

# *How Grievers Can Experience Healing and Transformation Through Self Guided Imagery*



Q and A with Leslie Davenport

Leslie Davenport is an expert in working with guided imagery and is a pioneer in the role of guided imagery in psychotherapy and integrative medicine, and is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with Master's Degrees in both the arts and psychology. Recently I asked her a few questions about how guided imagery can be used successfully by grievers...

JH represents Jamieson Haverkamp's questions and LD represents Leslie Davenport's answers to those questions.

**JH: Leslie, can you explain what guided imagery is and how it can help grievers with the grief journey?**

**LD:** Guided imagery is a natural process of focusing our attention inward, below the activity of our day-to-day thinking, to receive impressions arising from more deeply within ourselves. Because imagery is a natural way to heighten awareness of a range of perceptions, there are a variety of imagery approaches that can be very useful in supporting the emotions and stages that are often part of the grieving process.

For example, we sometimes get stuck on fear-based thoughts, such as "I'll never be happy again." Guided imagery can reconnect us with our inner resiliency, and help put things in perspective. Imagery puts us in touch with what psychology calls an "internal locus of control." In other words, as we connect with our own inner strength, we increase our ability to tolerate stress and ambiguity. Guided imagery can also help us to simply relax and have a respite from distress, which restores physical and emotional balance.

There is also an imagery exercise where we can "visit" the person we lost. Depending on the nature of the relationship, it can be a way for working toward forgiveness and understanding, or simply being with the love that still continues.

**JH: Leslie, I understand that medical research has supported the beneficial effects of using guided imagery. Can you tell us more about what the research has shown are the benefits of using guided imagery? Has it been proven to assist grievers?**

**LD:** Guided imagery is a flexible approach whose effectiveness has been indicated through a large body of research over many decades in psychology and medicine, and is considered a research-based approach to helping. Because images are the communication network between our mind, body and emotions, our thoughts and feelings impact of bodies. For example, if we are remembering an upsetting scenario, the images in our mind get reflected in our physiology through a cascade of reactions from adrenalin to muscular tension. With guided imagery, we become more aware of our mental images, releasing the ones that promote stress and cultivating those that support wellbeing

Because of this mind-body link, the benefits of imagery range from pain reduction, increased self esteem, improving sleep, to better surgical outcomes, to name just a few. There are more than seventy-five studies just related to the benefits of imagery during cancer treatment. Imagery is also used in optimal sports performance and in psychology, with good research in the area of anxiety and phobias in particular.

There are many scholarly articles and books written for medical and mental health professionals that teach the benefits of guided imagery for the grieving process. A couple of notable ones are *Treatment of Complicated Mourning* by T. Rando, and *Traumatology of Grieving* by C. Figley. While these books substantiate why imagery is effective, when someone is in grief, the best approach is simply to relax, go inside, and explore the personal images that can best support their unique grieving process.

**JH: Leslie, how often should griever work with guided imagery? Everyday? And if they are listening to a guided imagery CD, when is the best time to listen to it, in the morning, midday or in the evening?**

**LD:** Twice a day is optimal, and many people report that to “bookend” their day with imagery in the morning and evening can be very grounding and centering. It can help cultivate a more peaceful foundation for daily life. That being said, don’t let it discourage you from trying imagery whenever it fits into your current schedule. Anytime we tap into wellbeing within, it is beneficial. Many people find it a little easier in the morning, before their minds are geared up to tackle the responsibilities of a day.

**JH: What are the various ways to work with guided imagery? I have heard of guided imagery CDs but are there other ways?**

**LD:** Yes! I’m a strong advocate of what is called “receptive” imagery – imagery that arises uniquely from within each person. By contrast, directed imagery follows a script, such as an imaginary walk on a beach, which is what you get with a CD. While it can be useful, it is like going to a clothing store to buy an outfit. You pick something from the rack that looks great, but when you try it on it doesn’t always fit. So directed images in a script may have meaning for you, or they may go against your natural sense of things. The receptive imagery that calls forth images from within you is like going to a tailor who has your exact measurements and knows your style. It is always a perfect fit because the source of guidance is you!

