Visualization and the Mind–Body Connection

How the images you hold can shape the body you live in

Your imagination is one of the oldest healing tools you carry. Long before brain scans, healers, midwives and grandmothers knew that what we picture, and what we expect, ripples through the body. Science is now catching up with them.

Here are some of the research findings I find most helpful, each in plain language with a free link so you can read further. Afterward you'll find ways to bring visualization into your own life.

1. Imagining Relief Can Bring Relief

In one study, people who spent a few minutes imagining their pain easing before a mildly painful test felt less pain, and expected less, than people who didn't. Researchers describe this as a placebo-like effect you can create yourself: the brain begins to offer the relief it has learned to anticipate.

Read more: Peerdeman and colleagues, "Placebo-like analgesia via response imagery," European Journal of Pain (2017). https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5573948/

2. Your Brain Takes Imagery Seriously

Picturing something lights up many of the same areas of the brain as seeing it, and imagined scenes stir real emotion and real changes in the body. A vivid memory can quicken your heart. A vivid image of safety can help it slow down again.

Read more: Pearson and colleagues, "Mental Imagery: Functional Mechanisms and Clinical Applications," Trends in Cognitive Sciences (2015). https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4595480/

3. Guided Imagery and Your Health

A review of randomized controlled trials found guided imagery tested with a wide range of people, from children to elders, in hospitals, clinics and everyday life. Many of those studies reported less stress, anxiety and pain, and a greater sense of well-being.

Read more: "A Scoping Review of Health Outcomes Examined in Randomized Controlled Trials Using Guided Imagery" (2017). https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5812272/

4. Calming the Nervous System

In a randomized trial, people who practiced guided imagery showed lower stress, shifts in brainwave activity and sharper attention. Imagery seems to speak directly to the nervous system, helping it settle out of alarm.

Read more: "Investigating the Impact of Guided Imagery on Stress, Brain Functions, and Attention: A Randomized Trial," Sensors (2023). https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10346678/

5. Easing Anxiety and Low Mood

A recent meta-analysis, which pools the results of many randomized trials, looked at people living with cancer. Guided imagery reduced anxiety and depression and improved quality of life. The link takes you to a free summary of the study.

Read more: “The effectiveness of guided imagery on psychological outcomes and quality of life in cancer patients: a systematic review and meta-analysis” (2025). https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/41094273/

6. The Power of Expectation

Placebo effects grow out of expectation, meaning and the care that surrounds us. Brain imaging shows the body releasing its own natural pain relievers when it expects to feel better, and some people improve even when they know they’ve taken a placebo. Hope, it turns out, has a chemistry.

Read more: Patterson and Schroder, “In studies and in real life, placebos have a powerful healing effect on the body and mind,” Michigan Medicine Health Lab (2022). https://www.michiganmedicine.org/health-lab/studies-and-real-life-placebos-have-powerful-healing-effect-body-and-mind

7. Healing Is Something You Take Part In

Researchers are exploring how people can kindle placebo-like effects on their own, through imagery, focused attention and a sense of choice. Healing becomes something you take part in, rather than something that simply happens to you.

Read more: “Enacting the mind/body connection: the role of self-induced placebo mechanisms,” Humanities and Social Sciences Communications (2024). https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-03492-6

8. The Body Listens

Imagery can influence heart rate, blood pressure and immune response, and it can raise pain tolerance. In studies of people preparing for surgery, imagery was linked with faster recovery and shorter hospital stays.

Read more: David E. Bresler, “Physiological Consequences of Guided Imagery,” Practical Pain Management (2005). https://www.medcentral.com/pain/chronic/physiological-consequences-guided-imagery

9. Bringing Visualization Into Your Life

Visualization works through expectation, repetition and a nervous system that is learning something new. It doesn’t ask you to force a belief. These suggestions can help:

- **Make it sensory.** Bring in what you would hear, smell and taste, and what you’d feel on your skin and in your belly, along with what you see. Some people don’t see pictures at all. A felt sense, a sound or a memory of warmth counts just as fully.

- **Keep it believable.** Choose an image your body can say yes to. If “completely healed” feels like a stretch, begin with “a little more ease today.”
- **Practice little and often.** A few minutes most days teaches your nervous system more than an hour once a month.
- **Let your breath help.** A few long, slow exhales before you begin tell your body it is safe enough to soften.
- **Welcome the parts that doubt.** If a skeptical or worried part of you shows up, thank it for looking out for you, and ask whether it would be willing to simply watch for a few minutes.
- **Visit your future self.** Picture the you who is a season or a year further along, already living with more ease. How do they stand? What do they wear? What would they like you to know?

10. Calling on Support

Imagination has always been a doorway between worlds. Healers in every culture have used it to call in help, and you can too. The living world is a generous teacher of images, so step outside when you can and let it supply them: the warmth of a river stone in your palm, the smell of pine after rain, birdsong before dawn, the vibrancy of young squirrels chasing each other, garden soil under your fingernails. Let one of these become the seed of your practice. You might also picture a wise one walking beside you: an ancestor whose hands knew how to heal, a guide who has visited you in dreams, or the future you who has already found the ease you’re reaching for. Then rest the whole practice in the arms of the Great Mystery, or whatever name holds the sacred for you, and let yourself be helped.

11. When to Reach Out

Visualization supports your care. It isn’t a replacement for medical treatment, so keep working with your doctor on any health concern. If an image stirs up a hard memory or more distress than you expected, open your eyes, feel your feet on the floor and come back to the room. That is a good time to reach out to me or another trusted practitioner, so you don’t have to sort through it alone.

A Final Word

Your imagination has been working on your behalf all along. With a little tending, it can become one of your most faithful allies in healing.

Free Resources

- Every study above is free to read online at the link given with it.
- Related handouts: Sensation Vocabulary, for building sensory-rich images, and Binaural Beats.

Influences and Credits

These summaries are written fresh from the research linked above, and all credit for the studies belongs to their authors.

- The practice of guided imagery owes much to Dr. Martin Rossman and Dr. David Bresler, founders of the Academy for Guided Imagery.
- Welcoming doubtful and worried parts comes from Internal Family Systems, developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz.
- Calling on the support of the living world and the unseen comes from Neoshamanic IFS (NIFS), the approach I practice and teach.