

GUIDED IMAGERY

Definition

Guided imagery is the use of relaxation and mental visualization to improve mood and/or physical well being.

Benefits

The connection between the mind and physical health has been well documented and extensively studied. Positive mental imagery can promote relaxation and reduce stress, improve mood, control high blood pressure, alleviate pain, boost the immune system, and lower cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Through guided imagery techniques, people can learn to control functions normally controlled by the autonomic nervous system, such as heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and body temperature.

One of the biggest benefits of using guided imagery as a therapeutic tool is its availability. Imagery can be used virtually anywhere, anytime. It is also an equal opportunity therapy. Although some initial training in the technique may be required, guided imagery is accessible to virtually everyone regardless of economic status, education, or geographical location.

Description

Guided imagery is simply the use of one's imagination to promote mental and physical health. It can be self-directed, where the individual puts himself into a relaxed state and creates his own images, or maybe directed by others. When directed by others, an individual listens to a therapist, video, or audio taped exercise that leads him through a relaxation and imagery exercise. Some therapists also use guided imagery within group settings.

Guided imagery is a two-part process. The first component involves reaching a state of deep relaxation through breathing and muscle relaxation techniques. During the relaxation phase, the person closes her eyes and focuses on the slow, in and out, sensation of breathing. Or she may focus on releasing the feeling of tension from her muscles starting with the toes and working up to the top of the head. Relaxation tapes often feature soft music or tranquil, natural sounds such as rolling waves and chirping birds in order to promote feelings of relaxation.

Once complete relaxation is achieved, the second component of the exercise is the imagery, or visualization, itself. There are a number of different types of guided imagery techniques, limited only by the imagination. Some commonly used types include relaxation imagery, healing imagery, pain control imagery, and mental rehearsal.

Preparations

For a successful guided imagery session, individuals should select a quiet, relaxing location where there is a comfortable place to sit or recline. If the guided imagery session is to be prompted with an audiotape or videotape, a stereo, VCR, or portable tape player should be available. Some people find that quiet background music improves their imagery sessions.

The sessions, which can last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, and should be uninterrupted. Taking the phone off the hook and asking family members for solitude can ensure a more successful and relaxing session.