Making receptive imagery available for everyone is what prompted me to write my book, *Healing and Transformation Through Self Guided Imagery*. It provides simple instructions you can use by yourself or with a partner to receive wisdom from within for your particular issue. It also includes twelve stories of people who openly share their personal stories of overcoming crisis with imagery, as well as tips for addressing temporary obstacles that can commonly arise during the process. I’ve also made the basic worksheet from the book, “Journey to the Wisdom of Your

Heart” as a downloadable word document and mp3 available at no cost on my website:  
[www.LeslieDavenport.com](http://www.LeslieDavenport.com).

**JH: Leslie, can you tell us any stories about any particular griever or other clients who have experienced great success using guided imagery?**

**LD:**I am thinking of a lovely woman I worked with that I will call “Betty” as I share the essence of her story. Betty tried guided imagery for the first time when she was struggling with intense grief over the sudden death of her husband “Jim.” They had been married for forty-one years, and the loss sent her into a tailspin, where she lost her appetite, spent much of her day in tears, and had difficulty sleeping. She began to experience chest pain that her doctor attributed to high levels of anxiety.

When Betty entered the guided imagery, she asked for an image of her grief to appear. It was her heart charred like the smoldering ash that trails a wildfire. She continued and asked for guidance, and the response was deeply moving.

The image was Jim’s hands pouring clear, cool water from a pitcher into her heart. As he filled her heart with soothing relief, he spoke the words, “We can be connected in peace, my beloved. I want this for you.”

This imagery experience had a strong impact on Betty. To keep the image with her, she created a ritual where every morning she fills a crystal bowl with water. The bowl is a gift that Jim had given to her on one of their wedding anniversaries. Sometimes she will float a blossom in it. And other times it will just be the water centered on her living room coffee table. As she fills and centers the bowl each day, she takes a few moments to talk to Jim. Although she still has strong periods of sadness, her chest pain and other symptoms began to improve after this imagery journey.

**JH: How is guided imagery different than meditation?**

**LD:**Meditation and guided imagery are definitely cousins. They both use a form of focused awareness that bring attention away from your thinking mind. Most forms of meditation direct practitioners not to engage with any impressions or images that may appear with instructions to just let them pass. Guided imagery intentionally focuses on images that arise from within the relaxed state, and enters imagery as a doorway into our deeper wisdom.

**JH: How did you get interested in guided imagery?**

**LD:**I like to joke that my first imagery teaching began when I was six years old. I’ve always had cats, and I credit them as being my first teachers of visualization. As a child, I was fascinated with the way my cat would stare intently on a spot on a ledge in absolute stillness. The focus was so intense I could trace a straight line through the air. A moment later, she would effortlessly spring onto the ledge. She taught me something about the power of seeing where you want to go. Imagery also played a large part in my first career in dance. For more than a decade, I embodied living images as a professional modern dancer. Tapping into the creative well within as a choreographer opened the way for a growing understanding of the body-mind-spirit connections which took a healing focus later in life.

**JH: Leslie, what should people look for on products related to guided imagery to know that the product will be safe to use and the person has had the appropriate professional training**

**to work with guided imagery? Are there any types of guided imagery products that are unsafe to use?**

**LD:**There is not currently any state or national credentialing for guided imagery practitioners or products, although there are some highly respected training programs. The Institute for Health & Healing at California Pacific Medical Center issues a Certificate in Integrative Medicine with a specialization in Guided Imagery and Expressive Arts upon completion of a year long, 750 hospital-based clinical education training program. The Academy for Guided Imagery also certifies practitioners upon completion of a comprehensive program. When working with deeper issues, it can be helpful to see if the person has additional training in psychology for a more substantial foundation with the subtle and complex aspects healing. For imagery products that are designed for relaxation and stress reduction, it is often more about style than safety. You may prefer a female voice over a male guide, or vice versa. Or the pace of one CD may work better for you than another. Try several out, and see what feels right.

Take the example of imagining a relaxing place. What could be better than having someone guide you through a walk on a beautiful beach? The sun is shining, the warm sand is soft under your feet, the fresh breeze caresses your skin, you hear the sounds of the waves...

But stop!

Suddenly your heart – not the sound of the waves – is pounding!

If you happened to be someone who nearly drowned at the beach when you were five, the sound of the waves is not soothing. In fact, it triggers a terrifying memory. Your fears are stimulated, and the script is having the opposite effect than intended.

Be your own best advocate. Because grieving is unique to each person, you have within you the resources and instincts on how to best navigate the healing journey.

