Patient Education: Using Relaxation and Guided Imagery for MS: Lowering Anxiety Associated with MS and MS Injections

Author: Miriam Franco, MSW, Psy.D., MSCS Immaculata University, Immaculata, PA

Co-authors: **Donald Barone, DO & Kathy Barone, RN**, MS Center of South Jersey, Voorhees, NJ, USA • **Dorothea Cassidy Pfohl, RN, BS, MSCN**, University of Pennsylvania Comprehensive MS Center, Philadelphia, PA, USA • **Brant J. Oliver, NP, MSCN,** Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, Lebanon, NH, USA • **Jay H. Rosenberg, MD,** The Neurology Center, Encinitas, CA, USA • **Robin Tillett, RN, MSCN,** Louisville Comprehensive MS Center, Louisville, KY, USA • **Katherine Treadaway, LCSW,** University of Texas Southwestern Clinical Center for MS, Dallas, TX, USA

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Study Rationale:

Stress and anxiety, especially surrounding disease modifying drug injections, are major stumbling blocks to adherence. Missed injections due to anxiety are frequent and are a major factor in reducing efficacy. Guided Imagery techniques reduce anxiety that accompany chronic illnesses and painful medical procedures.

Objectives:

- 1) To evaluate the efficacy of Guided Imagery among Relapsing Remitting MS (RRMS) patients who experience anxiety, including injection anxiety;
- 2) To generate feedback from MS professionals, once exposed to these techniques, regarding their perceived relevance of Guided Imagery to reduce anxiety and injection anxiety within their respective MS treatment populations;
- 3) To assess healthcare professionals' interest in utilizing or incorporating these techniques.

Methodology; Patient Workshops:

All site programs included a one and a half hour free patient education workshop for RRMS patients that consisted of:

- 1) An initial assessment of anxiety and diagnostic MS information;
- 2) Relaxation training;
- 3) A MS specific Guided Imagery script, designed by Dr. Franco, aimed at lowering anxiety, injection anxiety and shifting patient perception to view their medicine as a healing ally;
- 4) A scripted Guided Imagery CD given to patients to practice daily for 2 weeks post workshop;
- 5) Patient Workshop Evaluations at four sites;
- 6) Post Workshop Follow Up Questionnaires at six sites.

The Assessment Methodology; Patient Workshops:

- 1) Anonymous Workshop Evaluations which were analyzed for participants' ability to become deeply relaxed, experience reduction of anxiety symptoms and to perceive of Guided Imagery as a helpful intervention;
- 2) Questionnaires were analyzed for perceived value of workshop, level of anxiety pre and post workshop, participant satisfaction with results and patients' indication of the value of Guided Imagery to lower anxiety and injection anxiety.

Methodology; Professional Workshops:

At three sites, workshops for MS professionals were conducted.

- 1) Relaxation techniques were taught;
- 2) MS specific Guided Imagery script was conducted;
- 3) Packets of the patient workshop materials and the Guided Imagery CD were distributed.

The Assessment Methodology; Professional Workshops:

- 1) Evaluation of the professional's ability to become deeply relaxed;
- 2) HCPs evaluation of Guided Imagery's usefulness in lowering anxiety and injection anxiety as an asset to their service/practice to aid patients.
- 3) Their interest in learning more about these techniques and how to make them available to their patients/colleagues.

Results; Patient Workshops:

- 1) 45 RRMS patient workshop evaluations were returned. Carepartner evaluations were not included;
- 2) 98% became deeply relaxed at the workshop;
- 3) 89% found Guided Imagery to be a helpful technique; and
- 4) 83% reported lowered anxiety after the workshop.

Results; Patient Follow Up Questionnaires:

- 1) 35% returned the Questionnaires;
- 2) 97% reported a lowering of anxiety, including lessening of injection anxiety; sleep, confidence and energy were improved and pain, stress and muscle tension reduced.

