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PO Box 121  
Botsford, CT 06404  
[www.nacsw.org](http://www.nacsw.org)  
888.426.4712

**GUIDED IMAGERY AS AN ADJUNCT TO PHARMACOLOGIC  
PAIN CONTROL AT END OF LIFE**

**By: Julie Burnett**

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# *Guided Imagery*

*as an*

*Adjunct to  
Pharmacological  
Pain Control at  
End of Life*



*Julie Burnett, B.S. L.S.W.  
Gerontologist*

# Guided Imagery as an Adjunct to Pharmacologic Pain Control at End of Life

Julie Burnett, LSW

Social Worker/Gerontologist

[Julieburnett62@aol.com](mailto:Julieburnett62@aol.com)

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*...As he thinks in his heart, so he is. Proverbs 23:7*

## **Guided Imagery as an Adjunct to Pharmacological Pain Control at End of Life.**

**T**his workshop will be an overview of how guided imagery can be used with patients at end of life when medication isn't desired or just isn't enough.

**What is guided imagery?** By definition, Guided imagery therapy is a cognitive-behavioral technique in which a client is guided in imagining a relaxing scene or series of experiences.

Guided imagery uses imagined pictures, sounds, or sensations for generalized relaxation or for specific therapeutic goals, such as the reduction of pain.

There are generally three stages to guided imagery: relaxation, visualization and positive suggestion. Guided imagery is the practice of coaching a participant through these stages to reach a determined goal.

For our purposes, pain relief may be achieved through the verbal guidance of a clinician through the stages of imagery to reduce and or eliminate pain, anxiety, fear or tension.

Guided imagery is a form of focused relaxation that helps create harmony between the mind and body. It is a way of focusing your imagination to create calm, peaceful images in your mind, thereby providing a “mental escape.”

Guided imagery provides a powerful psychological strategy that enhances a person’s coping skills. Imagery involves all the senses, as well as one’s whole body and emotions. It is a way of viewing your ideas, feelings, experiences and interpretations.

God created our bodies with perfect balance and healing ability. We were designed with congruence and a natural rhythm. (The rhythmic opening and closing of the valves of the heart, the coagulation of blood to form a healing covering or scab on a wound, the messaging system of our nerves which alert our brains to act are examples).

Guided imagery is **NOT** hypnosis, sorcery, witchcraft, voodoo, or demonic. It is **not** handing over control of your mind in any way. This is a misperception and a myth in the Christian community. Like all gifts of God, some are misused or misconstrued to be used for darker purposes.

Imagery can stimulate changes in bodily functions such as heart rate, blood pressure and respiratory patterns. It can help tap inner strengths to help the patient find hope, courage and other qualities that can help the patient cope with a variety of conditions.

Worldly distractions and disturbances keep us from fully realizing internal abilities and the abilities God placed within us to help us. In this world with the constant need to hurry, rush, and fit 48 hours in to 24, people tend to minimize their ability to realize the full potential of human functioning created within.

### **Research studies on guided imagery**

More than 200 research studies in the past 30 years have explored the role of mind-body techniques in helping people prepare for surgical and medical procedures and in helping them recover more rapidly. These studies show that guided imagery can dramatically counteract a loss of control, fear, panic, anxiety, helplessness and uncertainty. It can help people overcome stress, anger, pain, depression, insomnia and other problems often associated with illness and medical/surgical procedures.

Guided imagery has also been found to decrease side effects and complications of medical procedures, reduce recovery time, shorten hospital stays, increase self-confidence and self-control, strengthen the immune system and enhance the ability to heal. In addition, guided imagery is also able to help patients undergoing chemotherapy, dialysis, and other treatment procedures.

More than half the studies of imagery for pain--postoperative pain, cancer pain, chronic low back pain, burns, and migraine headache--report significant relief from the procedure

(Eller, 1999). In a review of laboratory research on coping strategies for pain control, imagery was the most effective in relieving pain (Eller, 1999). Many of these studies, however, evaluate imagery together with other interventions such as hypnosis, cognitive-behavioral therapy and relaxation techniques. Nonetheless, the limited evidence suggests the usefulness of guided imagery in reducing the sensory and emotional components of pain.

