

## Guided Imagery

Guided imagery (GI) can be a powerful tool in your health toolkit. GI uses the imagination to help the body and mind heal through directed daydreaming. You can use it for many things: to control pain, support your immune function, relieve headaches, reduce stress, improve depression and anxiety, lose weight, and many more. The only limit is your imagination as you conjure up images of tumors shrinking, blood pressure decreasing, emotions getting calmer, and pain fading away.

GI isn't just about creating visual images. It also uses sensory impression like sounds, smells, taste, or touch. Any perception that comes through the senses can be incorporated into guided imagery. For instance, remembering your grandmother's smell when she snuggled you is an "image" you may find soothing and calming. You might envision growling, gobbling immune cells chewing up cancer cells or bacteria or picture cool, soft cotton surrounding a painful spot, soothing and muffling it.

Guided imagery relies on the strengths of the right side of the brain—the relaxed, non-linear side. It's far more than idle daydreaming because our bodies can't tell the difference between sensory images and real life. For example, if you go to a horror movie, your body responds as though the images are real. Even though you know those are actors on the screen and the blood is fake, your blood pressure goes up, your muscles tense, your pulse goes up, and you feel fear. Your intellectual mind knows it isn't real but your body reacts as though it is. The same is true for sexual fantasy; your body responds as though the images are actual events.

In guided imagery, you deliberately introduce healthful images and the body responds as though they are real. Your body interprets the images as actual events—and it responds with physical changes. Research studies show that imagery can improve immune function, improve interstitial cystitis, lower blood pressure, improve allergies, speed wound healing, improve depression, decrease pain, give a greater sense of well being and more.

Your body believes what your imagination tells it—even when you might not want it to. For instance, if you became nauseous from chemotherapy, just imagining the experience of receiving it—walking through the doors and smelling the distinctive odors—can make you nauseous.

Anyone can use guided imagery, regardless of his or her age, education, intelligence, ability, or illness. Children are often particularly enthusiastic about guided imagery because they have great imaginations and aren't afraid to use them. One of the brilliant things about guided imagery is that you don't even have to believe in it. Guided imagery even works for skeptics. It even works if your attention wanders.

Guided imagery also confers an important side benefit because it's in your control. Especially when you're sick or suffering in some way, it's helpful to have a sense of mastery about what is happening. We all tend to feel more hopeful and optimistic when we have a sense of control—and guided imagery gives us this sense.

### **How to do it**

Many people start with buying recordings of guided imagery. A great resource is [www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com). This website sells guided imagery compact discs and mp3 files on many different topics (stress, depression, multiple sclerosis, cancer etc). Once you've used a recording or two for a bit, you'll probably be able to induce the images on your own, "replaying" them in your mind.

Many people find it easier to start with a prerecorded tape, but creating your own imagery can be more personal as you include images that are really important to you: animals, nature, your mom or grandmother, cooking, gardening, cleaning, whatever matters to you. For instance, if you love a clean space around you, then guided imagery of scrubbing your liver clean of cancer cells might be very powerful for you. If there's a piece of background music that has special meaning for you, include it as well.

Guided imagery works even better when you're in a relaxed state, so the imagery usually starts with a relaxation exercise. If you're creating your own imagery or GI recording, be sure to induce relaxation first. Even simply counting down with your inhalations from 20 to one will do. Your goal is a state of calm alertness, relaxed but not sleepy. Soft lighting is more relaxing than harsh glare, and sitting up with your back supported allows you to relax without drifting off to sleep.

You may find it helpful to place one hand in the same place on your body—over your heart, say, or over the location of your pain, injury, or tumor—every time you start a guided imagery session. This physical cue makes it easier to return to a relaxed but alert state next time.

### **What makes guided imagery more effective?**

Practice is important. GI may be hard for you at first. You may feel like you aren't doing it right or that it isn't working. Most people find it challenging at first, but guided imagery gets easier and more effective over time.

Be consistent. Begin with five to twenty minutes once or twice a day for at least two to three weeks. And be realistic about how long you spend when you begin; five good minutes is much better than 20 fidgety ones full of resentment and impatience. If you have trouble sitting still, you can listen to an imagery tape while walking; just find a place where you can safely let your mind wander while you move your feet.

Use images that are consistent with your beliefs and values. The more you resonate with the images, the more effective the process will be. For instance, if you abhor violence, then images of your immune system doing battle with and killing your cancer cells might

not be the best choice for you. You might want an alternative scenario, one in which the cancer cells shrink or are erased by a giant pencil.

Be kind to yourself. Imagery works better when you're in a relaxed state, and you aren't relaxed if you're beating yourself up because you're not doing it 'right.' You might not 'see' the images. Some people are visual, but others are more auditory or more affected by taste or smell. At any rate, the images in your head won't be like a TV picture, clear and crisp. They may just be vague colors and swirls; that doesn't mean it isn't working.

Don't try to force the process. Listen to the tapes and let your mind go where it wants to. And, if you're really struggling to stick with it on a given day, it's fine to move on to something else. By all means, don't let guided imagery become another source of 'to-do' stress in your life.

Guided imagery is a powerful and versatile tool that you can use when and where you want to. It's easy and effective—so harness the power of your imagination in service of your health!

Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

[www.InsightMedicalConsultants.com](http://www.InsightMedicalConsultants.com)