



Penny Brohn UK
Living Well with Cancer

Relaxation Techniques

Evidence-based information to help you self-manage your cancer experience



About this booklet

Relaxation techniques can help people feel calm, rested and free of tensions. Relaxation is an effective self-help therapy for people with cancer. It can help to reduce nausea, pain, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure and stress. Types of relaxation can include:

- **Imagery**
- **Breathing exercises**
- **Meditation and mindfulness.**

This evidence-based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the range of relaxation techniques on offer to support people with cancer. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services Penny Brohn UK provides, please contact our **Helpline on 0303 3000 118**. We're able to provide our services free of charge, thanks to the charitable donations and voluntary contributions which fund our work.

How to use this booklet

This sheet is split into sections to help you get the information you need to start exploring different relaxation techniques. We've included information about cost and safety of these therapies as well as quotes from people who have tried the different activities.

Contents

Imagery	4-6
Mindfulness and meditation	8-11
Relaxation	12-13
Further support	14
Contact us	15

About imagery

Imagery involves using your imagination to create an experience or scenario in your mind to positively affect your own health and wellbeing. It usually takes place sitting or lying down and may involve listening to an instructor or CD. It is a self-help technique, which includes not just visual images but also smells, sounds, tastes, textures and touch. These experiences are consciously constructed in the mind, with the intention of influencing physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. Imagery may also be referred to as 'visualisation'.

Imagery is used to help with side-effects of cancer and its treatment, such as nausea, stress and anxiety. Some people who have tried imagery said they felt it helped them to relax, and improved their mood. Studies have shown that imagery can help improve the quality of life of those living with cancer.

Imagery is now commonly used alongside other techniques such as healing, meditation and relaxation. It may also be employed by nutritional therapists, psychotherapists and counsellors in their work.

What happens in a session?

- Imagery can be led by a therapist or you can use a pre-recorded CD at home.
- You can practise imagery whilst sitting or lying down.
- When using a CD or being led by a therapist, this is known as 'guided imagery'. Once taught, imagery may also be used as a self-help technique.
- The most common type of imagery used is 'active' imagery. You may focus on pleasant experiences, such as being in a beautiful landscape or garden, or on a process such as activating the immune system, or an outcome such as being completely well.
- For some people their visual strength is not as strong and for them it may be more effective to use sounds or sensations during imagery sessions.
- At the end of the session, the therapist may spend some time listening to your experiences and exploring what they mean to you.

What do people who've tried imagery say?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can provide information from a personal perspective, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone.

In one study researchers asked people with cancer about their experiences of guided imagery. They felt that they benefited from the distraction it provided and it helped them to achieve a relaxed state¹. In another study people said that imagery became easier with practice. With this increased practice, people noticed that it positively affected their mood².

What do people who've tried imagery at Penny Brohn UK say?

'It helps me manage my work/home life by letting go of my tensions and/or anxieties.'

'Takes me out of the home environment and meeting others and getting away from sources of stress.'

'It has helped me sleep better.'

'Provides a model to use at home.'

What is the evidence on imagery?

There is a growing body of evidence that looks at how imagery can help people with cancer.

One high quality review of the evidence looked at studies that used imagery alone⁴. It found that imagery reduced anxiety and depression and increased quality of life. It also found that guided imagery significantly improved people's experiences during chemotherapy and radiotherapy. The review found no significant effects on physical symptoms, such as nausea and vomiting.

Is it safe?

