

Harnessing the **Power of the Mind** Through Images

By Meredith Whitmore

Guided imagery can provide physical and/or emotional relief, but it takes practice and professional guidance is often needed.

LET'S EXAMINE through a simple exercise a superpower that most people have without realizing it. First, imagine a lemon. See its color. Feel its rind with your fingertip. Visualize yourself holding a cold lemon wedge in your hand. Feel its moisture. Run your finger along the pulp. Smell its fragrance. Now, sink your teeth into it and taste the juice squirt into your mouth. Are you puckering? Salivating? Cringing? If so, your response is common. And, that powerful mind-body connection is your latent superpower. In other words, your mind has the ability to forcibly, tangibly change your body's physiological functions through only your imagination.

Physical reactions such as feeling nauseated when imagining something disgusting or feeling anxious when reading a chilling story or action novel also demonstrate the

mind's ability to physically alter the bodily state through mental images. Minds and bodies, in a very sophisticated capacity, work together to respond corporeally to what is only envisioned.

"Words and images are magic to us, and they change our brains," says clinical psychologist Joseph Rhinewine, PhD, director of Portland Mindfulness Therapy, in Portland, Ore. "Just picturing a lemon — or a food we crave or have a special memory of — causes our bodies to make an actual glandular change, even though there's no lemon. The parasympathetic nervous system kicks in, activates the salivary glands, and voilà. There's saliva in your mouth, and you taste a lemon. That's magic."



The lemon illustration is an example of guided imagery, a therapeutic technique in which individuals visualize and focus on mental images to evoke physical feelings such as peace, joy or even pain relief.

When the visual cortex of the brain is activated through one's imagination, even without actual visual stimuli, it can greatly influence a person's emotions and cause other very strong physiological responses in the body. "We can't even understand each other, we can't even have language, we can't even have truly human communication without this function of 'thought entanglement,' which means we confuse thoughts and images for the things themselves," explains Dr. Rhinewine. "This entanglement, accessed through guided imagery, can help a person to elicit positive changes in their lives that can heal, whether their underlying problem is physical or mental."¹

Dr. Rhinewine further clarifies how images (words, thoughts, visuals) can be used in healing: "This therapy can do one of two things. Either we try to weaken the influence and undermine the magic of language on behavior (for example, the thought 'I'm fat and stupid and no one will love me'), or we can augment and 'juice up' the entanglement in order to strengthen a concept, and that's what guided imagery is all about."

Studies show actual physiological changes can be seen on functional MRI (fMRI) images that reveal the brain's altered state as people practice guided meditation.^{2,3,4} There is visible physical activity in the brain when people perform such exercises. In addition, various studies indicate this technique, though it often requires patience and practice, can even reduce nausea and pain in cancer patients, reduce stress, manage grief, help with addiction, and help a person to better cope with various other mental health issues.^{1,2,3,4} "If we can access a peaceful place in our minds, our occipital and temporal lobes respond as if we are actually in that peaceful place," says Jessica Huffman, MA, a counseling professor in Salem, Ore. We can see this on an fMRI. The brain is

absolutely working with those mental images. It truly is a physical shift, and if we can get there, we can create neural pathways there so the brain does it without as much effort."

Guided imagery can also help people have more restful and restorative sleep. This is because, as Huffman explains, "You are putting your body in a state where you are imagining the way a pleasant place smells. You're imagining the sounds. You're feeling the breeze on your face. You're picturing a meadow or lake or something else that's very peaceful to you. You are actually putting your mind there. Then, your body responds as if it is there." And a body that feels it is at peace in a peaceful environment will respond in kind during sleep.

But, long before fMRIs and other modern technologies, the ancients knew of our amazing mind-body connection. Aristotle and Hippocrates, among others, understood the power of mental images and their ability to affect both body and soul, and they encouraged the practice. Today, Aristotle's and Hippocrates' foundational beliefs are being studied and expanded. As neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections and pathways) is better understood, so is guided meditation and

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imagery. And, fMRI has proven guided imagery's efficacy as it is used to help people heal from a variety of ailments, including managing grief, reducing fear and stress, and managing headaches, among many others.¹

Modern History of Guided Imagery

In the 1970s, David E. Bresler, PhD, LAc, a health psychologist and acupuncturist, and Martin L. Rossman, MD, a medical doctor, were among the first to begin to study and implement guided imagery with their patients. Dr. Rossman's seminal book, *Guided Imagery for Self-Healing*, is still in print and offers wisdom for those who would like to learn more and possibly begin simple exercises in guided imagery on their own. These men set the precedent for today's practices, which include more and more hospitals implementing guided imagery's potent ability to help heal.

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As a caveat, however, guided imagery should never be taken as a cure-all or a casual approach to therapy. Nor does it work for everyone, depending on their capacities and needs. Guided imagery can even have negative consequences with certain conditions, since false memories and other complications may come into play.⁵ Overall, however, even when the latter occurs, guided imagery under the right circumstances can be helpful, especially when used under the expertise of a trained mental health provider.¹

How Does It Work?

With regard to the nuts and bolts of "how-tos," Huffman, who has helped many clients utilize guided imagery to manage chronic pain, offers helpful insight. First, she warns those who might find this type of therapy intriguing that it can take time to learn and feel comfortable with it. "It's important not to be too quick about it because people need a basic understanding of things such as diaphragmatic breathing, for

example, and how to get their body to a relaxed state before they do any kind of imagery practice," she says. "Otherwise, the imagery can be very triggering and can actually induce pain. You have to start at the basic level. Guided imagery, or any kind of imagery, really, is the next level, so to speak, in mindfulness practices for pain."