**JH: What hospitals or medical settings are actively using guided imagery in their practices with great success that you know about?**

**LD:**While a few medical centers make imagery CD's available to patients, California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco and Marin General, it's sister hospital across the Golden Gate bridge, are the only ones I'm aware of that train imagery practitioners and provide the receptive-style of imagery directly at the bedside. I'm thrilled to say that while I began the imagery program on a grass roots level within Marin General in 1989, The Institute for Health & Healing is now the largest provider of hospital-based integrative medicine in the United States. Today, the Institute's programs serve more than 60,000 patients a year. Imagery is provided at no cost to patients and is available throughout all the units including oncology, transplant, pre and post surgery, cardiology, maternity, hospice and pediatrics.

**JH: Is there anything else about guided imagery that you feel is essential to pass on to grieverers?**

**LD:**I can't emphasize enough how imagery is a natural process, and for that reason, it is very possible for someone to tap into meaningful images on their own. That being said, there are quite a few misconceptions about imagery that can initially get in the way. One example I often hear is, "I've tried before to picture a pretty place, but I just can't." While about 55% of the population does have a visual orientation when it comes to internal sense perceptions, there are also

kinesthetic impressions, auditory responses, olfactory memories, all of which are valid portals for the full expressing on internal guidance. We often just sense something and it is accompanied by a feeling that rings true. All these internal impressions are the language of imagery.

**LD:Try this simple 30 second exercise:** Take a moment right now to answer the question, “How many doors, including closet doors, do you have in your home?” (pause) Unless you recently remodeled, you didn’t have a number pop into your head. You retrieved the information you were after by taking a quick imaginary tour of your home and looking around the rooms. The ability to enter imagery is easily available to everyone. The images of your home may not have been in Technicolor, but it was clear enough imagery to retrieve the information you were after. That’s all it takes! The goal is not to picture something: The goal is to tap into the amazing source of wisdom and healing within. And if we do take the time to relax and move into quieter realms within, we can also tour quite subtle and soulful aspects of our inner landscapes.

Thank you Leslie!

### **BIOS**

#### **Jamieson Haverkamp**

Jamieson Haverkamp is the author of the multi-award winning resource guide *Mom Minus Dad: The Essential Resource Guide for Busy Adults with a Newly Widowed Parent* (Blooming Women Press, L.L.C., \$14.95, May 2008). *Mom Minus Dad* provides more than 500 useful resources and practical advice to assist other adult sons and daughters brainstorm ideas and find assistance in ten common caregiving areas after the loss of a parent. You can learn more about Jamieson and her book *Mom Minus Dad* at [www.momminusdad.com](http://www.momminusdad.com)

#### **Leslie Davenport**

Leslie is a pioneer in the role of guided imagery in psychotherapy and integrative medicine, and is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with Master's Degrees in both the arts and psychology. Leslie is also an ordained minister in an interfaith Sufi tradition. Her unique background and creative work has been influential in a health-care revolution that recognizes the role of meaning and the spiritual dimensions of life as an integral part of health and healing.

In the late 1980's Leslie was a founder of the Humanities Program at Marin General Hospital, which evolved into the Institute for Health and Healing in collaboration with California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. Her years of clinical experience culminated in the publication of *Healing and Transformation through Self-Guided Imagery*, through Celestial Arts/Ten Speed Press. She has also served as Editorial Consultant to Aspen Publishers for their book, *Holistic Health Promotion and Complementary Therapies: A Resource for Integrative Practice*.

Leslie has more than ten years teaching experience at universities including Mills College, University of San Francisco, California State University Hayward, Holy Names

University, and she served as core faculty with the Transpersonal Psychology Graduate Program at John F. Kennedy University.

An engaging speaker, she lectures in a broad range of setting that has included KRON Television, the National Wellness Conference, Uncovering the Heart of Higher Education Conference hosted by the California Institute of Integral Studies and the Fetzer Institute, to name just a few. She was honored in her home county with the Marin Breast Cancer Council's "Honor Thy Healer" award in 2003.

Leslie is currently in practice in Kentfield, California, and in the Health & Healing Clinic at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. She is also clinical faculty with the Institute for Health & Healing's Integrative Medicine Certificate Program.

You can learn more about Leslie on her web site [www.LeslieDavenport.com](http://www.LeslieDavenport.com)