



# Feel My Pain: Truth about My Struggle with Pain Management

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It is chaotic around me, but I can only hear what I choose to hear. I hear a soothing voice, smoothly floating atop waves of music and soothing noise, taking me away to a place where I feel the relief of knowing I am not alone, and I am powerful if I perceive myself to be. Although my relaxation time is short, I find solace in the woman's voice, feeling that she cares for the idea of me, and wants me to be kind to myself. Although it is impossible to stop the world around me, I can press the pause button in my own mind, and separate my conscious self from the daily struggles of stress and pain.

*The technique I describe is guided imagery, introduced to me by a wonderful friend of Imadulation. a concept spear-headed by psycho-therapist Ellen Simon. Ellen's private practice, The Stress & Happiness Center, is located in Dallas, TX. Guided imagery refers to a wide variety of techniques, including simple visualization and direct suggestion using imagery, metaphor and story-telling, fantasy exploration and game playing, dream interpretation, drawing, and active imagination where elements of the unconscious are invited to appear as images that can communicate with the conscious mind. Imadulation is a term coined by Ellen, defined by her as "Intentional use of the imagination."*

In a world inundated with more information than any one person could ever consume, it is sometimes difficult to make wise choices as a consumer. With endless excess and misinformation sprinkled amongst accurate information, it is easy to feel as if you are drowning in an ocean of uncertainty, treading water over the choices that are available. One of the many things that unite us as human beings is pain. We all experience a period in our lives where pain is a reality, and we lose the strength to tread over the endless options for pain management. Pain does not discriminate, however it does affect some people differently than others. Whether pain is an attack on the physical body, the spirit or the mind, there is no universal life jacket to save some from losing their battle, and ultimately slip into the dark, deep, waters below. This may sound like bad news, but the great news is this; you can always start swimming back toward the light at the surface. Pain is not a death sentence. It's a test of fortitude, and an opportunity to make mistakes before finding the life jacket that will help you stay afloat in your time of need.

*Once considered an "alternative" "or complementary" approach, guided imagery is now finding widespread scientific and public acceptance, and it is being used to teach psychophysiological relaxation, alleviate anxiety and depression, relieve physical and psychological symptoms, overcome health-endangering habits, resolve conflicts, and help patients prepare for surgery and tolerate procedures more comfortably. Mental images, formed long before we learn to understand and use words, lie at the core of who we think we are, what we believe the world is like, what we feel we deserve, what we think will happen to us, and how motivated we are to take care of ourselves. These images strongly influence our beliefs and attitudes about how we fall ill, and what will help us to get better. All healing rituals involve manipulation of these images, either overtly or covertly, and thus guided imagery can be considered one of the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of medicine. The healing rituals of various cultures that have persisted over time all have a certain level of clinical efficacy, and while we may attribute these therapeutic benefits to 'placebo effects', they have real and measurable effects with important implications for our understanding of the healing process.*

We all know someone who has been affected by the hold of narcotic pain management choices. I am not here to tell you they don't work, that they are unnecessary, or even bad for you. As a young woman who suffers from a degenerative form of arthritis in my spine, I will readily admit that I have used and abused pain medication. However severe or seemingly harmless that abuse may have been on my part, I am here to tell my story, though the story is different for each of us. I was able to abuse pain medication for a period of time, and walk away from it generally unscathed. I may not have as much of a propensity to be susceptible to addiction as my sister or my best friend. Everyone knows someone in their lives that they care about who has been affected by pain's tight grip, maybe without even being aware of their suffering; we all drown differently. My decent was short and sweet, whilst others went down kicking and screaming.

What if there was something I'm missing? Something that is relatively low cost or free, and available to any person regardless of affliction? I started wondering this when I suffered a catastrophic accident, July 17th, 2008. I was standing static on the ground and was struck at 35 mph from behind in the side of my head by a sky diver who had lost control of his parachute. That moment changed my life forever. I found myself quickly in the emergency room with a broken jaw in two different places, a bruised sternum, and a couple bruised ribs. To add insult to injury, my six-year career as a professional military musician seemed hopeless at

I was hurting physically and mentally, readily accepting the escape of popping pain medication prescribed to me by my primary care physician. Along with the pain medication for my physical injuries, I was drinking alcohol heavily and eating very little. I had slipped below the surface, and was succumbing to the weight of the water on my body, silently and stealthily sinking towards a place that was too deep, and the whole time I had a smile on my face. Unfortunately none of my friends were able to see through my facade, and not because they weren't paying attention, I was just that good at hiding it. For many of my friends, reading this will be the first time hearing any of my struggle.

I lost the ability to fulfill my passion for playing brass instruments, and was severely depressed at the loss of six months of excruciating training for a 10-miler running team, for which I was considered hopeful to earn a spot. Even after the first two months passed and I was generally able to start doing light physical activity, I was hardly able to do so because of the atrophy I had from not eating and substituting my nutrient intake with hard liquor and pain medication. I wish I could have discovered guided imagery at that time in my life. Unfortunately for myself and many others, this may not happen, and the decent into those deceptively soothing waters continues until they are so deep that no life jacket could ever reach.