In terms of procedure, Huffman says, "The therapist provides the generic script, and then the client gets to craft it together in order to make it personal." In this way, a client can feel safe and benefit from a script they have personally created to fit their needs. Huffman believes, too, that it's important to realize guided imagery takes time to learn. It can take a few weeks to build foundational diaphragmatic breathing practices (for relaxation), and then it can take some time to explore the emotional connection to the pain, for example, if pain is what a client is working toward reducing. Huffman says she and other therapists often craft a generic guided imagery script first. In this way, the client can feel safe and start the preliminary work. Then, the client gradually "crafts his or her own script to make it personally tailored to their own needs." For example, if people have seasonal allergies, they shouldn't imagine themselves in a field of flowers or grass to find rest. They need to find their own mental "place" and make it their own for comfort and healing tailored to their situation. They also should not allow any therapist to dictate what the script should be.

Huffman offers a clear illustration of her own guided imagery practice: "One script I have for myself is a cabin in the woods. I have a hammock and I imagine going there. I feel the breeze and smell the campfire smoke. I'll walk through that script, and there are many different ways I can get to the cabin. Sometimes, I'll drive my car there. Sometimes, I'll hike up a mountain. Sometimes, I'll raft down a river. The scripts can build and change the more a person continues to do guided imagery." That is, if a script begins to feel stale, a person can always change something to have a new experience and keep the experience fresh, since too much repetition can feel monotonous. "The more a person does this, the easier it is for the brain to 'go' to that place of peace in their mind," Huffman adds. "Because I have been doing guided meditation for so long, it takes me just a minute to find it. A neural pathway has been created, and a person can take that neural shortcut to find relief. The end game for this technique is to be able to have such a place that you can access almost immediately [when you need relief]."

“The general goal of guided imagery is to reduce suffering,” explains Huffman, “not necessarily pain, but suffering, which could mean easing a person’s experience of the pain, their perception of the pain, reducing the interference of the pain in their life activities, developing a higher tolerance to the pain.” This pain can be physical or mental. “The question we ask is, how can we widen the window of how we tolerate the amount of pain we can take before our physical or emotional breaking point?” adds Huffman. “What is making that window narrower than we’d like, and how can we expand that? Guided imagery can help expand that window.”

Doing It Yourself

Bearing in mind the aforementioned caveats, of course, simple guided imagery can be practiced without the help of a therapist in some cases. There are phone apps, books and websites such as www.healthjourneys.com, among other resources, to assist the process. This technique can be accessed whenever someone needs it during the day. If people feel stressed and

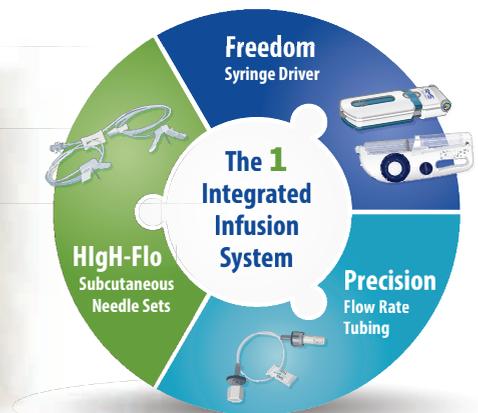
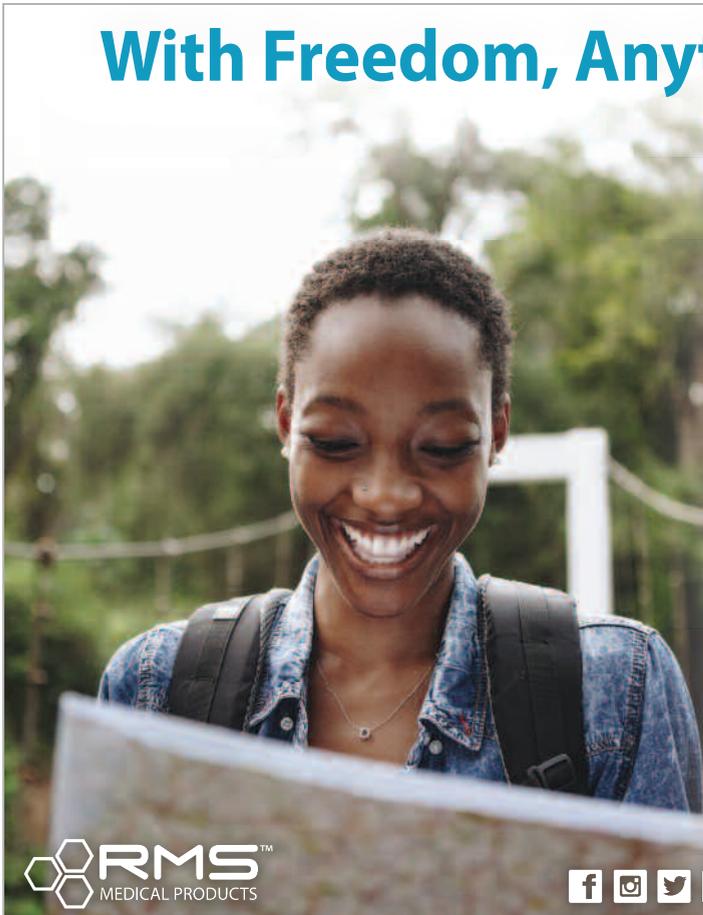
want to better handle the emotional dysregulation, they can find an outlet through guided imagery, which will help their mind and body to find a sense of calm within the storm. It is a matter of checking in with their body, so to speak, and going to their proverbial “happy place” that can help their body to regulate and calm down. But, as mentioned earlier, it takes practice, and it is helpful to seek professional guidance. ■

MEREDITH WHITMORE is an English professor and freelance journalist in the Northwest.

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