



Illustration by Keith Skeep

Imagination:

THE POWER TO HEAL

Can you see a beautiful sunset in your mind's eye, hear your grandmother's voice in your mind's ear or taste the tartness of a lemon with your mind's taste buds? Most people can. And Dr. Anees Sheikh knows that such tricks of the imagination can be powerful tools in emotional and physical healing. "Of all the recent developments in the healing arts, perhaps the most noteworthy one is our increased understanding of the healing potential of mental imagery," he says.

Sheikh, a professor of psychology who has taught at Marquette for more than 40 years, was a pioneer in the field of mental imagery and is credited with helping establish the field.

The founder of the *Journal of Mental Imagery*, Sheikh has published 16 books on the topic and trained thousands of health professionals around the world through his workshops and lectures. The Dalai Lama was so impressed by Sheikh's work that he wrote a foreword to Sheikh's 2002 book, *Healing Images: The Role of Imagination and Health*. Sheikh's latest book, co-written with David Pincus, his former graduate student, is titled *Imagery for Pain Relief: A Scientifically Grounded Guidebook for Clinicians*. It is due out in 2009.

Mental imagery has a very close connection to the body, according to Sheikh. "Imagine that you are squeezing lemon juice into your

mouth," he explains. "Your mouth will pucker up and you will salivate, just as you would if you actually squeezed lemon juice into your mouth. This is just an example of the many identical responses to actual stimuli and to imagery. While they may not have the same intensity, they are of the same nature." Simply imagining walking up stairs produces electrical activity in your leg muscles, imagining a scary situation will affect your blood pressure, and imagining a happy event will elevate your mood. In many important aspects, an experience in imagination can be the psychological equivalent of the actual experience, he says.

In addition to its close connection to physiology, mental imagery can be a valuable vehicle for therapeutic work for other reasons, Sheikh says. "Images have intimate ties to our emotions," he says. "They are an excellent source of details about early experiences, particularly the traumatic ones in need of resolution, and they are less likely to be filtered through the conscious, critical apparatus." Sheikh has found that clients open up more when they are describing mental images, because they do not feel as responsible and self-conscious as when they are describing their experiences in words.

Recently Sheikh has been exploring the healing potential of death imagery, which stems from his belief in "the profound inner wisdom of

our mind-body system." He points to the fact that our body temperature remains roughly constant regardless of the ambient temperature; that our heart beats 100,000 times every 24 hours, pumping 6,300 gallons of blood through 96,000 miles of blood vessels; and that 3 million new red blood cells are created every second. The immune system is full of constant, awe-inspiring miracles, he says.

It's one reason that Sheikh feels that imagery is key to physical and emotional health. "We don't heal our patients. We help them heal themselves by helping them connect to their inner wisdom. With a little nudge from the therapist, the patient reconnects with some unfinished emotional issues from the past, mentally revises them and brings closure," Sheikh says. "It is never too late to have a happy past, and the first step to a happy future is to imagine it."

