

# Guided Imagery & Diabetes

## A Special Report for Practitioners

A Health Journeys Wellness Report  
by **Belleruth Naparstek, LISW, BCD**

Over the past two decades we've learned that techniques that promote relaxation and mood regulation will shift biochemistry in ways that can profoundly benefit people with diabetes.

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## What is Guided Imagery, Anyway?

Guided imagery is an immersive, hypnotic, audio intervention, consisting of calming words, soothing music and positive images, designed to structure a relaxing, healing experience that targets specific health goals.

It can be spoken by a practitioner or self-administered with a recording.

Considered the “lazy man’s meditation”, because it takes no training or preparation whatsoever, it is extremely easy, user-friendly, portable and private, requiring only an audio player and the ability to press “Play”.

It works well as an adjuvant therapy alongside conventional treatment, and is also helpful on its own.

If you click on the links below, you’ll hear brief audio samples that will immediately convey to you the nature of this intervention.

- \* [Guided imagery](#)
- \* [Affirmations](#)
- \* [Walking Meditation](#)

## An Explosion of Research

Over the past two decades, with the development of more sophisticated research methods and a better understanding of mind-body medicine, we’ve learned that *techniques that promote relaxation and mood regulation will shift biochemistry in ways that can profoundly benefit people with diabetes.*

Studies investigating guided imagery<sup>1</sup>, breath management<sup>2</sup>, relaxation<sup>3</sup>, autogenic training<sup>4</sup>, hypnosis<sup>5</sup> (all of these techniques are also forms of guided imagery), as well as biofeedback<sup>6</sup>, acupressure<sup>7</sup>, yoga<sup>8</sup>, tai chi<sup>9</sup> and mindfulness based stress reduction<sup>10</sup> have yielded impressive or promising results with blood glucose, HbA1c, lipid status, peripheral circulation, post-prandial hypoglycemic levels, blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides, depression, anxiety and improved self-care.

**Guided imagery is one of the simplest, most user-friendly, portable, self-administered and scalable of interventions.** It is easy to add to a treatment plan, has built-in reinforcement for continued use, and it will support motivation for increased self-care, with even the most challenging of daily regimens.

## General Benefits

Four decades of research have established numerous benefits. Guided imagery is an astonishingly simple, flexible and easy tool for promoting health and wellness, getting through difficult medical procedures, managing symptoms and, in some cases, even reducing disease. [See Appendix A for a sampling of general findings on the efficacy of guided imagery for various health challenges.]

**It is a practice that packs a powerful punch**, because of the way it can skip around cognition and send healing messages straight into the whole being, by way of primitive, sensory and emotion-based channels in the brain and nervous system.

Imagery travels primarily via “right brain” sensing, perceiving, feeling and apprehending, rather than through left brain thinking, judging, analyzing and deciding.

Indeed, imagery is the gift that keeps on giving, creating a highly receptive reverie state, where healing images can act like a depth charge dropped deep beneath the surface of the mind, reverberating again and again, delivering rich, complex, healing messages to mind, body and spirit. Impact is cumulative and intensifies over time.

**It is fast, powerful, costs little or nothing**, and gets easier and more effective with continued use. Its end-user needn’t be smart, rich, well educated, young, strong, nor mentally healthy to reap its considerable benefits. Listeners can be bone-tired, disgusted, depressed, disbelieving, listless, resistant, distracted, mentally disabled, physically unfit or at death’s door, and yet the imagery will still bestow its benefits.

In addition, it easily, comfortably and non-competitively supports other ongoing therapies, helping to anchor the inroads made by conventional treatment.

**To summarize, guided imagery offers a wide range of general benefits:**

- \* Promotes relaxation
- \* Reduces stress, anxiety
- \* Counters depression
- \* Lowers cholesterol
- \* Improves blood pressure

- \* Improves focus, concentration
- \* Improves performance
- \* Helps with sleep
- \* Boosts energy
- \* Increases self-esteem
- \* Promotes and maintains smoking cessation
- \* Improves surgical outcomes
- \* Helps patients tolerate difficult medical procedures
- \* Reduces pain and ameliorates other symptoms
- \* Decreases side effects of medication and treatment

## Particular Benefits for Diabetes

In addition, guided imagery has some special advantages for those working to promote the proper management of diabetes. Among other things, it can do the following:

- \* Lowers hemoglobin A1C
- \* Reduces blood glucose, in the short and long term
- \* Helps with circulation and neuropathy
- \* Raises endorphin levels - decreases pain, lifts mood
- \* Enhances feelings of empowerment, hope, mastery
- \* Increases motivation for self-care, even with a difficult daily regimen
- \* Reduces anxiety-based behaviors, including compulsive eating, smoking & drinking
- \* Is user friendly - doesn't ask a lot from weary, discouraged end-users
- \* Delivers immediately felt benefits, thus reinforcing continued use
- \* Is self-administered, allowing the end user to be in control
- \* Has portability – can be uploaded to a phone or MP3 and used anywhere
- \* Facilitates transition – can be introduced in the hospital and brought home
- \* Offers wide application - listeners don't need to be trained, focused, motivated, smart or even awake to benefit from use

## Practical Tips for Success

- \* Put some imagery audio clips on the phone line at your hospital and make them available to patients who are getting stressed on the floor.
- \* Upload clips of guided imagery, breathing exercises, affirmations, walking meditations to your patient's smart phone or MP3 player and show them how to use it.
- \* If they're technologically intimidated, order some Playaways for simplifying mistake-proof use.



- \* Remember, this technique works well with other treatments and tools. Not only does it not compete with them, but it supports them by promoting hope, motivation and self-care, along with improved biochemistry.
- \* If there is resistance to trying guided imagery, start with one that helps with sleep. Patients are more likely to relax and let go when trying to sleep.
- \* Don't get discouraged if a patient doesn't "get it" at first: skill, efficiency, speed and impact increase with practice.
- \* Don't "sell" it too hard. But you may want to play a segment in the office, so they can hear it with you first. Otherwise, they may not try it out on their own.
- \* It helps to advise people to not worry about being perfect at this – half-baked attention works, too.
- \* People who are not used to being both *relaxed and awake* at the same time will routinely fall asleep while listening. Reassure them this is okay - it will benefit them anyway.

- \* If dozers want to know what's on the recording, they can listen sitting up, standing or walking. But it's okay for them to nap.
- \* Tell people they can change the narrative in their own minds to suit themselves. If they're religious, let them invoke Jesus or a symbol of faith at the start; or you can encourage them to fill in the blanks with favorite people and places. They can also ignore parts they don't like.
- \* Remind your patients that they don't have to be "visual" for this to work – the imagery engages all the senses – sights, sounds, tastes, feel, smells, emotion. (Remember, only a little over half of the population is strongly visual.)
- \* Take advantage of a group setting. The altered state is contagious, and people will have a more impactful experience in a group. So introduce imagery in a support group or even very large audience if you can.
- \* Music increases the effects of imagery, unless the listener is a music major or musician who gets analytical or hypercritical about music, in which case it may be better without music altogether.
- \* If a listener has hearing problems, the music can mask the words. In that case, it's better to get an audio without music or to read from a script found in a book, while playing the background music at lower level.
- \* Remember that the patient does not have to be a "believer" in guided imagery in order to benefit from it. Even a skeptical willingness to give it a try is enough to get the ball rolling.
- \* Keep in mind that people who normally would not give it a try, will almost always when under the gun – especially when facing surgery or other scary situations.
- \* Imagery is great with a massage or a Reiki treatment or other forms of physical touch. Touch helps with relaxation and increases the kinesthetic power of the images. [A newly published study in Military Medicine (Sept 2012) shows that guided imagery combined with Healing Touch significantly reduced posttraumatic stress, depression and cynicism, and improved mental quality of life in combat-exposed Marines facing re-deployment – in only 6 sessions/3 weeks, which is just plain astounding.]
- \* Encouraging the use of the same posture or hand-positioning with each imaging session creates a conditioning cue that helps the patient respond with an immediate relaxation/healing response to the posture.
- \* You can reassure your patients that losing track of the guided narrative is not an indicator that they are listening incorrectly. A wandering mind is just part of the experience. The imagery is still being absorbed.
- \* You will notice that people will often tear up, get runny noses, cough, yawn, feel heaviness in their limbs, get tingling along the top of their scalp or in their hands and feet, or experience minor, involuntary muscle-movements. These are normal responses to guided imagery. You can reassure your patients it's all good.
- \* Keep in mind that an indicator of a strong response during the imagery is unusual stillness, increased coloring in the face, and an ironing out of lines and wrinkles. After the imagery, a person's voice will be deeper and lower, the breathing slower and more relaxed.
- \* Usually an imaging exercise will clear a headache or remove back pain, joint pain or stomach aches, because of the combination of muscle relaxation and increased endorphins. But occasionally people acquire a headache. Physical movement, pressing acupoints, changing posture or using additional imagery to release the trapped energy will remedy this.

