Guided Imagery: A Best Practice for Pregnancy and Childbirth
by Belleruth Naparstek

GUIDED IMAGERY: MORE THAN JUST RELAXATION

Guided imagery is a made-to-order intervention for the unique demands of pregnancy and childbirth. A deliberate kind of directed daydreaming, narrated by a soothing voice over relaxing music, it produces a calm state of focused, energized readiness that reduces discomfort while offering emotional support and a feeling of confidence in the body's inherent wisdom.

More than just relaxing, imagery can set the stage for productive, confident labor; it can focus breathing and encourage a powerful alliance with uterine contractions; it can increase a sense of gratitude for the body and the miracle of childbirth; and it can enhance a feeling of connection with the growing baby.

While delivering all these benefits, imagery is nonetheless easy to use and extremely non-demanding in nature. All that is required is the ability to listen. And because it can be delivered through a simple audio recording — a CD or download — it requires no special expertise, practice, or discipline from either the listener or her care partners, beyond an ability to press “play.” For this reason, it has been rightly called “the lazy man’s meditation” or “do-it-yourself hypnosis.”

ESTABLISHED EFFICACY

Imagery has been quietly but consistently producing impressive outcomes in health and medicine over the past 15 years. It was found to reduce anxiety and depression (McKinney et al. 1997), lower blood pressure (Hermann 2002), reduce cholesterol (Bennett and Carroll 1990) and lipid peroxides (Schneider et al. 1998), speed up healing from cuts (Ginandes et al. 2003), fractures (Ginandes and Rosenthal 1999), and burns (Fratianne et al. 2001), reduce blood loss (Dreher 1998) and length of hospital stay in surgery patients (Halpin et al. 2002), enhance short-term immune function (Gruzelier 2002), reduce pain from arthritis (Sharpe et al. 2001) and fibromyalgia (Whiting 2001), increase comfort during all manners of medical procedures (Montgomery et al. 2002), lower HemoglobinA1c in diabetics (Surwit et al. 2002), improve motor deficits in stroke patients (Page et al. 2001), reduce fear in young children undergoing MRIs (Smart 1997) and needle sticks (Albert 2000), cut down bingeing and purging in people with bulimia (Esplen et al. 1998), improve success rates in infertile couples (Domar et al. 2000), accelerate weight loss (Johnson and Karkut 1996), and improve concentration in developmentally disabled adults (Poretta and Surburg 1995). A recent meta-analysis showed that hypnosis and imagery reduced pain and the need for pain medication in laboring women (Cyna, McAuliffe, and Andrew 2004).

WHY IT WORKS

This simple, subtle practice 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, apprehending, and motor reactivity, rather than through left brain thinking — judging, analyzing, and deciding. Because of this, and the way that pregnancy and childbirth heighten the functioning of primitive, survival structures of the brain, it is an ideal intervention for pregnancy, labor, and delivery.

It is fast, powerful, costs little or nothing, and gets more 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, exasperated, frightened, terrified, disinterested, resistant, distracted, or mentally disabled, and it will still capture their attention long enough to bestow its beneficent blessings on them.
The calming voice tones, pacing, music, and evocative images help to create an altered state, where pain is reduced and capacity for focus is increased. This is why imagery is such a preferred technique for athletes facing the high performance demands of competition — a situation very comparable to labor. It mobilizes every part of the person — body, mind, and spirit — behind the goal of doing everything possible to create the best possible outcome. For women in childbirth, there is the added advantage of the natural flood of trance-inducing hormones that cascade through the body, intensifying the altered state and potentiating the imagery experience even further.

SAMPLES OF IMAGERY’S EVOCATIVE LANGUAGE FOR PREGNANCY AND LABOR

Guided imagery can be as simple as imagining a favorite time or place, in all its sensory beauty — its sights, sounds, smells, and feel — as well as the emotional responses produced within. This can be a sufficiently pleasant distraction, occupying just enough cognitive space in the mind, to turn attention away from the discomforts of pregnancy or the intense rigors of childbirth, to create an inner haven of peace, calm, and safety.