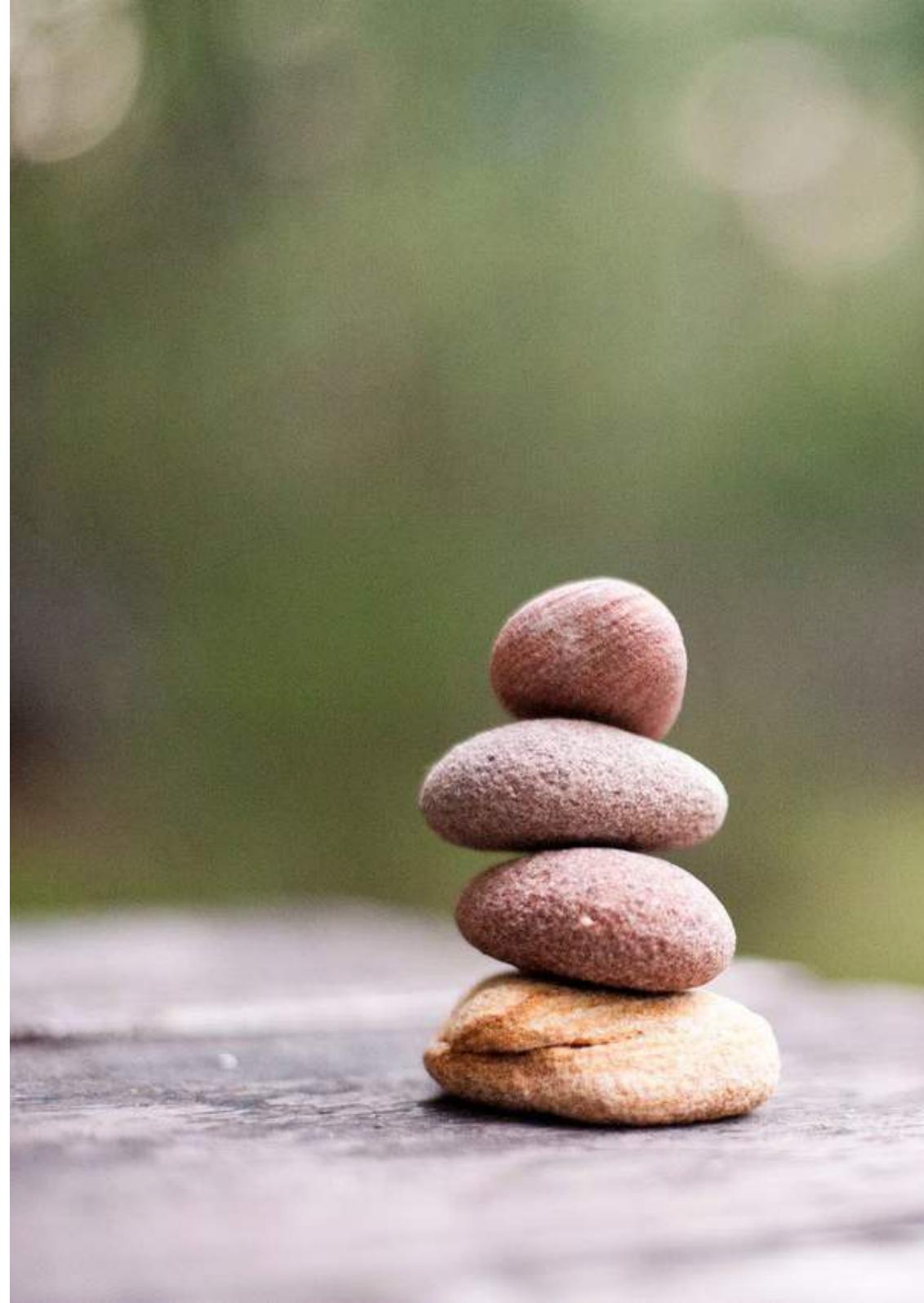
There are no known side-effects of imagery. Avoid driving or operating machinery whilst listening to imagery CDs or practising self-guided imagery. This therapy may not be suitable for those with certain psychological conditions³. Please talk to a therapist if you are in any doubt.

How much should it cost?

Group sessions may be offered as part of a course or workshop, along with other self-help techniques. The cost will vary according to what is being offered. There are also many good quality CDs and audio tapes available.

Are there any legal issues?

There is currently no formal regulation of therapists offering imagery. Most practitioners have training in another therapy. For example, many psychotherapists, psychologists and counsellors use imagery.



About meditation and mindfulness*

By focusing your attention, meditation practices aim to help you create a peaceful, quiet state of mind. Mindfulness involves increasing your awareness of what is happening in the present moment. This can help you learn to respond more effectively to the challenges of your stress, pain and illness. For people with cancer, meditation and mindfulness are offered to improve wellbeing and to help cope with the symptoms of cancer and its treatments.

People who have tried meditation and mindfulness report that it helps them to feel calmer and more able to cope. Studies show that meditation and mindfulness are potentially beneficial for reducing anxiety, stress and chemotherapy-related nausea.

Mindfulness aims to help you live more fully in the present moment, increasing your ability to respond to situations rather than react. Mindfulness does not aim for a particular result, rather it is about simply learning to 'be' in the present moment with your experience. This can help reduce the overall distress of challenging experiences and life events.

*Throughout this chapter we talk about 'meditation and mindfulness practice' rather than meditation or mindfulness individually. Where studies have taken place solely in one of the therapies we have specified this.

