



Guided Meditation: Nursing Interventions for Senior Stress and Pain Reduction

by GALE LYMAN, RN, BSN, HNB-BC

One memorable day, I walked into a long-term care room to find two residents who were more than 100 years of age complaining about their daughters. One roommate promised the other that she would pray for her daughter to be more devoted and attentive to her mother. How old must the daughters be? In their 70s or 80s? Most likely I was witnessing only one half of a relationship stress cycle among multigenerational elders. No wonder these two 100-year-old mothers were on my assignment for the day. Relaxation activities such as guided breathing, progressive relaxation, or imagery could be exactly what these distressed moms needed.

Seniors are stressed and in pain, and nurses can help. In my experience working with older adults at senior centers, assisted living, and long-term care facilities, I have witnessed many people in their “golden years” still struggling with stress. What I hear from our elders reflects the same stressors that many of us manage throughout our life cycle: Physical and emotional pain; personal illness and limitations; loss and grief; unrealized expectations of others; and worry about family, relationships, and finances.

Guided meditation is an effective non-pharmacological alternative for alleviating the burdens of stress and pain. Many older adults have benefited from and enjoy guided meditation practices such as breathing, muscle relaxation, and imagery. These techniques are easy to implement and do not require expensive equipment or site preparation. Because it is quick and easy, guided breathing meditation fits well into a busy nurse’s shift. Helping an elder to relax is not only compassionate, but also can facilitate maintaining safety (Kim, et al., 2012). Physical activity is not necessary for guided meditation, making it an ideal practice for many elders, including those with limited mobility. These techniques are also easily taught and replicated. According to the Institute of Noetic Sciences (2016), “All forms of meditation can be guided, and many are often practiced with recorded or in-person guidance at first, and then later with decreasing need for explicit guidance.”

Guided Breathing Meditation

Perhaps one of the quickest and easiest relaxation interventions is guided breathing meditation, which is also referred to as abdominal breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, belly breathing, breathwork, relaxation breathing, and in yoga, *pranayama*. This conscious awareness of breath can be described as “focusing on taking slow, deep, even breaths” (NCCIH, 2016) and “concentrated breathing” (Frame & Alexander, 2013). Considering the comorbidities of many older adults, I avoid inviting elders to breathe slowly or deeply as this can sometimes be a challenge. Instead, I invite them to breathe comfortably while paying attention to their breath. Sometimes instead of attending to the breath, I suggest a different focus such as counting or light imagery. Some of the comments my clients have shared after guided breathing meditation include, “All the busy worrying in my mind stopped.” And “I feel good; (my) aches and pains are a little better.”

Evidence Based Practice

Nursing research supports the use of guided meditation with older adults, demonstrating various positive outcomes. Patients recovering from total knee replacement were found to have less pain, stress, and anxiety after doing breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, and guided imagery; they also reported greater perceived relaxation and self-efficacy (Lim, Yobas, & Chen, 2014). In a review of literature about pain in older people, certain cognitive complementary therapies were found to “be useful for the older population, including guided imagery, biofeedback training and relaxation” (Abdulla, et. al., 2013). One study related relaxation with mobility, finding that “GRI (guided relaxation and imagery) is an effective, simple, low-cost tool for older adults to improve falls self-efficacy, and leisure time exercise behaviors” (Kim, et al., 2012).

Teaching Self-Care

One of the great advantages to guided breathing meditations is that they are easy to learn. “People can learn these therapies and use them without the intervention of a healthcare provider, thereby empowering a person in his/her own healing and allowing the person to take an active role in the management of his/her own healthcare” (AHNA & ANA, 2013).

Part of my nursing assessment is to inquire what the resident already does to relax. Often, I discover that they’ve been practicing similar techniques throughout their lives to manage stress and pain. One resident mentioned, “I like counting to quiet my mind.” When I asked another resident about the guided breathing meditation experienced in our last session, he explained, “I’ve been doing this three times a day. It makes me feel good.” Before a session ends, part of my intervention is to discuss if they liked the breathwork, and how they might use it on their own. Responses have included, “This breathing exercise will be nice to do at bedtime,” and “Everyone should do this after an argument.” How true!

Contraindications & Challenges

As with any intervention, there are some potential adverse effects, but “Relaxation techniques are generally considered safe for healthy people” (NCCIH, 2016). Clinical cautions include possible flashbacks or dissociation if there is a history of PTSD and other dissociative experiences (Frame & Alexander, 2013). Some medications such as anti-hypertensives, anti-anxiety agents, sleep aids, thyroid replacement, and cardiac medications may need to be adjusted if residents consistently attain greater levels of relaxation (Anselmo, 2016, p. 254). Rare reports indicate that relaxation techniques might cause or worsen symptoms in people with epilepsy. Also, people with heart disease should seek medical advice before doing Jacobson progressive muscle relaxation, which teaches to tighten and relax muscles (NCCIH, 2016). A few people have experienced a paradoxical increase in anxiety at first when trying to deeply relax (AHNA, 2016). An awareness of best practices in guided meditation can be gained by learning from an expert in the field of relaxation, meditation, or guided imagery.

My greatest challenge in senior care settings has been finding, creating, or manifesting a quiet environment for guided meditation that is free from interruptions. It is accurate to describe this as *my* challenge, because the residents are far better at tuning out background noise and activity than me. Rather than noise and interruptions, the actual challenges of offering guided meditation in senior care settings are more patient-centered such as the resident’s level of consciousness and/or cognitive ability, as well as language barriers and hearing impairments.

Sadly, stress and pain can be present throughout the life cycle, including “the golden years.” Elders are stressed, and many are open to and benefit from guided meditations. Easy to implement, guided breathing meditations can be a helpful and compassionate tool for holistic nurses to integrate into their care of older adults.

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Gale Lyman, RN, BSN, HNB-BC is a freelance health and wellness writer for various newsletters, magazines, and blogs. Her expertise in contemplative practices, especially guided meditation and finding peace in nature, enriches her restorative retreats and workshops. She is passionate about helping older adults and caregivers attain holistic well-being.

