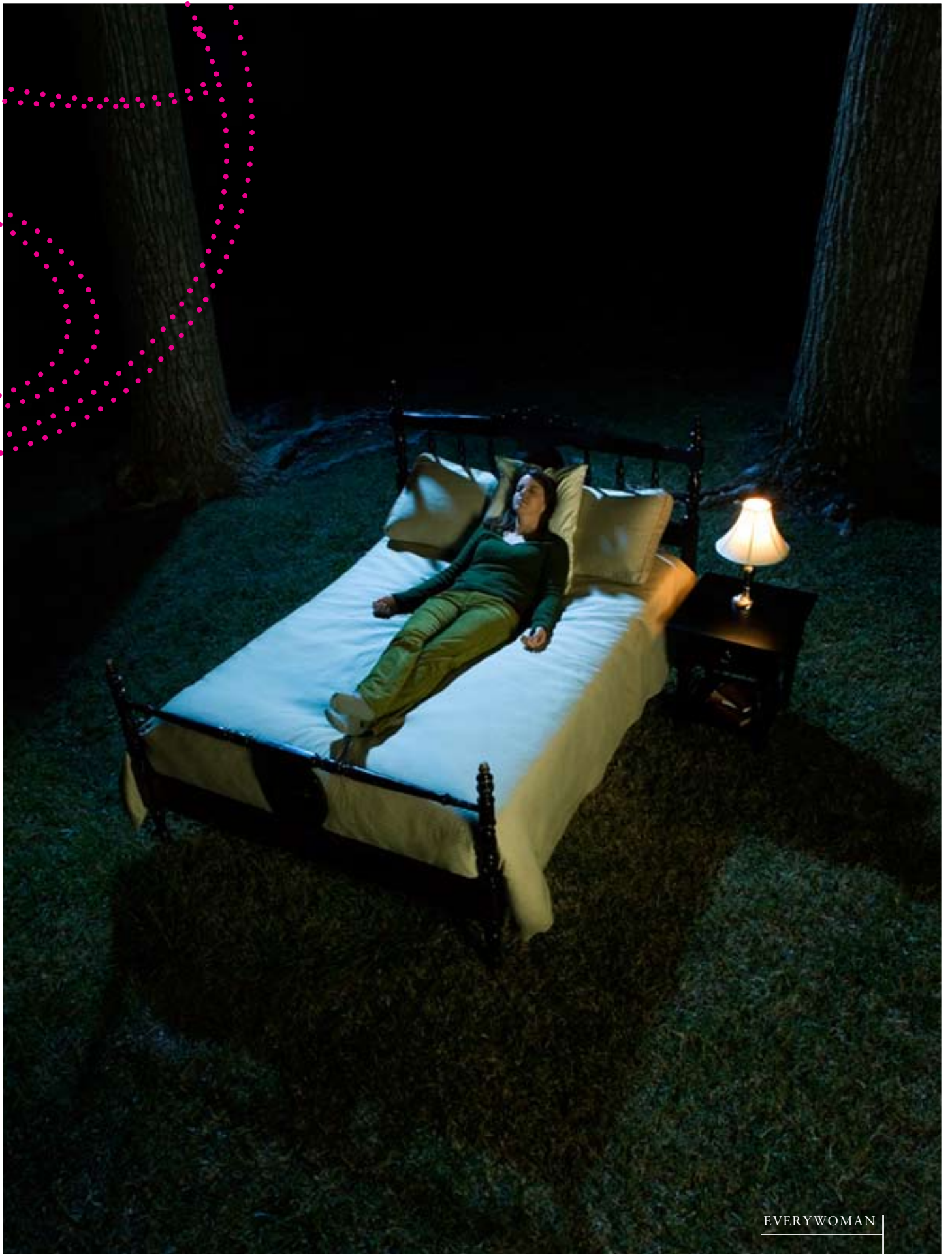
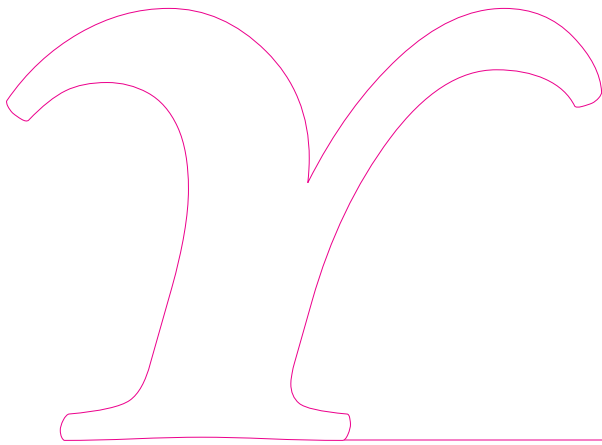


