

[Scott Redding:](#) Welcome to the three P's of cancer podcast where we'll discuss prevention, preparedness and progress in cancer treatments and research brought to you by the University of Michigan Rogel Cancer Center. I'm Scott Redding Redding.

[Scott Redding:](#) We're here with social worker, Claire Casselman Castleman of the Rogel Cancer Center's complimentary therapies program. Claire Casselman teaches and creates guided imagery for patients and caregivers at the Rogel Cancer Center. She also serves as a resource for other cancer organizations in the community. She has been a clinical social worker at the University of Michigan for the past 17 years. Welcome, Claire Casselman.

[Claire Casselman:](#) Thanks, Scott Redding.

[Scott Redding:](#) Since our talk today is about guided imagery, I wanted to kind of cover first. What's the difference if there is a difference between guided imagery and meditation?

[Claire Casselman:](#) Yeah, sure. The easy answer is that guided imagery as a form of meditation. Sometimes we even hear the term guided meditation, very similar. There are lots of different types of meditation. Probably the one we hear about the most these days is mindfulness meditation, and guided imagery and mindfulness meditation share some of the same sort of results or outcomes and benefits. For instance, they both result in this enhanced relaxation or a desired shift in focus or a greater awareness that results in just being more at home within yourself and more in control and comfortable with the places that you're not in control, which is of course really very important. For example, if somebody has pain or symptoms of depression, either mindfulness, meditation or guided imagery is going to be very helpful and provide some relief.

[Claire Casselman:](#) But the practice of mindful meditation and guided imagery are very different. Mindfulness meditation is more active. It requires paying close attention to one's thoughts or physical sensations in an ongoing continuous sort of way. It requires pretty constant monitoring that way, and you have to spend a little bit of time in practice, to get the benefits, but the benefits can be really very significant. It's a very powerful and potent practice, very rewarding, and I do teach it here in the cancer center. But what we've found is by far and away the more passive nature of guided imagery is where most of our patients find that reverie, find that relief from the practice itself, because it doesn't really require being very active. You put on your headphones or you turn on your device, and

there it is with this invitation to come join. Just the listening aspect and letting the imagination fill in where the guider is taking someone, that in and of itself is really very beneficial.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

The guide gives enough a direction to the listener so that the imagination can make it happen for that person. Each guided imagery has an intention. It's crafted for a specific sort of purpose. Perhaps just relaxation or assistance with getting to sleep, which we know is huge or symptom relief. It can really help with pain management, nausea, fatigue, those sorts of things, and the other thing is that most people find benefit right out of the gates. You don't have to become proficient necessarily with this, but it's very easily done. It's a very natural process. We all use our imagination all the time, but this is a way to focus the imagination. It's a big plus, the fact that you can quickly realize the benefits because are the people that we see here don't have a lot of energy sometimes, and oftentimes don't have a lot of focused attention. The good news is that neither of those, neither of much of those is required to have a really good experience.

[Scott Redding:](#)

Now you talked about the focus aspect and that some people are a little bit more weaker so to speak, so it helps them. How does that help with maybe someone that has fears or anxieties that relates to their treatment?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Right. That's a really great, great question, and it's such a common experience for everyone. Hearing those words, "You have cancer," is such a traumatic experience and the normal natural human response to that is anxiety. Sometimes it's levels of anxiety and a lot of people have never known before, and they can feel as though they've lost some sense of control. But guided imagery is a way to set aside and turn the volume down on the parts of the brain that really responded and anxious fashion, and turn the volume up on the other parts of the brain that are, are more holistic, more receptive, calmer. It's kind of a toggle switch. We learn to use the breath through and through guided imagery to help us support, which changes our experience, usually rapidly and dramatically. When we learn and re-experience that we can control something and it's our breath, that's a victory, and that levels of anxiety don't have to be our foe or enhance our fear. Guided imagery isn't going to stop anxiety from happening. That's never our goal is so that we say, "Okay, you're never going to feel anxious again." The goal is to recognize it and then use the imagery in a fashion that's going to help you get more into the driver's seat.