But guided imagery that is specifically geared to pregnancy can achieve much more than mere relaxation and simple distraction from pain. Early on in the pregnancy, it can promote delight in the genius of the body and its dazzling ability to support life; it can create a sense of connection to the mystery unfolding within:

And you may have noticed... a gentle preoccupation with the soft dark chambers of your interior... where sweet secrets of new life lay folded... tucked away, safe, and cozy... your whole body smiling... as it senses how each beat of your heart... surges nourishment and strength... suffusing this new being with everything it needs... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

Imagery can reduce isolation and fear, and initiate the listener into the powerful new phase of life she is about to enter — motherhood — reminding her that this is a path that has been taken by countless women before her. It can help her mark the importance of entering this phase of life, and honor it — and in doing so, honor herself.

Pleased to be joining the company of all the women who have come before you... and all the women who will come after you... and feeling their same sense of wonder and gratitude... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

Imagery can reframe the discomfort of random contractions, reminding the listener of how these fit into the larger picture and serve the greater goal:

All the while, uterine muscles rehearsing and toning... warming up with occasional contractions... so that when the time is right... it can move into capable action with efficiency and ease... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

It can also help her better tolerate the discomforts of bloating, fatigue, changing body image, and shifting moods...

And you can be confident in the knowledge that even the discomfort you might feel from time to time... comes from the purposeful activity of your body... from new hormone levels, increased blood flow, and all the new requirements of muscle, skin, and bone... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

...while supporting the communication of a silent dialogue between mother and baby:

Feeling the soft weight of your hands on your body... the warmth from your hands soaking into layers of tissue... deeper and deeper... sending a greeting and blessing inward... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

Imagery can invoke the protection of the ancestors — grandparents and great-grandparents — to contribute a powerful sense of the greater continuity of life and purpose:

And sensing the presence of smiling ancestors... leaning over and softly whispering this child’s name... transferring to this baby their highest hopes and deepest intentions... to pick up their banner... and carry the best of what they stood for... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

It can add to the delight and excitement of this unique adventure:

And you know... with your whole being... in the deepest part of your heart... that this new life that you carry inside of you is a gift... like no other... a precious link in the great chain... necessary and perfect... designed to leave the world a better place for having been in it... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000a).

Guided imagery that focuses on the birthing process can augment what has been learned in childbirth classes, and support the help a doctor, nurse, midwife, doula, or family coach offers during labor. In cases where no help is available, it can be a lifeline. Imagery can remind a laboring woman that her body knows how to do this:

And you know... that your body already knows how to do this... is a trustworthy ally... perfectly organized to go into action... every cell committed to the fullest... With a built-in intelligence, distilled and honed through the ages... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

continued on page 6
Imagery can remind the laboring woman that she is not alone, but in the spiritual company of generations and generations of women:

...by centuries of women who have come before you... doing as you are doing now... So in a sense... they too are all behind you now... strong and steady... patient and knowing... smiling, as they remember their own journey... into the power and mystery of motherhood... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

It can engender confidence and a sense of readiness, like an athlete who has been training all along:

And so now... as your contractions begin to settle into a regular pattern... you know that you too have been rehearsing and toning... that you can feel ready and strong... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

And it can focus breathing into the contractions:

Sending the warm energy of the breath... all around and through the bowed muscle of the uterus... and letting the power of the breath go right into the heart of the contraction... and help it soften and release... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

Imagery can encourage endurance and patience with reminders that progress is being made:

And you know... that with each contraction... important work is being done... that while you are breathing in and out... fully and deeply... with your mind focused and steady... your body is ingeniously carrying out its plan... moving forward in a steady, reliable progression... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

It can support confidence in the capable caring professionals and helpers in the delivery room:

...looking after you with great competence and care... with capable, respectful hands... along with partners and family members with loving hearts... who share your awe for this miraculous process... so ordinary and yet so magical... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

Imagery can remind the laboring woman that the exasperation of the transition phase is an indicator that the end is in sight:

And you know... that at the time when you feel the most discomfort... the most irritation... impatience... that this is the time when the most work is being done... that the end is in sight... the final stretch is coming... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

And imagery can support the work of pushing:

And now, if you can feel it, your body wants to bear down with each powerful contraction... every fiber of your being impelled... to bear down and push out this baby... with a commitment and force like no other... because it is the only thing your body wants to do... and you can let your caregivers coach you... helping you hold back... with panting breaths... and telling you when to push... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

Once the baby arrives, imagery can promote bonding, whether immediate or gradual, in the mother:

...a feeling of relief... and accomplishment... and gratitude... and the beginnings of a tenderness like no other... that you may feel right away... or that may gradually overtake you... over the next days and weeks... until one day you realize... that your capacity to feel love... is beyond anything you ever imagined... that your heart has been opened wider than you ever thought possible... (Excerpted from Naparstek 2000b).