# THE PICTURE OF HEALTH

*Facing a major health crisis, I decided to try guided imagery. It turned out to be an indispensable part of healing my body and restoring balance to my life.*

BY AMY PATUREL, MPH  
PHOTO BY FREDERIK BRODEN





Years ago I carried around a three-pound tumor on my adrenal gland that wreaked havoc on my endocrine system, the internal hormonal world that dictates whether you're happy, sad, skinny, fat, fertile, or barren. Even after the tumor was gone, I suffered from erratic hormone levels and their accompanying side effects on my psyche. Any blip and my brain went on overdrive: "Is it coming back?" "Will I be able to have children?" "How will I get through all of those &%\*# diagnostic tests again?" And if the negative self-talk wasn't enough, having your body pump out too much testosterone and DHEA had its own set of side effects, from acne and unwanted hair growth to premature shedding. So when my latest lab tests revealed hormone levels that were outside the normal range, I decided to take control. Why not use the same approach that helped me through the surgery? After all, I'm convinced that I willed my tumor to be dislodged due to my frequent proclamations that "it's going to pop right out." Never mind that my docs were convinced the mysterious mass was invading my kidneys and liver. In the end, I was right. They were wrong.

"Mental imagery is a language the mind uses to communicate what's happening inside our bodies," explains Tracy Gaudet, MD, director of the Duke Center for Integrative Medicine and author of *Consciously Female: How to Listen to Your Body and Your Soul for a Lifetime of Healthier Living*. "It allows us to tap into wisdom that we carry with us every day." The dialogue that ensues can be as helpful as the most sophisticated diagnostic tests.

But most of us aren't able to access these images without help. When imagery is "guided," trained therapists use deep relaxation and hypnosis to help participants reach *alpha*—an altered state of awareness between awake and asleep that allows the unconscious mind to communicate more freely.

One of Gaudet's goals is to make guided imagery a routine part of care in which health-care providers use "data" from imagery sessions to develop treatment plans. Of course, patients also receive some immediate benefits. Studies show that guided imagery reduces anxiety and depression, lowers blood pressure, speeds healing, and bolsters immune function. One recent study published in the *Journal of Complementary and Alternative Medicine* found that among 323 medical patients who received

interactive guided imagery sessions on a weekly basis, those who were most able to focus on the process and follow the guide's instructions reported gaining not only greater insights into their health problems, but a whole host of other benefits as well, such as stress reduction and improved mood. Eager to learn more, I made an appointment with certified guided imagery therapist and hypnotherapist Donna Fremon-Powell, CGIT, CHT.

**My experience with** traditional guided imagery was nil, barring a yoga instructor's 15-minute dialogue about a waterfall dissolving tension during the closing meditation. Donna's soothing voice lulled me into that dreamy state between awake and asleep. The whirring sounds of a washing machine's spin cycle played from a CD in the background to help clear the clutter in my head. And although my Type A-brain quieted down while she asked me to imagine different scenarios, part of me couldn't help thinking how bizarre the images were. First, she asked me to imagine a sword. "Pick it up," she said. "Take notice of everything about the sword. How does it feel in your hands? Is it heavy or light? What does it look like? How do you feel carrying the sword?" I felt cool! I swirled it around, bearing a close resemblance to Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. But when Donna asked me to put the sword in my belt, I tucked it away on my right side and immediately felt weighed down. The sword actually "talked" to me. I asked it questions, and it responded by telling me I was safe.

Then Donna guided me through the entire episode again, this time with a vase. By now, my inner skeptic had relinquished control and the dialogue was more-or-less effortless. I imagined the vase as drab and boring, without life or color. At one point, my sword and I wanted to crash the vase against a wall.

Before guiding me out of the exercise, she asked me to remember the discussions I had with the sword and vase. My brain had conceived of these things as vividly as if I was watching a movie, and the conversations were eye-opening.

It doesn't take a Freudian analyst to recognize the sword as my masculine side and the vase as my feminine side. The sword was working overtime, valiantly churning out male hormones, while the dull vase had been repressed for years, bringing my menstrual cycle to a gradual halt. It's probably no coincidence that I felt weighed down when I attached the sword to the right side of my belt—my right adrenal gland was the one carrying my tumor. But I never made the connection between my predisposition toward operating

I FELT COOL! I SWIRLED THE SWORD AROUND LIKE LUKE SKYWALKER DID IN *STAR WARS*.