Patient Feedback (Comments):

- Of the patients who returned questionnaires, many wrote in specific comments regarding the particular effects of Guided Imagery practice. A few representative comments follow:
- "I love this CD. I listen to it every night. It relaxes me & puts me straight to sleep. I even use the deep breathing throughout the day to help me relax in tense situations. I would recommend it to others with or without MS. I'm also more relaxed while giving my injections."
- "I love this CD! It has helped me to think about my meds as something to help rather than hurt me. This has been very helpful for me and I hope that it becomes available to all MS patients. I want to spread the word on the power of guided imagery!"
- "I felt just one session helped me greatly with relaxation. The Imagery was helpful in giving me a more positive view of the medicine, in it helping me..."
- "Thank you for the Relaxation CD. I listen to it once a week before I do my injection. It helps me feel more relaxed and confident."
- "I use this CD at least once a week now... I fall asleep more calmly and relaxed and don't feel my muscles tensing up like usual. It has helped me tremendously and clears my mind."
- "I do not have anxiety regarding my injections... My anxiety is more prevalent when my pain occurs. By doing these relaxation techniques, I feel I am able to handle or deal with the pain!"
- "I have never had the opportunity to imagine exactly how my medicine is working in my body and picturing it myself in a relaxed state."

Results; Professional Workshops:

- 1) 27 MS professionals participated including clinical trial nurses & MS care nurses (15), neurologists (8), MS social worker (1), MS Fellows (3);
- 2) 100% returned the evaluations;
- 3) 96% reported they were able to become deeply relaxed;
- 4) 96% indicated this would be helpful to their MS patients;
- 5) 89% were interested in learning more about Guided Imagery;
- 6) 19% specifically requested training in this technique. 4 clinical trial nurses and one MS social worker believed this technique would help them increase adherence to DMTs;

- 7) Two MS clinical trial nurses indicated that they thought these techniques should be incorporated into the research protocols of trials they will be conducting;
- 8) The MS Social Worker and Clinical Trial Nurse at UT Southwestern sought permission to refer to this intervention at an adherence conference in Australia.

Additional Observations:

- 1) A significant number of care partners were present at these workshops (on average 2 to 10). They claim to have benefited from these techniques to increase their support of their loved ones and to relax more if they administered injections.
- 2) Some MS nurses accompanied their RRMS patients to the patient workshops which had a positive effect for both the nurse practitioner and patient. Informal feedback indicated that when the MS nurse understood how these techniques work, they felt more confident in their abilities to help their patients relax, especially early in the DMT treatment.
- 3) On two occasions, newly diagnosed RRMS patients attended the workshops who had not yet selected a specific DMT but thought it would be helpful to become relaxed before engaging in this treatment process. The advanced rehearsal and preparation was found extremely helpful for them because they could prepare themselves for injection concerns before selecting a particular injection therapy.
- 4) Several patients, who no longer receive injections or whose mobility was decreasing, still perceived increased ability to become relaxed.
- 5) Many MS patients reported their eagerness for this type of technique to increase their sense of control and empowerment.
- 6) Several newly diagnosed MS patients found it easier to adapt to injections even if it was initially hard to perceive their medicine as "healing".
- 7) The fact patients could become relaxed with Guided Imagery encouraged them to practice regularly. Several who practiced reported perceiving their medicine as a healing and helpful aide which would not harm them.

Implications for Future Projects:

- 1) Designating a facilitator to collect surveys, remind patients to practice and to review the patient completed written materials (many patients demonstrated difficulty completing and remembering to return questionnaires) would be helpful.
- 2) Provide additional workshops for MS patient support group leaders to offer these techniques to more MS patients within their groups;
- 3) MS nurses requested that these techniques be incorporated into nursing injection, regimens for home visits, patient group injection protocols, phone contacts or web contacts. The nurses believed that these techniques can be reproduced inexpensively, are highly portable and could be taught to nurses easily.

CONCLUSIONS:

- 1) Guided Imagery was found to be efficient and effective in lowering general anxiety and for injection anxiety in 97% of MS patients, even after several weeks post-workshop.
- 2) MS healthcare professionals believed Guided Imagery to be a needed and effective technique to increase adherence and reduce anxiety with MS and MS injections.
- 3) A second study would solidify these encouraging results.