagination.

### 3 Principles of Guided Imagery

Guided imagery works because of three very simple, common-sense principles.

#### First Principle: The Mind-Body Connection

First of all, *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. The mind is constructing images of the food -- how it looks, tastes and smells; it might even be evoking the sounds of the food cooking or the feel of its texture as it's being chewed. And all the while, the body is thinking "dinner is served", and is responding by generating saliva and appetite.

The mind cues the body especially well if the images evoke sensory memory and fantasy sights, sounds, smells, feel and taste and when there is a strong emotional element involved. So, for instance, a strongly evocative image might be remembering the sound and timbre of Daddy's smiling voice, telling you he's proud of you; or the internal bristling of energy all through your body as you realize that you are about to triumph at something that you are home free *golden*.

These sensory images are the true language of the body, the only language it understands, immediately and without question.



#### Second Principle: The Altered State

Secondly, *in the altered state, we're capable of more rapid and intense healing, growth, learning and performance*. We are even more intuitive and creative. In this ordinary but profound mind-state, our brainwave activity and our biochemistry shift. Our moods and cognition change. We can do things we couldn't in a normal, waking state lift a tree that has fallen on a child; write an extraordinarily delicious poem; replace our terror of a surgical procedure with a calming sense of safety and optimism; abate a life-threatening histamine response to a bee sting.

We wander in and out of altered states all through the day, as a matter of course. Sometimes it's not a conscious choice, and we drive past our exit on the highway. At best, the altered state is a state of relaxed focus, a kind of calm but energized alertness, a highly functional form of focused reverie. Attention is concentrated on one thing or on a very narrow band of things.

As this happens, we find we have a heightened sensitivity to the object of our attention, and a decreased awareness of other things going on around us, things we would ordinarily notice. We are so engrossed, we lose track of time or don't hear people talking to us. Or we are so focused on our tennis, we don't realize we were playing on a broken ankle, and the pain isn't perceived until the game is over.

The altered state is the power cell of guided imagery. When we consciously apply it, we have an awesome ally, a prodigious source of internal strength and skill.

### **Third Principle: Locus of Control**

The third principle is often referred to in the medical literature as the "locus of control" factor. *When we have a sense of being in control, that, in and of itself, can help us to feel better and do better.*

Feeling in control is associated with higher optimism, self-esteem, and ability to tolerate pain, ambiguity and stress. Decades of research in ego psychology informs us that we feel better about ourselves and perform better when we have a sense of mastery over the environment. Conversely, a sense of helplessness lowers self-esteem, our ability to cope and our optimism about the future.

Because guided imagery is an entirely internally driven activity, and the user can decide when, where, how and if it is applied, it has the salutary effect of helping us feel we have some control.

So, when you put all this together, you have a technique that generates an altered state, in which the mind is directed toward multi-sensory images that the body perceives as real. This is done exactly when, where and how the user wishes. And that's why it's so effective.

## **General Info & Practical Tips**

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. You'll improve from whatever skill level you start with. Guided imagery functions in a way that is the opposite of addictive substances the more you use it, the less and less it will take for it to work.

Imagery works best in a permissive, relaxed, unforced atmosphere. So try not to get too intense 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. Let your own images come up and work for you. Don't get stuck in somebody else's way.



It's best to engage all the senses, especially your kinesthetic or feeling sense. Remember, only a little over half of the population is strongly visual.

Imagery is generally more powerful in a group setting, mainly due to the contagious nature of the altered state. So a support group, special study group or healing group is a nice place to work with it (and try to sit next to a yoga instructor or some other heavy-hitter mediator!)

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 get your back up and marshal unnecessary resistance.

You do not have to be a "believer" in order for imagery to help. Positive expectancy helps, but even a skeptical willingness to give it a try can be quite sufficient.

Touch may be the most powerful accompaniment to imagery you can employ, both to help with relaxation and to increase the kinesthetic power of the images. Imagery combined with therapeutic massage, energy work, or other kinesthetic modalities is very potent, and more than the sum of its parts.

Using the same posture cues, gestures or hand-positioning with each imaging session creates an "anchor" that conditions you to respond immediately to the posture. You can then adopt the posture in a meeting, or while waiting in traffic, or while resting, and your body will respond the way it did during the imagery.

If you aren't used to being both relaxed and awake at the same time, you will routinely fall asleep during an imagery session, especially if you're listening to a tape. If you want to stay awake, you might try sitting up, standing, walking or listening with your eyes half-open.

Even asleep, though, you'll benefit from repeated listening, as demonstrated in test results with sleeping diabetics and unconscious surgery patients.

Don't worry if you keep "spacing out" or losing track of a guided imagery narrative. This is not an indicator that you're listening wrong. On the contrary, a wandering mind often comes with the territory.

You may tear up, get a runny nose, cough, 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-movements. These are entirely normal responses.

Other indicators of a strong response to imagery is unusual stillness, increased coloring in the face, and an ironing out of lines and wrinkles. After some imagery, your voice will be deeper and lower, slower and more relaxed.

Usually an imaging exercise, regardless of what it's for, will clear a headache, relieve stress, lift mood and reduce chronic pain.

## 8 kinds of Guided Imagery content

There are many kinds of effective healing imagery, and, because people respond differently to different kinds, it's good to be aware of the range of possibilities.

Here are eight different categories of guided imagery content that I describe in my book, *Staying Well with Guided Imagery*. There are others, I'm sure, but this is a good place to start.

### Feeling State Imagery

This is simple imagery that changes mood, such as seeing yourself in your favorite place, or recalling a happy, peaceful time. Any imagery that can genuinely elicit feelings of love, care, safety and gratitude, will crowd out feelings of fear, anxiety, resentment and anger. All of this qualifies as feeling state imagery.