### Try It!

This is a technique that is worth trying. It won't be for everyone, but it can do a world of good for a substantial number of patients. And it can make your work a lot easier and more rewarding.

And don't forget yourself or your family, either. It can help you relax, lose weight, sleep better and feel more positive, too. And it can help your kids take a test, win at sports or ace a recital.

**So check it out. You won't regret it.**

## Appendix A

Imagery has been found to reduce anxiety and depression<sup>11</sup>, lower blood pressure<sup>12</sup>, reduce cholesterol<sup>13</sup> and lipid peroxides<sup>14</sup> in cardiac patients, speed up healing from cuts<sup>15</sup>, fractures<sup>16</sup> and burns<sup>17</sup>, reduce blood loss<sup>18</sup> and length of hospital stay in surgery patients<sup>19</sup>, beef up short term immune function<sup>20</sup>, reduce pain from arthritis<sup>21</sup> and fibromyalgia<sup>22</sup>, increase comfort during all manner of medical procedures<sup>23</sup>, improve motor deficits in stroke patients<sup>24</sup>, reduce fear in young children undergoing MRIs<sup>25</sup> and needle sticks<sup>26</sup>, cut down bingeing and purging in people with bulimia<sup>27</sup>, improve success rates in infertile couples<sup>28</sup>, accelerate weight loss<sup>29</sup> and improve concentration in developmentally disabled adults<sup>30</sup>, to name just a few of the established benefits.

## Endnotes

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Guided imagery to support diabetes can be found at [www.healthjourneys.com/diabetesselfcare](http://www.healthjourneys.com/diabetesselfcare)

Explore Health Journey's extensive guided imagery catalog at [www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com)

You can find additional guided imagery resources at [www.belleruthnaparstek.com](http://www.belleruthnaparstek.com) and [blog.healthjourneys.com](http://blog.healthjourneys.com)

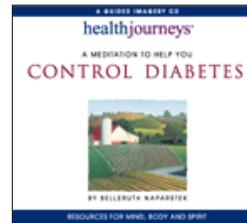
## About the Author



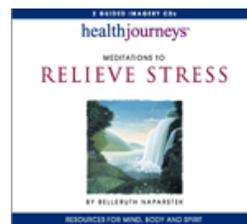
Belleruth Naparstek is a psychotherapist and author, best known as a pioneer in guided imagery and an expert in digitally delivered stress solutions. Creator of the Health Journeys guided imagery series, her company produces evidence based mind-body resources and disseminates the latest in mind-body research, program ideas and practice solutions.

Most recently she worked with the Surgeon General of the Army, helping devise solutions for stress, fitness and sleep. Her work has been translated into 10 languages, and her book on imagery and post-traumatic stress, *Invisible Heroes*, won the Spirituality & Health Award. Her imagery recordings have been tested in more than 30 clinical trials.

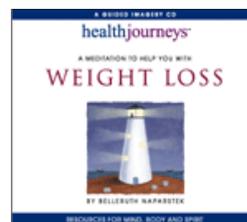
## Featured Guided Imagery for Diabetes



**Control Diabetes**, by Belleruth Naparstek LISW, was written so it would apply to either type I or type II diabetes. At the cellular level, it invokes images of insulin-sensitivity, whether to the body's own insulin or injected medicine. It envisions a steady, balanced digestive process, ongoing organ repair, and steady energy and strength.



**Relieve Stress**, by Belleruth Naparstek LISW, the four exercises on this two CD program contain imagery for mastering anxiety; guided imagery to pump up feelings of love, safety and protection; a soothing, walking meditation for the fidgeters among us who can't sit still; and affirmations for use anytime.



**Weight Loss**, by Belleruth Naparstek LISW, guided imagery encourages a sense of wonder and appreciation for the body, heightens serotonin to reduce appetite, and envisions the biochemical conversion of fat into focused energy and muscle. Empowering and confidence-building, this audio doubled weight loss in a placebo controlled pilot study at Canyon Ranch.