

# WHAT EVERY PSYCHOLOGIST SHOULD KNOW ABOUT GUIDED IMAGERY

by

**David E. Bresler, Ph.D., L.Ac.**

Associate Clinical Professor, UCLA School of Medicine  
Executive Director, The Bresler Center, Los Angeles, California  
Co-Director, Academy for Guided Imagery, Malibu, California

Published in: California Psychologist, 1994

Mailing Address:  
30765 Pacific Coast Hwy 355  
Malibu, CA 90272  
Email: Bresler@aol.com

“Imagination is more important than knowledge” ..... Albert Einstein

A mental image is a thought with sensory qualities. It is something we mentally see, hear, taste, smell, touch, or feel. The term “guided imagery” refers to a wide variety of techniques, including simple visualization and direct suggestion using imagery, metaphor and story-telling, fantasy exploration and game playing, dream interpretation, drawing, and active imagination where elements of the unconscious are invited to appear as images that can communicate with the conscious mind.

Once considered an “alternative” or “complementary” approach, guided imagery is now finding widespread scientific and public acceptance, and it is being used to teach psychophysiologic relaxation, resolve conflicts, enhance self-esteem, alleviate anxiety and depression, improve memory, relieve physical and psychological symptoms, overcome health-endangering habits, help patients prepare for surgery and tolerate procedures more comfortably, accelerate healing responses in the body, enhance athletic performance, and stimulate creative thinking.

Since psychologists utilize imagery in nearly every interaction we have with clients (whether we are aware of it or not), below is my personal list of what every contemporary psychologist should know about guided imagery.

**(1) Historically, more people have been treated using guided imagery than by any other therapeutic intervention.**

All healing rituals involve imagery, either overtly or covertly. In this sense, imagery can be considered the oldest and most ubiquitous form of therapy. The imagery-laden healing rituals of ancient cultures all have a certain level of efficacy or they wouldn't persist over time, and while we may label these therapeutic benefits as 'placebo effects', they are real and measurable effects with important implications for our understanding of the healing process.

**(2) Clients (and therapists) use imagery all the time.**

Do you ever work with clients who worry? Where does the worrying occur? Only in the imagination. The two most common worries are regretting the past and fearing the future. In the first case, the client brings images from the past into the present to re-experience it again and again, like an instant replay. In the second case, the client creates imaginary future scenarios and plays them in the present, but it's all happening only in the imagination. We also use imagery whenever we plan anything.

**(3) Imagery has powerful physiological consequences.**

The body typically responds to mental imagery as it would to a genuine external experience. The most familiar example of this is sexual fantasy and it's

attendant physiologic responses. Numerous studies have shown that imagery can effect almost all major physiologic control systems of the body, including respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, metabolic rates, gastrointestinal motility and secretion, sexual function, cortisol levels, blood lipids, and even immune responsiveness.

**(4) Imagery is the language of the unconscious mind.**

In addition to its potential for stimulating physical healing, imagery provides a powerful window of observation on the unconscious process, graphically revealing unrecognized dynamics that may support either health or illness. To the well-trained clinician, this window is invaluable for quickly identifying opportunities for change, as well as resistance to change, and ways to work effectively with both.

**(5) Guided imagery can be used to change moods.**

Because of the intimate relationship between imagery and state-dependent learning, the structured use of memory, fantasy, and sensory recruitment can help clients move from affective states characterized by fear, anxiety, confusion and hopelessness to those incorporating calmness, clarity, strength and courage. After vicariously experiencing more positive moods, clients often perceive their

present difficulties in new ways, and find inner and outer resources that were previously lost or missed.

**(6) Guided imagery can help build self-esteem and inner support.**

Instead of listening to the constant, belittling voice of their “Inner Critic,” clients are introduced to an “Inner Advisor” who can provide guidance on how best to reduce stress, resolve conflicts, and improve health. The Advisor can supply encouragement for decisions made with an enthusiasm that friends or family members may be unable or unwilling to offer.

**(7) Guided imagery can help to resolve conflicts and overcome habits.**

In the imagery domain, most health destructive habits can be considered a reflection of inner conflict. When clients walk through my door wanting to quit smoking, lose weight, or stop using drugs, I know that there is one part of them who desperately wants to overcome the habit (or they wouldn't have come). I also know that there is another part of them who doesn't want to change the habit, or else they wouldn't have come (i.e. they would have already been successful). Through images that represent each of these conflicted parts, meaningful and productive dialogues can be encouraged, leading to mediation of the conflict, much like conducting “couples counseling” inside the skin.

**(8) Guided imagery is the fastest and easiest ways to deal with resistance.**

Resistance is often the result of an inner conflict between one part of the client who wants to change, and another part who knows that change will be painful. By inviting clients to “allow an image to form for some part that has concerns about the change” and then facilitating a dialogue with the image, the guide can often quickly determine why resistance is present, what it wants, what it needs, and what it has to offer. This is usually critical information for any psychotherapeutic intervention promoting change.

**(9) Guided imagery can help convert insights into action**

The insights evoked by imagery can be effectively transformed into a specific plan for attitudinal, emotional, and/or behavioral change. This process of adding the will to the imagination involves clarification of insights, brainstorming, choosing the best option, affirmations, action planning, imagery rehearsal, and constant reformulation of the plan until it actually succeeds. It is usually the “missing link” in most other forms of therapy and by allowing clients to “fail their way to success” in the imaginal world, this process enables them to actually succeed in making the real world changes they desire.

**10) Guided imagery is best utilized interactively**

Over the past 25 years, Martin Rossman, M.D., and I have developed a variety of ways to utilize imagery “interactively” to teach clients how to draw on their own inner resources to support healing, to make appropriate adaptations to change, and to find creative solutions to challenges they previously thought were insoluble. This Interactive Guided Imagery<sup>sm</sup> approach is particularly useful in the current era of managed care, where cost-effective mind/body medicine, improved medical self-care, and briefer, yet deeper, more empowering approaches to health care are much welcomed and greatly valued by patients, providers, and insurers alike.

For additional information, contact:

Academy for Guided Imagery: (800) 726-2070; [www.healthy.com/agi](http://www.healthy.com/agi)  
Health Journeys: [www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com)  
International Association for Interactive Imagery: [www.iaii.org](http://www.iaii.org)

### **Biography of David E. Bresler, Ph.D.**

Dr. David Bresler is Associate Clinical Professor of Anesthesiology at the UCLA School of Medicine, Executive Director of The Bresler Center in West Los Angeles, and Co-Director of The Academy for Guided Imagery in Malibu, CA.