## MY MENSTRUAL CYCLE IS BACK TO NORMAL AND MY HORMONE LEVELS ARE ON EVEN KEEL.

like the Energizer bunny and my overcharged, testosterone-pumping adrenal gland until these images brought the information to my conscious mind.

**I gained an** even greater understanding about why my body may have developed an adrenal tumor when I told Donna about my childhood sexual abuse. Pumping out male hormones at a rate that rivaled Arnold Schwarzenegger's helped me feel safe and strong. Now that I knew *why* I needed those hormones in the past, I could let them go—with Donna's help—and make a conscious choice to restore balance within myself.

With that goal in mind, Donna gave me “feminine” homework. I was assigned to buy myself flowers, engage in situations that made me feel vulnerable, and wear sexy red sandals to help me stay grounded by drawing my attention to my feet. She prescribed 15-minute walks, twice a week, where I focused on my breath. Perhaps most importantly, she sent me home with a personalized 30-minute CD loaded with imagery sessions and positive affirmations.

Because of my background in health science, I was skeptical that these messages could transform my life. But I could fall asleep while I listened to the script (Donna claimed that this wouldn't lessen the effects since our unconscious mind is still at work when the rest of you is conked out) and the words were soothing.

“I am safe to relax and willing to graciously receive. I now manifest abundance, healing, and balance in every aspect of my life. My adrenal gland now creates the precise amount of hormones for my body's healthy balance. My skin is flawless. My mood is pleasant. My periods are normal and regular. I feel wonderful. And for this I am grateful.”

And my favorite: “I find myself smiling from ear to ear for no apparent reason.”

Such imagery has profound physiological effects—the body responds as it would to a “real” external experience. Imagine slowly sucking on a very tart, juicy lemon. You start to salivate, right? That's your mind and body at work together. But this relationship doesn't always produce favorable results. If you've ever been on vacation, lying on a beach in paradise but stressing about your finances, you know what I mean. Even in the most peaceful environment, your mind can cause your body to produce stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. The result? You feel anxious and on edge. “The trick is to do the inverse of that,” says Gaudet. “You may not be able to change your stressors, but you can use the mind to transport the body to a different

place when you're in stressful circumstances. Think of it as taking a mini-mental vacation.” The key is to be open to the images that present themselves and then take their advice—something I couldn't have done on my own. I needed Donna to help move me into an altered state of unconsciousness, access and interact with the images, and encourage me to trudge on even when an image didn't immediately come to mind. Left to my own devices, I likely would have judged the images that arose and given up.

“It's hard to explain guided imagery without sounding like you're off your rocker,” says Gaudet. “You're instructing patients to have conversations with pictures in their heads! But a tremendous amount of insight can be gained by building this relationship with your unconscious mind. When women get that, it changes their lives.” My transformation didn't happen overnight. But after a few months, I shifted my focus, learned to relax, and began nurturing my feminine side. Today, my menstrual cycle is back to normal. My skin has cleared up. And that little blip in my hormone levels, well, it's finally on an even keel.

I'm not suggesting that obliterating a disease like cancer is as simple as imagining healthy blood cells eating away cancer cells. But the more information we can gather about our health using every tool in our arsenals, the better equipped we are to win the war. And if nothing else, practicing guided imagery may make you smile from the inside out—especially if it's in your CD script.

### Getting a Guide

HERE'S A LIST OF QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR GUIDE BEFORE DIVING INTO YOUR UNCONSCIOUS:

**What type of training or certifications do you have?** Both the Academy of Guided Imagery and the group Beyond Ordinary Nursing provide extensive training. Every state has a program that certifies imagery therapists. Ask for proof.

**Have you worked with people with similar issues to mine?**

If you want to improve your golf game, make sure you're working with someone who is comfortable with sports imagery.

**How long have you been doing guided imagery?** Two years indicates a good amount of experience, provided they received professional training in the area, claims Roxanne Whitelight, DMin, CGHT, a guided imagery trainer.

**How much do you charge?** Prices range anywhere from \$50 to \$150 per session, depending on how many licenses and certifications the therapist has. Some may be partially covered by health insurance.

**Do a gut check.** Guided imagery is about trusting yourself and checking in with your soul before taking action. “Use that skill from the start,” says Whitelight. If you feel the therapist is competent, and you're drawn to them, that's data. And if not, no matter what their credentials are, you shouldn't work with them.