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**MINDFULNESS PRACTICES: Guided Imagery and Meditation**

Most mindfulness classes don’t emphasize the role of guided imagery, but it can be a great way to jumpstart your practice. Guided imagery shouldn’t be confused with guided meditation, though. A guided meditation simply means that someone is giving you an idea about how to do a given meditation practice—such as following the breath or working with difficult emotions. Guided imagery is different. With guided imagery you listen to someone spinning a story that you visualize in your mind. (By the way, just to confuse things, many sites that offer guided imagery refer to them simply as meditations.)

There are all types of guided imagery. For instance, at the links below you’ll find practices for use prior to medical procedures as well as for relaxation, anxiety, grounding, spirituality and what you might call “biologically correct” imagery, for people with cancer or other diseases who want to apply imagery to their healing.

Mindfulness meditation, on the other hand, is an active practice; requiring the meditator to keep noticing what is happening from a non-judgmental stance. It’s an ongoing process that requires some degree of effort and discipline for most people. Guided imagery is much more of a passive activity. You press play and the words and music carry you away. Because it’s easier to do and takes less focus and discipline, it can be the gateway to other forms of meditating. Like training wheels.

But it is tricky because guided imagery is usually done to provide a specific result, such as relief from anxiety, whereas mindfulness is about being with what is. It is easy to get caught up expecting certain results with guided imagery, and that may not always happen. Then you can start grasping for the desired effect, desperately trying to just feel better, and then start searching for ‘the perfect’ guided imagery. But when it doesn’t work—for instance if you are really overwhelmed--you may just give up on any sort of mind training.

It is better to view guided imagery as a way to realize that your mind can be your friend; that things like calm or wisdom are always within you, even if they are covered up by worry or irritation. When used mindfully, guided imagery can also be a great way to cultivate qualities like compassion, strength, or equanimity. You use the imagery to become more familiar with how those qualities show up for you, which allows you to get better at drawing on them throughout your day.

Plus, just sitting there and doing guided imagery gets your mind and body used to the idea of spending time caring for yourself in a manner similar to meditation. If you find imagery helpful, consider adding at least a few moments of a traditional meditation practice at the end of the imagery to help build your skill and motivation. Over time it is likely you will need the imagery less and less as you begin to become fascinated by understanding your own mind.

Here are two great resources for all kinds of guided imagery for different purposes:

Inner Health Studio

<https://www.innerhealthstudio.com/>

Kaiser Permanente

<https://healthy.kaiserpermanente.org/health-wellness/podcasts>

Another resource is the Meditation Society of Australia. They have great guided imagery—try “The Cliff.” (They are free, but you’ll need to register as a user):

<https://download.meditation.org.au/guidedmeditations.asp>