What happens in a meditation and mindfulness session?

- Sessions are of different length and can be in groups or one-to-ones. There is usually an introduction, then silence for practice.
- For those who wish to take the practices further, there are centres for longer sessions and retreats. You can also meditate alone, at home or in daily situations.
- You must be comfortable, which can include sitting, lying down and even some movement.
- Mindfulness meditation is often taught as an eight week course in 2-2½ hour group sessions. Each week has a theme, linking to daily life. Sessions include mindful body scan, movement and sitting practices and discussions between the group and teacher. Courses encourage daily 45 minute home practice and informal practices.

What do people who have tried meditation and mindfulness say?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can provide information from a personal perspective, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone.

Cancer patients report many benefits including changed perception of their illness¹, an increased ability to cope^{1,2} and a greater sense of control^{1,3}. People have also said they felt calmer², more able to deal with their pain³ and a sense of personal growth¹ and acceptance⁴.

What do people from Penny Brohn UK say about meditation?

‘I feel more relaxed and at peace after the session.’

‘[Meditation] helped me manage my diagnosis and sometimes overwhelming feelings that it generates. Really wonderful anchor to my week.’

‘This is essential to allow me to move forward, cope and de-stress.’

What do people from Penny Brohn UK say about mindfulness?

‘Helped me to be calmer, less anxious and given me techniques to apply outside when I feel anxious.’

‘Feel more confident to cope with ups and downs.’

‘I feel so much better than last week (less anxious) which is due to several factors but mindfulness and healing have helped.’

What is the evidence on meditation and mindfulness?

Reviews of the research into meditation and mindfulness based stress reduction have found that they can have positive effects. The reviews found that it may reduce anxiety, stress and chemotherapy-related nausea. They may help people cope and improve mood. There were mixed results for its impact on depression and quality of life.

Is it safe?

Meditation and mindfulness are generally considered safe. People who suffer with mental health conditions should consult their doctor beforehand. A small number of reports suggest that meditation could make these conditions worse.

How much does it cost?

Practitioners may only ask for a donation. Others charge hourly or fixed rates. Private sessions may cost between £10-£60 an hour⁷.

Are there any legal issues?

Practitioners do not need a licence in the UK. Some schools of meditation have training or accreditation schemes.

About relaxation

Relaxation helps your body and mind let go of tension to produce a state of deep rest. Relaxation can help you switch from the 'fight or flight' stress response to the more restful 'relaxation response'. You may have feelings of wellbeing and pleasure.

The use of relaxation techniques is thought to help with the symptoms of cancer and side-effects of its treatments. This may include a reduction in pain, nausea, depression and anxiety.

Types of relaxation techniques

- **Autogenic training:** This encourages you to become aware of your own breathing and slow it down in order to relax.
- **Guided imagery:** This involves the creative use of the imagination to construct a scenario in your mind. These pleasant images are evoked in order to replace negative images.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** To relax using this technique you should become aware of any tensions in your body and systematically let go of these.

