
Integrating Guided Imagery and Visualization to Achieve Personal Health Goals

Guided imagery and visualization are mind-body therapies that can help improve health and well-being. These imagery techniques focus on using multiple senses (sight, sound, touch, smell) to make imagined scenarios feel as realistic as possible. Imagining specific scenes or sequences of events may help with achieving health goals.

GUIDED IMAGERY AND VISUALIZATION MAY BE HELPFUL FOR:

- Sleep
- Physical activity
- Dietary changes
- Stress relief
- General immune health
- Musculoskeletal issues
- Digestive complaints
- Mental health concerns

Understanding guided imagery and visualization

Guided imagery involves visualizing scenarios or sequences to reduce stress, inspire change, and promote mental and emotional well-being. It may be led by a live person, such as a therapist, or an audio recording previously recorded by someone trained in guided imagery. Guided imagery is immersive. It focuses on imagining specific scenes in detail and incorporates as many senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch) as possible.¹

Visualization is related to guided imagery, though it differs in several ways. It involves picturing something in your mind, such as a health goal you want to achieve. Like guided imagery, it may focus on imagining scenes in as much detail as possible. However, you can also use visualization to imagine performing a series of steps to reach a goal. It can be either guided or self-directed. Self-directed visualization allows you to choose what scenes to imagine or what steps to take to help reach your goals, without input from external audio suggestions. While visualization primarily focuses on visuals, you can also incorporate other senses.²

Benefits of guided imagery and visualization

Imagery techniques, like guided imagery and visualization, can help promote change by increasing preparation and motivation toward a task, behavior, or health goal.^{2,3}

Guided imagery and visualization are beneficial for relaxation^{4,5} and stress relief,^{6,7} which can have many health benefits. These techniques also have positive effects on many other lifestyle factors that contribute to overall health. Some of these lifestyle factors are: sleep,^{8,9} food consumption^{6,10} and cravings,^{6,10,11} physical activity,^{6,12} emotional regulation,^{4,13–15} self-forgiveness,^{4,16,17} and even alcohol reduction^{3,18} or smoking cessation.^{3,19}

In general, guided imagery and visualization are associated with beneficial changes in the way the body functions and may be associated with improvements in certain health conditions. Some associated benefits are:

- Stress relief– decreased salivary cortisol,⁷ decreased perceived stress,^{4,20} changes in skin conductance and heart rate⁴
- General immune health – changes in immune cells, the cells that help fight infection and fend off diseases, including white blood cell counts,²¹ neutrophil adherence,²¹ and natural killer cell activity²²
- Musculoskeletal complaints – decreased pain in people with fibromyalgia,²³ chronic pain,^{24–26} and arthritis^{27,28}
- Digestive complaints – decreased abdominal pain,^{29,30} improvements in irritable bowel symptoms (i.e., bloating, pain, quality of life)^{31–33}
- Mental health concerns – decreased anxiety^{4,13,15} and depressive symptoms^{13,14}

How to practice guided imagery and visualization

Guided and self-directed imagery or visualization are done similarly. It may be helpful to start with guided sessions before attempting self-directed sessions. There are many resources available to help get you started, including trained mental health professionals, books, audio, and video options, as well as apps on your phone or computer. None of these are required though and it is possible to start right away with a self-directed approach.

There is no wrong way to use guided imagery or visualization to help achieve goals. However, when first starting it might be helpful to follow a series of steps to organize your thoughts during the session. The following steps may be used as a guide:¹



- **Establish your goal** – What do you hope to achieve and why? What are your personal health goals? Are you looking to improve sleep, exercise more, lose weight, improve your immune system, or manage day-to-day stress? Begin to think of images that represent your health goals. These images will be used later in your session.
- **Find a relaxed place and position** – Find a place that is quiet and makes you feel relaxed or happy. Position yourself so you are comfortable. For many this may be laying down with hands by the side, for others it may be sitting. Add pillows or blankets if it helps with feeling comfortable and relaxed. If incorporating music, audio, or video, focus on them and listen closely.
- **Focus on your breathing** – Once comfortable, close your eyes and start to focus on your breathing. Take deep breaths. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Try to establish a pattern and rhythm of breathing, with exhaling lasting longer than inhaling. Try to stay focused on breathing throughout the session.
- **Imagine a safe and positive environment** – Create images in your mind that portray a calm, safe place. Picture what it looks like, imagine sounds or smells that may accompany that location, and even things you would feel while there.

Imagining like this, incorporating as many senses as possible and really being in the moment, allows the body to relax and lowers stress. Since stress is a main driver of many health conditions, this is a large part of using guided imagery or visualization to achieve personal health goals.

- **Focus on your goal** – Once relaxed and comfortable in the imagined environment, start to shift your focus to images that are specific to your health goal. This can look different depending on the goal you have. Some options for visualizing your goal may be:
 - Replace negative experiences with images of positive ones. This is sometimes referred to as rescripting. An example may be mentally rewriting and imagining a nightmare to have a positive ending.³⁴
 - Imagine, in as much detail as possible, the steps needed to reach a goal. For instance, if you want to lose weight, visualizing yourself exercising—seeing yourself in exercise clothes, picturing where you exercise, and imagining the feel of the movements and your breathing—has been shown to assist with follow-through. Visualizing yourself performing various activities prepares your mind to actually do them.³
 - Rehearse or imagine the preferred result. If you want to quit smoking, imagine yourself turning down a cigarette when offered, or putting the pack of cigarettes back on the shelf instead of purchasing them. To increase chances of being successful, imagine a result that is an actual possibility, not one that is too extreme or more of a fantasy ending. You can also imagine how it feels when you achieve the result. Are you happy? Excited? Proud? Visualizing your preferred result and any feelings that go along with accomplishing it can provide extra motivation to achieve your goals.

Guided imagery and visualization can take time to learn. Practicing regularly will make things easier and more effective. Start with 5 minutes and work your way up to what feels right for you.

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