

# New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY AFTER TREATMENT



Issue 15



## It might be all in your head

A technique that could  
promote well-being  
after treatment.

Imagery is the use of the imagination to create sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or other sensations to create a kind of purposeful daydream. These mental exercises are designed to allow the mind to influence the health and well-being of the body.

Imagery might be used along with standard medical treatment to help to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression; manage pain; lower blood pressure; ease some of the side effects of chemotherapy and other treatments; and create feelings of being in control.

### What does imagery involve?

There are a number of different imagery techniques. One popular method is called “palming.” It involves placing the palms of your hands over your eyes and imagining a color you associate with anxiety or stress (such as red), and then a color you associate with relaxation or calmness (such as blue). Learning to picture the calming color can help some people feel relaxed and generally better.

Other methods involve the visualization of an image, such as a ball of gentle healing energy, forming in your chest and expanding through your body as you breathe.

Some techniques involve imagining yourself in a peaceful scene of your own choosing, such as a beach or meadow, with all the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations to complete the experience.

Another common technique is known as guided imagery, which involves picturing a specific image or goal to be achieved and then imagining yourself achieving that goal. Athletes use this technique to improve their game. One type of guided therapy used for cancer survivors is called the Simonton method, which was developed by a radiation oncologist and a psychotherapist. In the Simonton method, cancer survivors are asked to imagine their bodies fighting cancer cells and winning the battle.

One popular technique is modeled on the old Pac-Man video game. People are to picture tiny Pac-Man characters eating and destroying tumor cells, just as they destroyed their enemies in the game.

You can teach yourself these techniques with the help of a book or learning tape – many are available on the subject. You can also practice them under the guidance of a trained therapist. Imagery sessions with a health professional may last 20 to 30 minutes.

### What are the benefits of imagery?

Imagery is said to have both physical and psychological effects. Promoters claim it can relax the mind and body by decreasing heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and altering brain waves. Some supporters also say that imagery can relieve pain and emotional anxiety, make drugs more effective, and provide emotional insights.

Practitioners use imagery to treat phobias and depression, reduce stress, increase motivation, promote relaxation, increase control over one's life, improve communication, and even to aid in smoking cessation.

For cancer survivors, some supporters of imagery report that it can relieve nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy, relieve stress associated with cancer, enhance the immune system, improve weight gain, combat depression, and lessen pain.

### Does imagery work?

A review of 46 studies conducted from 1966 to 1998 suggested that guided imagery may be helpful in managing stress, anxiety, and depression, lowering blood pressure, easing pain, and minimizing some of the side effects of chemotherapy.

In 2002, a review noted that imagery was possibly helpful for anxiety, as well as anticipatory nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy.

A clinical trial involving women with early-stage breast cancer found guided imagery helped to ease anxiety related to radiation therapy, including fears about the equipment, surgical pain, and recurrence of cancer.

A 2006 review of clinical trials of imagery, however, found that only three of the studies showed improvement in anxiety and comfort during chemotherapy. Two other studies showed no difference between those who used imagery and those who used other measures.

Although one uncontrolled exploratory study suggested that guided imagery could improve survival for people with cancer, available scientific evidence does not support that these techniques can cure cancer or any other disease. More carefully constructed studies have shown improved quality of life in some patients, but have found no survival advantage for imagery or other psychological techniques.

Overall, imagery is considered one of the more useful psychological measures to reduce some side effects of chemotherapy and is in use at medical centers and hospitals. More systematic, well-designed research on guided imagery is needed to help answer questions about how it can best be used.

### Are there any possible problems or complications?

Imagery techniques are considered safe, especially under the guidance of a trained health professional. They are best used as complementary therapy, that is, along with conventional medical treatment.

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