**GENERAL TIPS AND POINTERS**

Here are some general pointers to keep in mind when encouraging people to try guided imagery for pregnancy and labor:

- Almost anyone can use this tool.
- Skill and efficiency increase cumulatively with practice. People are able to benefit in a faster, deeper way with repeated use.
- Imagery works best in a permissive, relaxed, unforced atmosphere. There is no one way to "do it right."
- Effective imagery uses all the senses, not just the visual sense, and especially it uses the kinesthetic or feeling sense. Only half of the population is strongly visual.
- Poetic language, filled with symbols, similes, and metaphors, is especially effective at capturing attention, driving the altered state, and making a deep impression on mind, body, and spirit.
- As important as the choice of words is, it will never be as important as the quality of the voice, the intention behind it, and the music that accompanies it.
- The narrator's voice should be natural, low, deep in the body, and the pacing should be a natural outcome of his or her relaxed breathing.
- Imagery is generally more powerful in a group setting, mainly due to the contagious nature of the altered state, making a childbirth education group or support group an ideal place to experience it.
- Music, when properly chosen, will increase the potency of imagery. People intuitively know what music is right for them. A small percentage of people prefer no music at all, especially if they know a lot about music or are extremely sensitive to/critical of it.
Imagery that elicits emotion is generally more effective than imagery that does not. Responding with emotion is a good sign that the imagery is working in a deep way.

Imagery that deliberately elicits feelings of love and gratitude has special ability to reduce fear and center the listener.

It's best to avoid the imperative verb form, so that inadvertently "bossy" language doesn't marshal unnecessary resistance.

The listener does not have to be a "believer" in order for imagery to work. Positive expectancy helps, but even a skeptical willingness to give it a try is sufficient.

Touch may be the most powerful accompaniment to imagery, both to help with relaxation and to increase the kinesthetic power of the images. Imagery when combined with therapeutic massage, energy work, or other kinesthetic modalities is very potent, and more than the sum of its parts.

When the listener uses the same postural cues, gestures, or hand-positioning with each imaging experience, an "anchor" is created that conditions an immediate relaxation response when needed, particularly during labor.

Imagery that creates feelings of lovingness and gratitude elevates serotonin levels enough to reduce pain.

Imagery by its very nature distracts and refocuses attention, and thus reduces pain.

Because of hormonal activity, laboring women are in a natural trance state, which potentiates the imagery experience even further.

Even during sleep, people benefit from repeated listening, as demonstrated in outcomes with diabetic and anesthetized surgery patients.

It is commonplace to "space out" or lose track of a guided imagery narrative. This does not mean that it is being listened to incorrectly — this often comes with the territory.

People frequently tear up, get a runny nose, cough, yawn, feel heaviness in their limbs, get tingling sensations along the top of their scalp or in their hands and feet, or experience minor, involuntary muscle movements. These are normal responses.

Other indicators of a strong response to imagery are unusual stillness, increased coloring in the face, and a smoothing out of lines and wrinkles. The voice drops deeper and lower, and speech is slower and more relaxed.

**CONCLUSION**

Guided imagery is a best practice, which can accomplish a great deal to support the pregnant or laboring woman, taking her beyond simple relaxation, to support a more confident, meaningful, and positive pregnancy and labor experience, while demanding very little by way of training or effort in return. It does not compete in any way with other methods, and collaborates well with other practices in the caregiver's tool kit.

**References**


continued on page 8
GuIided Imagery from page 7


Psychotherapist, author, and guided imagery pioneer Belleruth Naparstek is the creator of the Health Journeys guided imagery audio series, including *Meditations for a Healthy Pregnancy and Successful Childbirth*. Her latest book, *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*, was released in 2006. Her guided imagery is distributed by Aetna U.S. Healthcare, the U.S. Veteran’s Administration, The American Red Cross, Kaiser Permanente, United Health Care, Oxford Health Plans, and Blue Shield of California, and is involved in 22 clinical trials.
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