

Information on imagery



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

Imagery is recommended by Penny Brohn Cancer Care as a safe and gentle therapy for people with cancer. It can be delivered by a therapist, by listening to a recording at home, or can be self-led. It is offered to help manage the physical and emotional effects of cancer and its treatments, such as nausea, pain, sleeplessness, depression and anxiety. By bringing about a deep state of relaxation, it is also thought to support the immune system. Research evidence shows that imagery can help to improve quality of life for people with cancer. The evidence for other benefits is very mixed. More high quality research is needed to reach a clear consensus about the benefits of imagery.

Practitioner Perspective

"Imagery is the active and creative use of our imagination. We have taught the use of imagery at Penny Brohn Cancer Care for over 25 years and know it to be a vital tool for many in their support and care of themselves, from their initial diagnoses of cancer throughout any treatment and their subsequent lives. By helping people work consciously with their imagination they can support their immune systems and access feelings such as peace, calm, joy and contentment. We know from our experience that using imagery during the treatment of cancer can support conventional treatments e.g. chemotherapy, and help to reduce negative side effects. Many people who have come to Penny Brohn Cancer Care have found that the use of imagery has been a key part in helping them feel more in control in an otherwise bewildering experience."

More information: What is imagery?

Imagery is the use of the creative imagination to positively affect your own health and wellbeing. It is a self-help technique which includes not just visual images but also smells, sounds, tastes, textures and touch. These experiences are consciously constructed in the mind, to have an effect on physical, emotional and psychological levels.

It is thought that imagery has been used traditionally by many cultures across the world, to harness the body's own natural healing resources. Egyptian, Greek, Chinese and Navajo traditions practiced imagery, as well as religions such as Hinduism and Judaism¹ and pagan religions such as Wicca. It is an integral part of some mind-body practices such as shamanism, yoga and tai chi.

Imagery became popular in the west during the second half of the twentieth century not just to heal physical ailments, but also as a way of self-improvement, leading to books such as "Creative Visualisation" by Shakti Gawain². Its use for people with cancer was promoted most notably by the Simontons, a husband-wife partnership of an oncologist and psychologist, who wrote "Getting Well Again"³ and taught the technique to small groups in the 1970s. It has come to be used alongside and in conjunction with other techniques such as healing, meditation and relaxation to deepen or work alongside these practices. It may also be employed by nutritional therapists, psychotherapists and counsellors in their work.

What happens in an imagery session?

To practice imagery you may visit a therapist for a session, or you may choose to use a pre-recorded CD at home. You can practice whilst sitting or lying down. When a therapist is leading the session, they may ask a few general questions about your health and wellbeing so they can adapt the session to your needs.

The most common type of imagery used is "active" imagery. This is where you actively construct an experience or scenario in your mind. You may focus on pleasant experiences such as being in a beautiful landscape or garden, or on a process, such as activating the immune system, or an outcome such as being completely well. You can use images based in reality, for example imagining immune cells destroying cancer cells, or that are symbolic, such as imagining a vacuum cleaner sucking up all the cancer cells. Spiritual ideas, such as healing light can be used, as well as encounters with characters, objects and sensations. By including all the senses, such as smell and touch, your experience can be deepened and the effects of the session heightened¹. Some people do not use their minds in a visual way, and for them it may be more effective to use sounds, or sensations during imagery sessions.

At the end of the session, the therapist may spend some time listening to your experiences and exploring what they mean to you.

Relaxation and Imagery sessions are often offered locally by practitioners. Keep an eye on local press and notice boards for details. In addition, some retreat centres offer courses.

What are the providers' claims?

Imagery is used as a technique in many different therapeutic settings. For example, a psychotherapist may use it to help their client explore their feelings. A nutritionalist may use it to help their client change their eating habits. For this reason, there are many different claims made by providers about imagery.

As a self-help tool for people living with cancer, the claims made for imagery range from helping with side effects such as nausea, pain and sleeplessness through to relieving stress, depression and anxiety and improving quality of life.

Some practitioners offer Imagery as a way to relieve stress and support the body's own potential to heal. This is based on the understanding that the body and mind are linked, and that the state of our physical health is influenced by our state of mind. In modern scientific terms relatively new advances in the somewhat controversial field of mind-body medicine and 'psychoneuroimmunology' (PNI) is investigating these links⁴.

What do people who have had imagery say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?"). We did not find any qualitative studies about imagery for people with cancer.

Are there any legal issues?

There is currently no formal regulation of therapists offering imagery. Most practitioners will have training in another therapy which uses imagery as a technique. For example, many psychotherapists, psychologists and counsellors use imagery. There is greater regulation of these practitioners - please see our Psychotherapy information sheet for more details.

Any therapist using imagery should be well trained or experienced at working with people living with cancer to give the most appropriate and effective guidance.

How much does it cost?

Imagery sessions may be offered individually or as a group. Individual sessions may cost from £10 - £30 and usually last 20 to 50 minutes. Group sessions may be offered as part of a course or workshop along with other self-help techniques such as relaxation and meditation. The cost will vary according to what is being offered.

Whilst sessions with a therapist are more personal and can lead to deeper work, there are many good quality CDs and audio tapes available. These can provide a good introduction to imagery as a technique, and can help to maintain practice at home.

What's the evidence?

There is a fair amount of research on imagery as a therapy for people with cancer. Most research looks at both imagery and progressive muscle relaxation together. The results of these studies have been included as a short relaxation session is usually given before imagery in the therapeutic setting.

The evidence currently available is supportive of imagery in improving quality of life. There is however, a great deal of conflicting and contradictory evidence for and against all of the following benefits: anxiety, depression, anger/hostility, nausea and vomiting, psychological and emotional responses, pain and immunological function. Because the approach used in each case was not the same, and often did not reflect how imagery could best be used, more research must be done to give a clear picture of the benefits of imagery.

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

Is Imagery safe?

Imagery is considered safe when delivered by an experienced or appropriately trained therapist. If listening to a recording or practicing self-guided imagery, this should not be done whilst driving or whilst engaged in other similar activities. Imagery may not be suitable for those with certain pre-existing psychological conditions¹. Please talk to a therapist if in any doubt.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

1. Imagery [monograph on the internet]. Natural Standard. Accessed 12/11/07. Available with subscription from www.naturalstandard.com
2. Gawain S. Creative visualisation. 25th anniversary edition, 2002. Nataraj publishing. New World Libaray, California.
3. Simonton OC, Matthews-Simonton S, Creighton JL. Getting Well Again. 1992. Bantam books.
4. Oakely R. How the mind hurts and heals the body. American Psychologist 2004; 59(1); 29-40.

Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org
- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk
- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

If you have any questions please contact us

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