The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research recommends the use of imagery for reduction of pain intensity and distress for cancer pain and for the management of mild to severe acute pain (AHCPR, 1992).

The Cleveland Clinic states, Clinical studies have shown that anxiety can intensify pain, prolong recovery time and lower the immune system. Guided Imagery can bring about the state of mind and body most conducive to healing. This article goes on to state the benefits of guided imagery:

1. Reduces stress and anxiety.
2. Decreases pain and narcotic consumption.
3. Enhances sleep.
4. Increases client's satisfaction and quality of life.

The US Veterans Administration as well as the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health researched guided imagery's usefulness in treating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD.) They reported significant improvements in the reduction of nightmare frequency and intensity, increased positive mood states, improved sense of self and others and improved cognitive and emotional functioning.

Psychology Suite 101 reports that "if you're looking for a way to ease chronic pain, speed the healing process, or reduce anxiety and stress, consider guided imagery. It's an alternative therapy that's noninvasive and drug-free". The publication explains that guided imagery sends direct, positive messages to the emotional control center of the brain. Those messages then travel to your immune system and autonomic nervous system, which affects your heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rates You let positive hormones flood your body, and you concentrate on keeping that positive energy strong. Your body can't differentiate between reality and thoughts you imagine, and your body responds in healthy ways.

The Mayo Clinic describes Guided Imagery as a learning process to listen to someone's voice, relax the breathing and consciously direct the ability to imagine. The effect of guided vivid imagery sends a message to the emotional control center of the

brain. From there, the message is passed along to the body's endocrine, immune and autonomic nervous systems. These systems influence a wide range of bodily functions, including heart, breathing rates and blood pressure. The Mayo Clinic goes on to state that Guided Imagery provides the following benefits to clients:

1. Reduces the negative side effects of cancer treatments.
2. Reduces pre-surgery fear and anxiety, post surgery need for prolonged pain medications, and allowed clients to leave the hospital more quickly than those who had not used Guided Imagery.
3. Improves the client's ability to manage stress.
4. Aids the client's ability to reduce the severity of migraine headaches **just as effectively as taking preventative medications.**

### **The benefits of guided imagery**

Lifestyle changes or conditions that require medical or surgical interventions often cause patients to feel out of control, scared or overwhelmed. Fear of pain is a commonly expressed concern. Clinical studies show that anxiety can effect pain, prolong recovery time and lower the immune system. Guided imagery can bring about the state of mind and body most conducive to healing, deep relaxation and positive focus.

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

There are two significant ways guided imagery helps with pain management.

The first one is a relaxation technique that helps a person calm down and relax. This help addresses the emotional distress a person often experiences with physical pain. Focusing on a breathing technique will calm the body and often the mind. By calming the body and the mind, emotional distress is alleviated, thus assisting in managing physical pain.

The second method for alleviating pain is distraction. Distraction is a powerful tool in pain management. Guided imagery leads a person through a process that allows them to shift their focus, often distracting or alleviating their attention for their discomfort to something more comfortable, enjoyable and relaxing. This powerful techniques helps a persons to shift their focus off their discomfort and find someplace comforting, even if it for a short period, that they create for themselves through a guided imagery."

### **Guided imagery may help:**

- Increase control
- Decrease depression
- Decrease stress and anxiety
- Decrease pain
- Decrease side effects

- Enhance sleep
- Enhance quality of life
- Increase relaxation
- Decrease nausea
- Decrease blood pressure
- Enhance healing
- Improve immune system
- Decrease respiratory difficulties
- Decrease hospital length of stay
- Enhance self-confidence

**Clinicians should avoid guided imagery if the client is:**

- Actively psychotic
- Not able to think abstractly
- Not able to distinguish fantasy from reality
- Having hallucinations or delusions
- Have moderate to advanced dementia or delirium
- Unable to communicate

**Technique:**

Both the clinician and the client construct a relaxing scene by discussing exactly what the client finds pleasant. It is better if the client chooses all images (positive or negative) and the therapist trains the client to visualize the selected images as vividly as possible.

