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Patient Handout: The Power & Limits of Visualization

Dear Patient,

Visualization is a supportive therapy that many patients find helpful. While it may not be for everyone, please read this overview of how it works, its potential benefits, and its limits. This way, you can make an informed decision whether to give it a try.

What is visualization?

Visualization refers to a mental technique of creating a picture in your mind. Common images include a landscape or still life; a shape, design, or color; or you striking a pose or doing an activity.

How does visualization work?

Visualization directs your thoughts to alter your reactions (physical and emotional) to what’s happening or going to happen. Or the mental image inspires you. Whether you use it routinely or only in special circumstances, the practice helps you get in a good frame of mind to make wise decisions, take proper action, and get through adversity.

Visualization is based on a well-accepted fact: The mind affects the body. We see evidence of this when salivating at the thought of biting into a juicy lemon. The nervous system likely mediates the connection between the mind and body. Signals from the brain travel via nerves to trigger changes in the blood vessels, muscles, glands that produce hormones, and so on.

What purpose(s) might visualization serve?

It may help with...

- *Calming anxiety.* Focusing on a mental image may ease distress.
- *Motivating you to act.* Picturing yourself acting with confidence and/or succeeding may inspire you to start.
- *Boosting confidence.* Mentally rehearsing getting through an upcoming test or treatment may build confidence in handling it.
- *Decreasing pain.* Distraction and relaxation may bring relief.
- *Strengthening hope.* Envisioning a hoped-for outcome may increase feelings of hope.

How might visualization help you physically?

Tapping into this mind-body connection may help you by...

- *Facilitating compliance.* Cancer therapies work best when taken on schedule. If fears or feelings of vulnerability tempt you to delay, images of cancer treatment as “healing light” or “armies of cancer fighters” may calm those fears and empower you to proceed.
- *Putting you in a frame of mind to benefit from treatments.* Just as athletes visualize to improve performance, you can use it, too. Centering yourself may help you prepare psychologically and physically for the challenges of treatment and recovery.
- *Increasing physical reserves.* Recovery from each cancer treatment depends on the body’s ability to repair. Visualization may help you overcome obstacles to building up your physical reserves. For example, envisioning food as “healing therapy” or “fuel” may help you overcome a poor appetite to take in enough calories.

What other physical benefits might you experience?

Distressing situations trigger automatic physical changes such as elevated stress hormones. Short-term, those changes can make you feel worse. Long-term, chronic stress can cause harmful consequences. Visualization helps when the brain sends signals to the body to counter unwanted physical changes of the “stress response.” For example, a natural response to tumor pain is tensing up, which may worsen pain. Relaxing of muscles near the tumor through visualization may

bring pain relief. Over time, less chronic pain can mean less chronic stress affecting your body in negative ways.

How might visualization help your emotional recovery?

Tapping into the mind-body connection may preserve emotional reserves and build emotional resilience by...

- *Decreasing distress.* Faced with the discomforts and uncertainty of tests or treatments, a “fight or flight” stress response can further increase the misery, which further drains emotional reserves. By dampening symptoms of anxiety or reining in a runaway imagination, visualization decreases distress.
- *Facilitating restorative sleep.* Visualization techniques may be used to help improve sleep—a fundamental factor for physical and emotional health.
- *Improving mood.* Visualization designed to improve your perception of what’s happening—and to feel better about yourself—promotes optimism and hope, which helps your general mood.
- *Fostering compassion.* Visualization designed to foster feelings of kindness toward yourself and others may lead to improvements in self-image, self-confidence, and relationships.
- *Increasing a sense of control.* With a clearer head and more emotional energy, you may see more ways to improve the outcome and feel more confident about moving forward.

What are the dangers of visualization?

Dangers include...

- Using visualization *instead of* effective cancer therapies.
 - Feeling obligated to do it.
 - Blaming yourself if a setback occurs.
- Dangers arise if people believe the mistaken idea that the mind can *control* the body. Normalizing a mildly abnormal pulse is a completely different phenomenon from controlling the spread of cancer cells. People cannot “think” their diseases into remission.
- Another danger is feeling obligated to visualize, even if it’s not helping you—or you don’t like doing it. There’s nothing wrong with you if it doesn’t help you. Let it go.

Yet another danger is unfairly blaming yourself if a setback occurs. Setbacks don’t happen because a patient visualized “wrong” or not often enough.

The mind only affects the body; it does not control the body.

How can you learn to visualize?

Visualization is fairly easy to learn with a little instruction. You don’t need special equipment, and you can practice it almost anywhere. The basic idea is to get settled in a quiet place, take some slow deep breaths, and then quietly focus your mind on a specific image. As with any skill, it may take time and practice to enjoy the full benefit.

There’s no single “right” way to visualize. Different approaches address different issues, such as anxiety, fear, pain, low mood, and insomnia. You may need to try a few approaches before finding a good one for you. Resources include...

- *Cancer support services.* Local and national cancer support organizations often offer classes and/or online resources.
- *Counselors.* Many social workers, psychologists, and other counselors teach it or can refer you to professionals who do.
- *Books, articles, audiotapes, websites.* Whenever using self-help resources, keep in mind that anybody can say, “I’m an expert.” **Please beware false claims of curing disease.**

A supportive therapy that helps in a small way may make a big difference in how you feel. Please consider giving visualization a try. **OT**