*A new study published in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine examined the prevalence of chronic pain and opioid use among U.S. soldiers following deployment. The researchers found that of the more than 2,500 participants surveyed, 44 percent had chronic pain and 15 percent regularly used opioids—rates much higher than the general population.*

Today I am committed to becoming aware of those around me that are hurting, and giving everything I have in my emotional cache to helping them realize that they are not alone, and there are other ways. Close your minds eye; think back to a moment where you were going through a time in your life and suffering from physical or emotional pain, and felt that no relief was possible. Hold on to that feeling. What if I told you that your mind and body could be fooled into experiencing that pain at a lesser degree? There is a wide array of alternative medicine and therapeutic options readily available, and a lot of times the people that could benefit from these techniques simply cannot afford them (or their insurance doesn't cover it). Often, the people that want to explore these alternatives to medication or self-medication are not able to do so because of the tower of medical bills on their desk at home, or their insurance does not cover it and they do not have the means to pay for it independently. My father still remodels houses and performs difficult physical tasks, despite the fact that his arches of his feet fell when he was about 20 years old, and he is in constant blinding pain. He sacrificed everything for my sisters and I, making sure we had the meager essentials to survive and go to school. Even once we became self sufficient, he had stopped looking for relief outside of consuming and abusing pain medication. This does not make him a bad person; rather, he is one of millions of Americans who relies on pain medication to function because they are of the baby boomer generation, and tucking away a nest egg for retirement was simply not possible for many blue collar workers. He is one of many, I am one of many, and you are one of many. You are not alone.

I recently began using guided imagery to help myself, and my father, overcome the pain that we experience on a constant, daily basis. My sister uses it to fight her ever-present urge to use illicit drugs, to which she has been a slave her entire adult life. It is a simple, small mp4 player that contains 60 minutes of voice over soothing noises, and I can listen to it anywhere at anytime. I'm not here to tell you it's the cure or that it would even be effective for you. What I am here to tell you is that we have both overcome seemingly impossible drug addictions due to our constant, intense pain levels, and our inability to effectively manage the pain. We are human. We feel intensely, fight fiercely, and sometimes fail. The beauty of it is that we choose the ways that we manage pain, and we can change at anytime we want. This tool is not a cure, but it is a way to maintain an acceptable level of pain and help people of all ages and afflictions resist the temptation to use or abuse pain medication.

Throughout history, many cultures have used imagery for therapeutic purposes, including the Navajo, ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Chinese. Religions such as Hinduism and Judaism have also practiced imagery. Therapeutic guided imagery may be used to help those in pain relax and focus on images associated with personal issues they are confronting. Experienced guided imagery practitioners may use an interactive, objective guiding style to encourage patients to find solutions to problems by exploring their existing inner resources. It is theorized that the process of visualizing images can evoke sensory memory, strong emotions, or fantasy that in turn may affect the mind and body in beneficial ways. Imagery techniques have been proposed to cause a number



of changes in body functions, including alterations in breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, metabolism, and the gastrointestinal system, immune system, and endocrine system. Practitioners often aim to use a variety of senses, including touch, smell, sight, and sound, to achieve a tranquil state by decreasing negative physical symptoms. I recently introduced Ellen's Sleep Well system to my 10-year old daughter, who struggles with anxiety uncommon for her age. She has shown fantastic results, and the late sleepless nights are behind her for now. She is more efficient in school and her overall demeanor is vastly improved.

Our bodies, evidenced by SPEC scans, don't distinguish between sensory images in the mind and what we consider to be our waking every day reality. The effectiveness of guided imagery has been

increasingly substantiated by research findings that demonstrate its positive impact on health, creativity and performance.

**Studies show that in many instances even 10 minutes of imagery daily can:**

- improve mood
- reduce depression
- reduce anxiety & fear
- accelerate weight loss
- lessen headaches and pain.
- reduce blood loss during surgery
- reduce morphine use after surgery
- reduce glucose levels in the blood
- heighten short-term immune cell activity
- lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol
- lessen the aversive effects of chemotherapy, especially nausea, depression and fatigue

**Be kind to yourself.**

## **FUN FACTS:**

-Chronic pain consumes approximately \$70 billion per year and affects some 80 million Americans.

-A study by Laurion and Fetzer investigated the effects of guided imagery and music on female patients undergoing laparoscopic gynecologic surgery. The guided imagery groups' median narcotic requirement was 36% less than that of the control group. Differences in patients' pain and anxiety were also markedly lower in the guided imagery group on all postoperative days.

-Patients who undergo surgery usually experience fear and apprehension about their surgical procedures. Guided imagery is a simple, low-cost therapeutic tool that can help counteract surgical patients' fear and anxiety. The authors randomly assigned 130 patients undergoing elective colorectal surgical procedures into two groups. Members of one group received routine preoperative care. Members of the other group listened to guided imagery tapes for three days before their surgical procedures, during anesthesia induction, intraoperatively, in the post-anesthesia care unit, and for six days after surgery. The authors measured patients' anxiety levels, pain perceptions, and narcotic medication requirements. The patients in the guided imagery group experienced considerably less preoperative and postoperative anxiety and pain, and they required almost 50% less narcotic medications after their surgical procedures than patients in the control group.

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