

*“You can’t depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”* —Mark Twain

***Imagine sitting by a roaring waterfall, listening to birds call to one another from a nearby tree top. Take a deep breath and think about the quality of the light. Feel the sun warming your skin, and sense the water droplets on your skin. See the vivid green of the moss and ferns and feel the cool, solid stone beneath your bare feet.***

Guided imagery is the act of imagining yourself in a peaceful setting, incorporating your senses, and changing your mental state. Guided imagery is a powerful tool for increasing relaxation, reducing pain, managing stress, and improving mental resilience. As a practice, guided imagery requires very little to begin, although many spend lifetimes perfecting it. Imagery is a type of meditation.

Neural patterns created by imagining an experience are similar to those created when actually having the experience. This means you can hack your emotions and physiological responses by choosing what to experience for part of your day. With practice, you can transform challenging states into productive and positive ones.

## Be Intentional

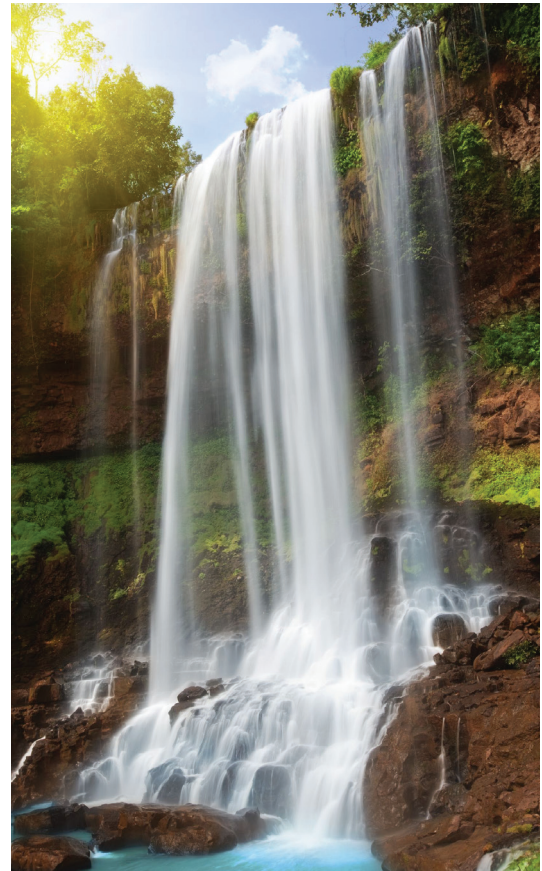
To be successful with guided imagery, it is helpful to decide why you are doing it. Are you looking to lower your blood pressure, improve your immune system, reduce the impact of life events, or manage day-to-day stress? Consider your motivation and decide upon your intentions: what do you hope to achieve and why? What are your personal health goals?

## Be Imaginative

Many guided imagery tools are available, from books to audio to video. You can use any of these to begin your guided imagery, but you don’t need them. The most important component of guided imagery is your imagination. Think of a place that you associate with the feelings of contentment and relaxation and call it up to the forefront of your mind, including vivid sensory details. What does it smell like? What temperature is it? What sounds can you hear? What colors do you see and textures do you feel?

## Be Adventurous

You cannot fail at guided imagery. Even if you cannot visualize in your mind’s eye, imagining an experience using other senses has the same beneficial effects. Rather than judging your imagery



practice, explore its limits. Experiment with focusing on particular senses and developing your repertoire of guided imagery locations or experiences. You can pair your imagery with music if that helps you to set the stage for relaxation. Alternatively, you can pair your imagery with aromas that relax you, like lavender or chamomile.

## **Set & Visualize Goals**

If you choose to set goals for your health, visualization may be useful to help you reach them. Visualization is a subset of guided imagery. For instance, if you want to lose weight, visualizing yourself exercising—seeing yourself in exercise clothes, where you exercise, imagining the feel of the movements and your breathing—has been shown to assist with follow-through. In essence, visualizing yourself performing various activities primes your mind to actually do them.

Consider your health goals and imagine the steps you need to achieve those goals. What visualizations will work for you?

## **Get Started!**

Find a quiet place and take several deep breaths. Close your eyes and think about your intention for meditating, or focus on your health goals. If using music, audio, or video helps you to reach a greater state of self-awareness and relaxation, then integrate that and listen closely. If conducting self-guided imagery or visualization, concentrate on the details of the experience.

Practice regularly and this will become easier and more effective. Allow at least 5 minutes but, if possible, strive to extend the time up to an hour for each imagery session.