[Scott Redding:](#)

You kind of mentioned the breath, and full disclosure, I do semi-practice some mindful meditation, and breath is one of the key aspects of that. Is that one of those crossover pieces between say meditation and guided imagery?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Absolutely. Yes, because the breath is so important. If you've ever had a yoga class, your yoga instructor is going to be talking about how to use your breath. If you're a singer or a musician, you learn how to use your breath. The breath is intricately woven into our sense of wellbeing at any given moment in time, so it's a really great tool. When we teach guided inventory, we usually include a little 30 second breathing lesson, which is things like inhaling through your nose flips the switch on your parasympathetic nervous system, which is an automatic down regular later. So not to become too technical, but there's chemistry behind the use of the breath.

[Scott Redding:](#)

We've already touched on it a little bit, but how does guided imagery help in the healing process?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Well, to be very clear, there's no evidence that guided imagery heals cancer. That's oftentimes a lot of people's question. But there's a lot of evidence that guided imagery helps with management of side effects, symptoms. We've talked about anxiety. Many patients find that really beneficial because sometimes for some people, the worst part are the side effects. They would like to know how they can do this without adding another medication or something invasive. For some people discovering that they do already have some inner resources, and if we can help them locate those inner switches, so to speak, to flip on the systems that we're all wired with that can help them, that in and of itself can feel healing. It puts people back closer to feeling that they're in the driver's seat about managing themselves. That in and of itself is healing and is helpful, again, because many people lose confidence, find themselves in totally uncharted territory with cancer experiences, whether it's symptoms or side effects, or very present anxiety. Guided imagery can really help feel like you can respond to a situation by helping yourself out, whether it's the breath or whether it's very intentional about what it is, where you're steering your imagination to help you.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

What we know is that anxiety and worry tend to help the imagination runaway out into a future that hasn't happened yet, but we respond as though it has. That can be very disquieting and very discomfoting, but guided imagery can help people really restore and reconnect with that sense of control by saying, "Come on back, be right here and let's reconnect with the sensations of being



right here in this moment and that sense of control and calm and quiet." Then noticing that guided imagery can help with sleep, because sleep is so critical. So many people come through the door and say, "I haven't slept in this many days," or "I only sleep two hours a night," or, "I'm up worried all night long," and they're very concerned because everybody knows the importance of sleep. To realize that they can enhance and improve their, their sleep and their sense of rest. A lot of people have fatigue, so we use guided imagery in those situations to kind of boost one sense of energy. We may do some imagery around taking a hike. I've worked with a lot of distance runners who are just beside themselves because they aren't getting their endorphins, and they aren't getting their run in. We use imagery to really replicate and bring up those that site or memory, if you will, of what it's like to be on the run, and people can experience that.

[Scott Redding:](#)

We were talking about the healing process here, and you went into more detail about how it can benefit a cancer patient, what about the flip side, a caregiver? They may struggle with fatigue, they struggle with a lot of other issues as it relates to being that caregiver. Can this help a caregiver's health?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Absolutely. It can help any person. I do actually have in our podcast library a specific caregiver experience, but the caregiver can benefit from this sort of practice for sure. They're experiencing cancer also. While they aren't the identified patient, they're certainly carrying it and walking through it day by day as well.

[Scott Redding:](#)

It kinda sounds like it from our conversation that guided imagery could be for everyone. Is that the case?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

For the most part it is. We should throw a caveat out that if someone is at high risk for delirium or hallucinations, they're probably better served by first consulting their medical provider or a psychiatric provider if they have one, just to kind of check in about that. I will say that in my practice of sitting down individually with people, that's always part of my assessment. I'm not going to try to put somebody in a situation that's going to be more discomforting and disquieting for them. That's a very, very tiny slice of humanity, if you will. Yes, it is for everyone. Even the worriers. The worriers can go to the head of the line when it comes to using guided imagery because they already have the skill. They're able to picture something and then react to it, and that's what happens with guided imagery, as we say that the imagination getting out way ahead of us and taking control when we're worried and picturing worst case scenarios. If



you could picture something going poorly, you can picture it going well. We take that skill, we harness the power of the imagination and guide it and direct it in a direction or a fashion that's more supportive and more attuned to a patient's desires and hopes.

[Scott Redding:](#)

There's a lot that goes into this. You talked about podcast library, but do you also do individual guided imagery, self guided imagery?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Yes, indeed I do. Again, I'm going to sit down and visit with somebody one on one. I do a brief assessment, kind of get their sense about what's most difficult and what's most bothersome, get a little bit of history about their checking into their mental health history, but then a little bit of information about what they have found helpful or where they find their mind and their imagination going, and then build that then into a recording specifically for them that speaks to their difficulties but also speaks to their strengths, to their resources. Customizing the imagery is a really important piece of the work. General resources, and there's a lot of them that are available on our website in that I even have to give to people, but I find that the customized is generally most potent.