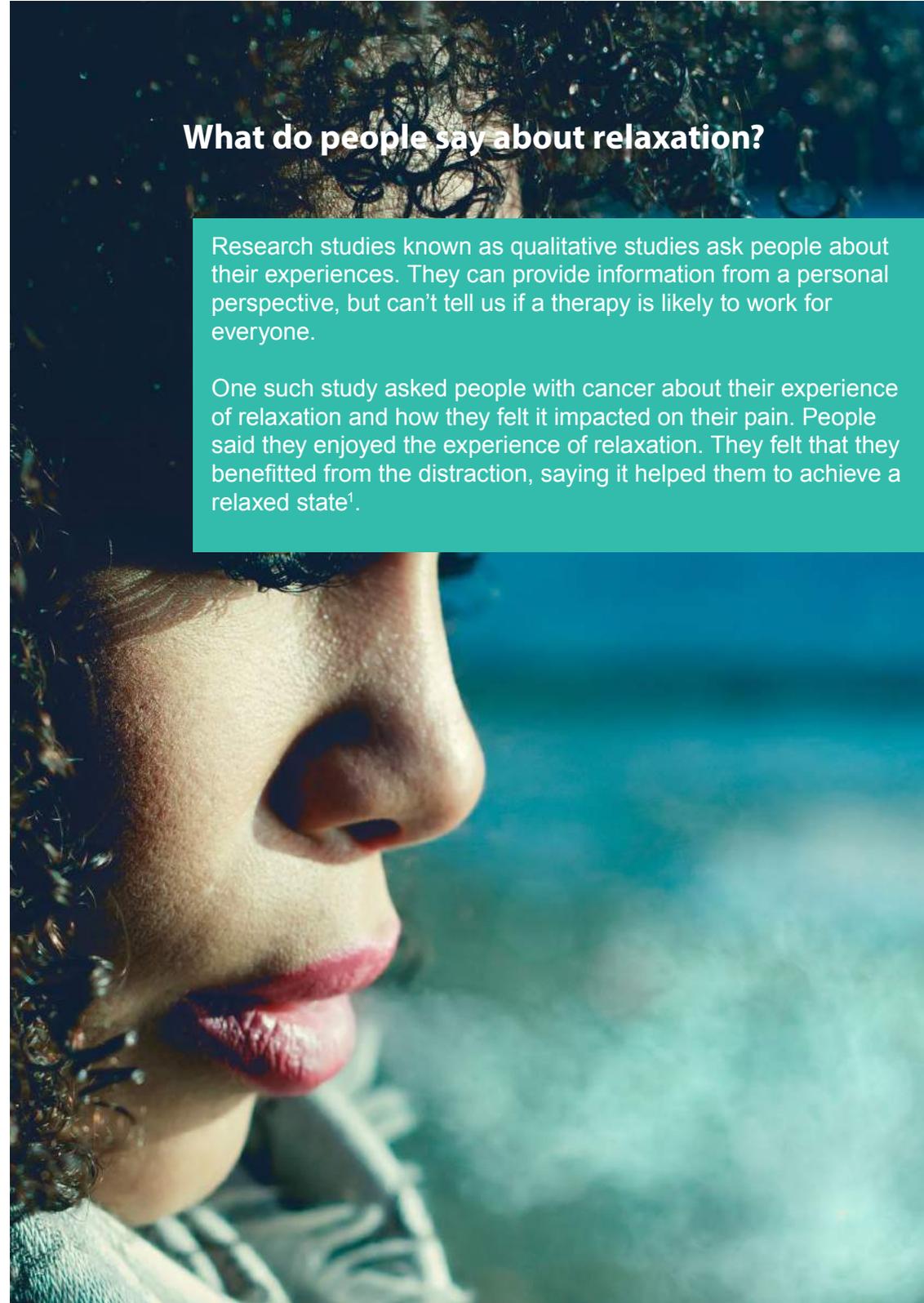
What happens in a relaxation session?

- Relaxation therapy may take place:
 - In group sessions
 - One-to-one with a therapist
 - Alone listening to CDs/audio recordings of relaxation exercise instructions.
- Relaxation exercises are mostly practised sitting or lying down. They usually involve the releasing of tension in the muscles.

What do people say about relaxation?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can provide information from a personal perspective, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone.

One such study asked people with cancer about their experience of relaxation and how they felt it impacted on their pain. People said they enjoyed the experience of relaxation. They felt that they benefitted from the distraction, saying it helped them to achieve a relaxed state¹.



Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer

Cancer Research UK
0808 800 4040
www.cancerresearchuk.org

Macmillan Cancer Support
0808 808 0000
www.macmillan.org.uk

NHS 111
111
www.nhs.uk

More information

NHS Evidence
www.evidence.nhs.uk

CAM Cancer
www.cam-cancer.org

Contact us

Helpline: 0303 3000 118
Weekdays 9.30am-5pm
(24 hour answerphone)

Email: helpline@pennybrohn.org.uk

Penny Brohn UK,
Chapel Pill Lane, Pill, Bristol BS20 0HH

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time for illustrative purposes, we make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

Disclaimer

While we make every effort to use up to date and reliable sources, we can't accept liability for errors in the sources that we use and we can't guarantee to find all the information relevant to your enquiry or request. All responsibility for interpretation of and action upon that information rests with you. This information and advice is offered on the understanding that if you intend to support your treatment with complementary or alternative approaches, then it is advisable to consult your medical team to ensure that they have a complete understanding of your situation and the complementary or alternative approach that you are considering.

All rights reserved. © Penny Brohn UK 2019.

Penny Brohn UK is the trading name of Penny Brohn Cancer Care, a registered charity (no. 284881) and a company registered in England (no.1635916).

EBIS ID: Applied relaxation. Literature search completed: 10 2015.
With thanks to The James Tudor Foundation.

Sheet published: 09 2020
Review date: 09 2022

www.pennybrohn.org.uk

