

Excerpt taken from:

Interactive Guided Imagerysm in Treating Chronic Pain

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Imagery is the Primary Encoding Language of the Body's Healing Systems Imagery can be thought of as one of the brain's two higher-order information processing and encoding systems. The system we are most familiar with is that which uses sequential information processing, and it underlies linear, analytic, and conscious verbal thinking. Most health professionals are highly educated and highly rewarded for their abilities in using this mode of information processing. Imagery serves a simultaneous information processing system, which underlies the holistic, synthetic, pattern thinking of the unconscious mind, and can reveal to us how seemingly disparate areas of our lives are intimately related.

A brief clinical example from Dr. Bresler's practice serves to bring the importance of this relational quality to life. "A fifty-two-year-old cardiologist named John was suffering from excruciating low back pain following treatment for rectal cancer. Although surgery and radiation therapy apparently had eradicated the cancer, he described the pain that remained as unbearable. Because the area had been so heavily irradiated, neither repeated nerve blocks nor further surgery could be used to help relieve his terrible discomfort, and he had long ago developed tolerance to his pain medications. When John first came in, he already had narrowed down his personal alternatives to three: 1) successful treatment; 2) voluntary commitment to a mental institution; or 3) suicide. John was convinced that under no circumstances could he continue to live with pain and, at the same time, maintain his sanity. In reviewing his medical records, I noticed that during a psychiatric workup, John had described his pain as "a dog chewing on my spine." This image was so vivid that I suggested we make contact with the dog, using guided imagery. With his training in traditional medicine, he thought the idea was silly, but he was willing to give it a try. In John's case, our initial goal was to have the dog stop chewing on his spine. Over the next few sessions, the dog began to reveal critically important information. According to the dog (named Skippy), John never had wanted to be a physician - his own career choice was architecture - but he had been pressured into medical school by his mother. Consequently, he felt resentment not only toward his mother, but also toward his patients and colleagues. Skippy suggested that this hostility had in turn contributed to the development of his cancer and to the subsequent pain problem as well. During one session, Skippy told John, "You're a damn good doctor. It may not be the career you wanted, but it's time you recognized how good you are at what you do. When you stop being so resentful and start accepting yourself, I'll stop chewing on your spine." These insights were accompanied by an immediate alleviation of the pain, and in only a few weeks' time, John became a new person, and his pain progressively subsided."

This type of experience demonstrates how powerfully the imagery process can reveal meaning in a supposedly "meaningless" symptom, and show the way to healing. While imagery does not always lead so dramatically to relief, and disease remission from such dialogues does not always occur, they almost always lead to better self-understanding and enhanced coping skills for dealing with a chronic illness or condition.