[Scott Redding:](#)

Are these services that you really only offer here at the Rogel Cancer Center and at the University of Michigan or do you work with other organizations to be able to supply the services as well as even via social work?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Sure, sure. Yes. The good news here, Scott Redding, is that the benefits of guided imagery or are widely known and that there are other agencies and organizations serving people with cancer who do utilize these. For instance, the Cancer Support Community of Greater Ann Arbor right here in our backyard does use some of my recordings has used some of our other resources available here at the cancer center as well. I recently did a presentation there about managing anxiety around scans, and we use some guided imagery in that experience. I'm very happy to be able to be a partner with these organizations like the Cancer Support Community of Greater Ann Arbor that are just so comprehensive in such a great job for patients and families.

[Scott Redding:](#)

So again, I guess looking back as we talked that you don't necessarily have to have a specific to you kind of recording. Any guided imagery could be useful to anyone, whether it's been specifically made for them, whether it's found on a website or a download it through an app.



[Claire Casselman:](#) Yes, true.

[Scott Redding:](#) It's been interesting to hear about how this benefits patients and caregivers and anyone as it relates to being able to utilize guided imagery. Is this something that you've always had a passion for? How did you kind of move into this role, or has this always been your clinical social work practice?

[Claire Casselman:](#) How long do we have Scott Redding? I've considered myself a spiritual person lifelong as many of us have. I've always been fascinated by the potency and the power of the mind and breath and the combination of those two things. There are many ways to understand the power of the mind and the power of the imagination, but when I started to study this more we're seeing that a lot of the people that I was serving were just so locked into their own truth about how things are going to go, how awful it's going to be how powerless they feel. I started exploring more about is there really a discipline or practice or resource and discovered guided imagery and meditation at that time. I do have my own meditation practice, but I discovered over the years, as I said earlier, that that guided imagery is just much more accessible for most people and more readily experienced and used.

[Claire Casselman:](#) The first group I ever worked with were people that were in a partial day program for substance abuse, so I was asked to come in and do some guided imagery and meditation for them. We established the Higher Power Half Hour, and basically it was a half an hour of guided imagery, and this is noninvasive, that people were latching onto as, "Oh wait, I can alter my sense of any moment or my sense of myself without chemicals. Wow." It just kind of grew from there until I finally found what felt like hand and glove to me within the oncology community.

[Scott Redding:](#) You talked about, what was it? the Half Hour ...

[Claire Casselman:](#) The Higher Power Half Hour.

[Scott Redding:](#) So obviously you could see during that maybe how that was effecting and it may be improving those people. You make these individual guided imagery recordings? Have you actually seen the benefit to some of your patients?

[Claire Casselman:](#) Oh, yes, I have. I hear the benefits as well. One that comes to mind is a woman who was preparing for chemotherapy. We met before she had her first



chemotherapy. She was smart and she knew that it was going to be difficult for her, and that it be really wise to look at how am I going to manage myself through this? We had a session, gave her some resources, we did a breathing lesson and had a great talk. I knew that her first treatment was going to be in two days, and I knew where it was scheduled. I just wanted to pop down and say hello to her. By the time I got to the infusion unit, I could see that then the nurses were with her, and I could see that she was physically very uncomfortable and struggling. She had had trouble as she had anticipated, but she also had already started to employ the breathing techniques. She was already well down the road toward helping herself through this very difficult episode, and I was so happy for her and so impressed to see that she had the presence of mind and the faith in herself to be able to just dip into the breath and do as she had planned.

