



What is 'imagery' in Guided Imagery and Music (GIM)?

Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) was developed in the 1970s by Helen Bonny, a music therapist and researcher working in the USA. In its original form, the Bonny Method of GIM involves the client imaging whilst listening to a 30 - 45 minute programme of recorded music in a relaxed state, eyes closed, lying down, the process having affinities with the Jungian active imagination ([click here for more information about the Bonny Method of GIM](#)). In contemporary practice, the Bonny Method of GIM is used along with various other GIM and simpler Music and Imagery (MI) methods. This allows work to be undertaken with clients with wide-ranging difficulties in diverse settings of all ages ([click here for an overview of the spectrum of contemporary practice and clinical applications](#)).

This article outlines the different types of imagery that can be experienced in GIM. It will be apparent that the client's imagery experience can be very wide-ranging. It is, in fact, often multi-modal. The imagery evolves as a manifestation of the client's inner process and response to the music, supported by the non-directive guiding interventions of the therapist ([click here for more information about what 'guiding' means in GIM](#)).

Emerging spontaneously, the imagery characteristically represents the client's way of being and relating and his/her core issues in metaphorical form. As the imagery process unfolds over the course of a series of sessions, issues can be worked on, inner resources discovered, healing experienced, solutions to problems found and new perspectives discovered.

The spectrum of imagery experiences in GIM

The types of imagery experience set out below (Grocke, 1999) include those in every sensory modality. Body-based experiences, feelings and the experience of the music itself are all types of imagery in GIM; with the interplay of music, emotion and imagery always being central to the process.

1. Visual experiences, which may include: colours, shapes, fragments of scenes, complete scenes, figures, people, animals, birds, water (lakes, streams, oceans, pools).
2. Memories: childhood memories, including memories of significant events, significant people and feelings in the client's life are explored through reminiscences.
3. Emotions and feelings: sadness, happiness, joy, sorrow, fear, anger, surprise etc.

4. Body sensations: parts of the body may feel lighter, or heavier; parts of the body may become numb, and feel split off from the body; there may be feelings of floating or falling; sensations of spinning, or feelings that the body is changing in some way.
5. Body movements. The client may make expressive movements of the body in relation to the imagery being experienced - eg. hands create a shape, arms reach up in response to an image, fists or legs pound on the mat in reaction to feelings of anger.
6. Somatic imagery. Changes within the internal organs of the body may be experienced - e.g. pain felt in the chest or heart, exploring an internal organ for its shape and colour, a surge of energy felt through the entire body.
7. Altered auditory experiences. There may be an altered auditory perception of the music: the music comes from far away; the music is very close; one particular instrument stands out (which can also be transference to music)
8. Pure music transference – the client is fully engaged with the music
9. Associations with the music and transference to the music: memories of when the music was heard last, memories of playing the music; the music is being played especially for the person; the person is actually playing the music being heard.
10. Abstract imagery: mists, fog, geometrical shapes, clouds etc.
11. Spiritual experiences: being drawn toward a light; a spiritual person: a monk, priest, woman in flowing robes; being in a cathedral; feeling a presence very close.
12. Transpersonal experiences: the body becoming smaller, or larger, change felt deep in the body (cells changing, parts of body changing shape), or the person becomes another form – e.g. the person becomes a bird in flight, or becomes one with a significant feeling or event.
13. Archetypal figures. This can include figures and film characters: King Arthur, Robin Hood, the Vikings, Aboriginal man/woman, the witch, Merlin. Superman, ET, Donald Duck etc..
14. Dialogue. Significant figures from the client's life may appear in the imagery and often have a message, so that dialogue may occur eg with parental figures. Aspects of self may be symbolised in human form (a baby or adult figure), or significant companions (eg an albatross bird, or an eagle) and dialogue may occur with these aspects.
15. Aspects of the Shadow: A person of the same gender (or other figure/creature) may appear that the client immediately dislikes. It is helpful to find out what aspect of the person the client is reacting to, as this may be a part of the client that he or she does not like to recognize in him- or herself.

16. Symbolic shapes and images - eg. a long tunnel, a black hole, seeds opening. These shapes or images can be symbolic of moments of change or transition. Symbolic images such as an ancient book or the trident shape often have specific meaning to the client.

The imagery style of different clients

Individual clients have been found to vary in the types of imagery they typically experience (Bruscia et al, 2005), though this may change over time and vary from session to session. There are those who tend to be visual imagers, others who are more somatic imagers, and still others who have an intuitive style of imaging (Bush, 1995). The clients who most benefit from GIM, no matter how they may image, are those able, with the support of the music and therapist, to become deeply involved in the imagery experience at a felt level of engagement. It is this that most often leads to breakthroughs in the GIM process.

A planned second article will explore other aspects of imagery, including its metaphorical nature, and how the imagery process, as it unfolds, can help clients to develop their inner resources and address issues.

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