Once a pleasant scene is decided upon, the client is asked to assume a relaxed position and with closed eyes, if this is comfortable, before being guided in visualization. A common beginning instruction may be: "Imagine you are lying on a warm sandy beach." The clinician continues to guide the relaxation by saying such phrases as: "Notice the texture of the sand and the color of the sky. Focus on the sounds you hear, and the smells..." The client is asked to practice the image at home between sessions. A tape of the guided imagery in the familiar voice of the clinician can be helpful to some clients in practicing at home.

During visualization, clients are given permission to take control if they need to by changing the image or stopping the activity completely. To help clients maintain control of the image, the therapist may also say to the client: "Take as long as you need to relax,"



and "Do whatever you need to do in order to feel safe." This empowers clients in using such techniques.

### **Pain at end of life:**

Physical: related to disease process/care issues

Mental/emotional: related to anticipatory grief, loss, regrets, and illness

Relational: related to grief, loss, past relational trauma, loneliness

Spiritual: Fears, guilt, absence of spiritual connectedness

### **Pain control imagery**

Individuals can control pain through several imagery techniques.

One method is to produce a mental image of the pain and then transform that image into something less frightening and more manageable.

Another is to imagine the pain disappearing, and the patient as completely pain-free. Or, one may imagine the pain as something over which he has complete control. For example, patients with back problems may imagine their pain as a high voltage electric current surging through their spine. As they use guided imagery techniques, they can picture themselves reaching for an electrical switch and turning down the power on the current to alleviate the pain.

Using scripture in guided imagery is often very helpful for Christians. Familiar passages that strengthen the faith and are able to be tapped into at any moment can be very beneficial in pain relief. Meditation of Biblical passages may often bring comfort and refocus the energy away from the pain.

Examples may be:

But you, oh Lord, are a shield for me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.  
Psalm 3:3

No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper.  
Isaiah 54:17a

Unto you, oh Lord, do I bring my life. Psalm 25:1

He makes me lay down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still and restful waters.  
Psalm 23:2

Guided Imagery is a therapeutic intervention that may prove to be a valuable part of a clinical social workers skill set. Using techniques that may reduce the need for pharmacological interventions, which may result in improved quality of life for the final stages of life can be an immeasurable gift to the patient and their family.

As new millennium social workers, looking to meet the demands of our clients in the future, we must be fervent in our search for tools that renew hope, that offer fresh perspectives on their journey through suffering. We have to seek alternatives, even those new and innovative to use, in order to serve as that gateway to change. Our clients look to us to offer them “fresh bread” in our approaches, not stale diatribe.

Guided imagery is a fresh response to those clients dissatisfied with the strictly medical model of pain control at end of life.

## Guided Imagery Map

Determining the problem/defining

- ❖ Specifics (where, type of pain, etc)
- ❖ Setting the goal

Developing the image:

- ❖ Sights
- ❖ Sounds
- ❖ Smells
- ❖ Textures
- ❖ Tastes

Positioning:

- ❖ Relaxed
- ❖ Eyes closed
- ❖ Arms at sides, legs uncrossed

Regulating the breathing pattern:

- ❖ Deep breathing
- ❖ Rhythmic breaths

Guiding the journey:

- ❖ Multi-sensory one step at a time
- ❖ Addressing the problem
- ❖ Achieving the goal
- ❖ Resting in the solution for a time
- ❖ “walking” back home

Ending the session:

- ❖ **NOT** revisiting the pain
- ❖ Measuring the success



# Resources

## Books:

Quiet Places With Jesus, Isaias Powers

Opening to God: Guided Meditation on Scripture Carolyn Stahl Bohler

The Healing Light, Agnes Sanford

The Ball of Red String, Marlene Holpin

## Articles:

Guided Imagery for Musculoskeletal Pain: A Systemic Review, E. Ernst, P. Posadzki  
September 2011

Guided Imagery-Relief for Stress and Emotions During Breast Cancer Treatment, Pam  
Stephen June 29, 2011

Can Guided Imagery Help Me?, The Academy for Guided Imagery,  
academyforguidedimagery.com, 2009

What is Guided Imagery?, Healthjourneys.com, 2009

Raising Pain Tolerance Using Guided Imagery, David Bresler, PhD, Lac, July 1, 2010

Replenishing the Spirit by Meditative Prayer and Guided Imagery, Katherine Brown-  
Saltzman, RN, MA (Clinical Nurse Specialist in Palliative Care, Assistant Clinical  
Professor)