[Scott Redding:](#)

Normally I usually wrap up these talks with a quick summation, what's a key point for somebody to take away. I think today, could we end with a short guided imagery?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Oh, sure, sure. So I'm going to just settle into a very comfortable position and invite anybody who's listening to settle into a comfortable position, which may mean feet on the floor, which may mean a spine aligned with the shoulders and the head in a fashion that really feels supported. Just close your eyes if you are so inclined. There's no requirement to close eyes, but just realize that these next few moments are intended just for you. These next few moments, you're not needed by anybody for anything, anywhere. To just begin by tuning into your breath and just noticing your breath. You don't have to work at it or change anything. Just notice how your breath inhales and exhales. See if you can inhale through your nose easily and fully and then exhale through either your mouth or nose, whichever is more comfortable. Inhaling and filling with nourishment and replenishment, and exhaling to send out any spent energy, any fatigue or even constriction. Notice that with each breath, there's an increased sense of ease.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Maybe even noticing as you exhale that softening of your muscles, that opening in your chest or in your belly, maybe that release of tension in your hands or your jaw, your neck or shoulders. Inhaling to receive and exhaling through release. Nice, lovely, luscious exhalation to let it go. In these moments, just simply taking any tension or discomfort and setting it down. Maybe like setting your bag down, or taking that heavy backpack off and just setting it down, and



noticing that you can send each successive breath lower and deeper into your body and into your being. When those thoughts arise and compete for your attention, there's no need to engage or try to analyze or interpret. Just let thoughts be like bubbles in the glass, floating to the surface and released. Likewise, with any emotions that may come up, let them to just bubble up without attachment or engagement and left them just simply be released like steam forming into a cloud, always bringing your attention back to your breath. You're steady and constant companion that helps you settle center. Just watching your breath and noticing that your joints continue to soften your muscles. Soften and now see if you can use your mind's eye to take you to a place where you know you're free.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

A place with no deadlines, no responsibility, a place of safety piece. Maybe it's a place you visited on vacation or a place you dream of going, maybe a safe and protected and warm place from your childhood, or maybe it's in your comfortable chair next to the picture window in your home. Allow yourself to go there and see yourself arriving there. If you're having trouble deciding is settling on a place to simply take a nice inhalation and as you exhale, allow this place of peace and beauty and comfort and fun and familiarity to come into view and taking it in. See yourself there. Maybe pan the view from right to left or left to right, noticing the light, the time of day. Are there long shadows of morning or evening bright, full sun of midday?

[Claire Casselman:](#)

What colors do you see? Maybe you can see the sky. Maybe it's bright blue. Maybe there's puffy white clouds are little streams of cirrus clouds to the sky. Maybe you can see vegetation with greens and earth tones, maybe pops of color and blossom. Maybe you can see the deep dark greens of the forest with a bright light and the the gorgeous colors of a meadow. Maybe you're looking out onto the water and see all the gradations of green or aqua or aqua marine or gray. Maybe even seeing white caps if you're looking at way or maybe seen the sky reflected in the surface of the water, just taking it in and noticing to what you can hear, maybe a breeze or birds, maybe the movement of water. What do you smell? What aromas are here? The fragrance of blooming things, maybe your favorite meal being prepared or a mug of your favorite coffee or tea. Maybe you can lick your lips and taste the salt air. Maybe you're seated on something comfortable. Maybe you have your hiking boots on and you can feel the pine needles on the path in the forest. Maybe you have sand between your toes.





[Claire Casselman:](#)

This is a place to which you've called yourself for connection, connection to the beauty that you see here, to the energy and the vibrancy of this place, connection to what it is to be in a safe place, to be in a more peaceful state. Just taking it all in and just noticing how it feels to be here. You carry these sensations deep within yourself at all times. This place, readily available to you anytime you choose to use your breath and just a few brief moments to come here. To come for reconnection to the beauty reconnection to your calm, your core and reservoir of strength and peace. Reconnection perhaps to your highest self, your hopes, your dream reconnection to this sense of awe and gratitude. Maybe there's something specific for which you're grateful, and if so, just simply take note and Tuck it away for later. It'll come to you when you need or want it.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Gratitude is such a powerful ally, and knowing that this place and this space is always available to you. You can return at any time if you're choosing. So just for now, take one more look and listen around. Taking in the colors sounds, the aromas, the flavors, the sensations, the warmth of the sun on your face or back the breeze moving past your face, commonly surrounding, refreshing, taking it all in. Just for now with gratitude, begin the brief trip back to your current location and finding yourself. They're feeling your feet on the floor supported and comfortable on whatever you're seated upon or whatever you might be reclining upon. When you're ready and refreshed and reconnected, you can be here, whole, present and so you are.

[Scott Redding:](#)

Well, thank you.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

You're welcome.

[Scott Redding:](#)

That was very good, and I appreciate the time.

[Claire Casselman:](#)

Oh, my pleasure entirely. I wish you the best, Scott Redding, as well as all of our listeners.

[Scott Redding:](#)

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