

Guided Imagery and Breast Cancer: Major Advances

Relaxation and Guided Imagery (RGI) are gentle yet powerful mind body techniques that create deep states of relaxation and heightened sensory awareness. When practiced, it can improve coping, reduce anxiety and the negative effects of chemo and radiation treatments. It is also known to restore energy, increase self awareness and well-being.

Early pioneers of RGI (Bernie Segal, Shakti Gawain, Marty Roissman, Jeanne Achterberg) promoted its use with cancer patients because RGI creates deep states of physical and mental relaxation quickly and can provide “cellular landscapes” within your own healing process—particular visualizations in which you might picture your white blood cells conquering or pulverizing cancer cells in your body or see a tumor shrink in size or even imagine doing something you love to do as you lead a healthy lifestyle. RGI then was designed to cater to highly visual persons. In fact, it used to be called Visualization Imagery because most people were considered to be primary visual processors. Because RGI was proven in early studies to reduce nausea associated with chemo and increase short term immune function, breast cancer patients and others were encouraged to practice it. However, few large scale studies with randomized control groups were available then to document just how effective RGI is in coping with cancer and actually sustaining higher immune functions.

In the past 13 years, we have come to learn that only 55% of the population are primary visual processors (see visual pictures easily). RGI is now practiced as a full body and sensory experience. In fact, when kinesthetic awareness is facilitated (a felt sense in the body), it can create profound shifts in perception, behavior, energy and coping. Imagery that

engages all the senses along with one's emotions seems to generate the most potent experience. In a deep relaxed physical and mental state, it is possible to tolerate and acknowledge your feelings and thoughts—not suppress them. As you can know and interact with them you can become more mindful of your subjective or internal states. We now know that this promotes a person's sense of wholeness and strengthens self-awareness and empowerment.

RGI practitioners have long known that RGI can reduce the negative side effects of cancer and its treatments (nausea, fatigue, anxiety, depression, stress, pain) and that it could improve coping and quality of life. Since 2008, the American Cancer Society identified it as a promising adjunctive therapy on its website. Many hospitals in New York, Boston and California offer GI downloads to prepare for surgery and chemo.

Since 2008, a number of well documented scientific studies have utilized modern technologies, such as advanced brain scans and blood assays, to determine the efficacy of RGI with cancer. They have concluded that GI, especially combined with Relaxation techniques, can indeed produce significant changes in immune activity on the cellular level! For example, Hodacek et al at the University of PA Medical Center (2008) found that imagery could produce a heightened amount of Natural Killer (NK) cells with early stage breast cancer as well as lower depression. In 2009, a large controlled study of breast cancer patients (80) in the United Kingdom showed high differences in T-cells (cells associated with improved immunity) and NK cells and concluded that GI can increase immune function during and after chemo and radiation treatments (Eremin et al). And, this year, Cohen et al at MD Anderson Medical Center In Houston, completed a large

randomized control study on 159 men with prostate cancer and concluded that patients who practiced RGI had significantly higher levels of NK cells and higher immune function as compared to the control group.

So the good news is that RGI is an equal opportunity lender—almost anyone can use it and learn it. And though it does not cure cancer, it can certainly help improve short term immune function and well-being before, during and after cancer treatments. On-going research will be needed to ascertain how RGI practice affects a person's immunity over the long-haul, but for now, we have an easy to use resource that not only helps you to relax, lower anxiety and depression, but to also improve your immunity.

Dr. Miriam Franco is a psychologist and a certified Guided Imagery practitioner who has taught GI to health professionals and the public and has conducted RGI research on anxiety and injection anxiety with Multiple Sclerosis. She is President of The Guided Imagery Foundation, a non-profit that promotes research on GI in health, education institutions.