### End State Imagery

This is imagery that uses for its content any desired outcome or goal, in all its realistic particulars. So imagining a strong, cancer-free body; a perfectly played, confident, relaxed, focused game of tennis; or the sound of a perfectly registered high C just before singing it, would all be end state imagery, sometimes called "mental rehearsal" in hypnosis.



### Energetic Imagery

This is imagery, taken from Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, as well as quantum physics, that uses the notion of plentiful, coherent, free-flowing, unblocked energy as the underlying dynamic of good health. Illness, in this paradigm, would be seen as stuck energy, or energy that is withheld from the general flow. This can be imagined as moving dots, a kind of sound, or an internal feeling of motion.

### Cellular Imagery

This imagery focuses on the healthy interaction of the cells, and requires accurate technical knowledge, so it isn't for everyone. For asthma, it would be imagining the mast cells being less reactive to neutral particles floating by; for diabetes, it would be insulin attaching to energy hungry cells, so they can take in glucose from the bloodstream; and so on.

### Physiological Imagery

This is imagery that focuses on larger healing processes in the body, such as sensing the widening, softening and clearing of the arteries for heart disease; imagining the feel of tumors shrinking in the body with cancer; and seeing the opening of swollen, constricted passageways in the lungs for asthma. This too requires accurate knowledge of how the body naturally operates to heal each condition.

## Metaphoric Imagery

This is imagery that works with symbols instead of concrete reality, such as seeing a flower opening its petals as a metaphor for enhanced creativity blossoming again; or seeing a tumor as an enemy encampment, being decimated by a powerful supply of tanks, missiles and guns; or sensing insulin "keys" unlocking the "doors" to hungry cells for people with diabetes.

## Psychological Imagery

This is imagery that specifically addresses a person's psychological issues by providing corrective emotional content. So, for instance, it might consist of imagining being surrounded by loving friends and allies to interrupt a sense of isolation and despair; or seeing oneself through kind and loving eyes, for someone who is relentlessly self-attacking; or perceiving the presence a beloved, recently lost parent to alleviate grief.

## Spiritual Imagery

This imagery evokes the wider perspective and peaceful or transcendent feelings provided by mystical states of consciousness and prayer. This might involve sensing assistance from angels, guides, power animals, God, or specific religious figures and symbols; or imagery that fosters a sense of oneness and connection with all things; or any imagery that deeply opens the heart.

## Imagery & Intuition

We've all experienced, after all, moments of "knowing" that defy logic and reason. What is this business we call intuition, and how does it work? Why do certain life experiences - falling in love, intense grief, near-death experience, meditation, for instance - seem to bring it on? And what can we do to coax it out of us even more?

- Everyone is psychic, This is no big deal. We only make psi extraordinary because we live in a left-brain dominated culture.
- There are many things we can do to increase our skill at accessing these natural human gifts for telepathy, precognition and intuitive knowing.
- Guided imagery is one near-perfect vehicle for replicating both the biophysical and the subjective conditions that configure to produce a "psychic pop" of sixth sense knowing.
- Guided imagery that opens the heart and deliberately evokes feelings of love, gratitude and compassion, is a particularly safe and powerful way to do this.
- Further unlocking the sixth sense through opening the heart is a good idea. It helps us stay safe, perform well and create beauty. (The intuitive process and the creative process are the same process.) But that's not the only reason: opening the heart is something the world badly needs.



## Frequently Asked Questions

**What are some really good conditions for making my imagery as effective as possible?**

Being relaxed; using all of your senses, especially your kinesthetic or feeling sense; continued practice; going to the same place with the same music or props each time; using touch as a conditioning cue (such as putting your hands over your belly each time, and breathing deeply); not trying too hard or being too exacting about how you do this. Practicing with a group of people also helps.

### **Is imagery the same as self-hypnosis?**

Yes, in a sense it is, but hypnosis is really a broader category that includes verbal suggestion and thoughts without images along with guided imagery. For instance, telling yourself in the altered state that you'll be calm and confident qualifies as self-hypnosis. Seeing yourself that way, in sights, sounds or feelings is imagery. Although hypnosis also uses images, it isn't limited to them.



### **How is imagery different from meditation?**

Meditation is also a broader category. Imagery is a form of meditation. Meditation is any kind of deliberate focus, usually on just one thing or a very narrow band of things. This clears the mind, slows it down and calms and strengthens the mediator. For most westerners, imagery is a little easier to work with, more absorbing and appealing than the more stringent mindfulness meditation.

### **How often should I practice my imagery?**

Everyone's needs are different, but you might want to start out a couple of times a day for about 15 minutes each time for 3 or 4 weeks. First thing in the morning and just before falling asleep at night are usually convenient and especially potent times for imagery.

### **Do I have to believe it will work for it to work?**

No. You just have to give it a try, putting your analytic mind on hold, and preferably try it more than just once. Skill improves with practice. But a lot of skeptics end up doing quite well with imagery.

### **Is this an ability some are born with and others aren't?**

No. Everyone can do this, although it does seem to come more easily to some than to others. But anyone can improve with practice.

### **How do kids do with guided imagery?**

Kids are naturals at this, responding to it easily and intensely, because they haven't had time to be acculturated away from this natural, inborn ability. Contrary to what many people assume, adolescents are excellent candidates for guided imagery, probably due, at least in part, to all those trancey hormones coursing through their overheated little veins.

This material is adapted from information compiled & presented by Belleruth Naperstek, 2009

*For more information on guided imagery contact Milestone Counseling*