

My Turnaround



Laurel Kallenbach

▲ BEFORE:

During physical therapy, Laurel began planning for her healthy, mobile future.

◀ AFTER:

Laurel made her dream a reality in August 2017 with a hike in the Cotswold Hills.

The Path to Mobility

How visualization exercises helped one woman heal from the trauma of three hip surgeries and take her dream vacation.

BY LAUREL KALLENBACH

In July 2016 I had a panic attack during an acupuncture treatment — and it had nothing to do with the needles. Two days earlier I'd received the results of an MRI: The rare disease that had been destroying my right hip for several years was back. My mobility was severely limited, and I feared my travel-writing career was over.

I already felt hopeless after two traumatic surgeries. The first, in May 2014, had removed a large — but benign — tumor from my femur. It also revealed a

condition called pigmented villonodular synovitis (PVNS), a progressive joint disease characterized by tissue that thickens and overgrows, causing pain and loss of mobility. The second procedure, in August 2015, had removed more tumors, but the disease returned in 2016.

Total joint replacement was the best viable treatment option, but the thought of yet another operation and lengthy rehab left me fearful and depressed.

To move forward, I had to change my mindset. I had

a top-notch orthopedic surgeon as well as a supportive husband, friends, and bodyworkers. What I needed, my acupuncturist pointed out, was a healing goal.

“Is there a place you’ve always dreamed of walking?” she asked. I immediately recalled one of my bucket-list trips — a hike in England’s Cotswold Hills. She guided me as I visualized ambling through the British countryside.

I went home determined to make my surgery and recovery a positive process. There were lots of things

I couldn't control — like having this disease — but I *could* control my attitude.

That day, I began my quest to look beyond fear and to focus on hope.

Coping With Anxiety

My new mindset represented a major U-turn. I felt like I'd been stuck in the movie *Groundhog Day*, reliving a never-ending loop of pain and surgery. I had battled depression, anxiety, and hopelessness as I grieved my lost mobility. I hadn't been able to practice yoga or hike in the

foothills near my Boulder, Colo., home. My husband, Ken, and I had canceled two vacations because I couldn't navigate airports or climb in and out of trains.

To raise my spirits in preparation for my hip replacement, I embraced visualization. I listened to guided-imagery exercises as I fell asleep at night. *Psychosomatic Wellness* by Candace Pert, PhD, and *Preparing for Surgery* by Martin L. Rossman, MD, were favorites. They taught

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me to breathe in energy and breathe out tension, a tip I could use to center myself any time of the day.

Focusing on a successful surgery helped me set the stage for an optimal outcome. I consulted with my doctor to avoid post-op nausea and pain. I wrote a farewell letter to my “birth hip,” listing all the wonderful places and activities we'd shared over five decades. I also wrote a welcome note to my bionic hip, inviting it to join me in a mobile future.

Finally, I asked a member of my surgical team to read aloud a visualization as I was going under anesthesia. It affirmed the team's medical skills and my confidence that I'd heal quickly and fully.

To help realize my dream vacation, I created a

vision board with pictures I'd cut out of magazines: a collage of women leaping, dancing, and celebrating. Ken placed the board in my hospital room, where I could see it from my bed.

Eyes on the Prize

All of this preparation helped me feel at peace. Though my hospital stay wasn't easy, I experienced less anxiety than I had during the previous two. Once I returned home, I printed out an online itinerary for a walking tour designed by the Cotswold Walks company. It became the template for my desired future trip.

As I took tentative steps with my walker around our cul-de-sac, I pretended I was striding from one English village to another. Once, I imagined strolling with the Dalai Lama, who reminded me to be kind to my healing hip by not pushing too hard.

Over the next six months, I lost 20 pounds (spurred by my ketogenic diet), continued physical therapy, and built up to easy two-mile walks.

But in the early summer of 2017 I noticed I was stalling out. I doubted my ability to walk four to eight miles per day for nine days in the Cotswolds. “How will you feel if you don't go?” my acupuncturist asked. “Relieved? Disappointed?”

After all I'd been through, I knew I couldn't let fear get the best of me now. So in July, Ken and I booked a self-guided 50-mile trek for late August. Then I began training in earnest.

For a break from the impact of walking, I took a twice-weekly water-running

class at my gym. I stayed motivated by creating a record of my progress: On my wall calendar, I drew a star for every day I completed my exercises.

One year and two weeks after my hip replacement, we arrived in rural England. As we left our first hotel and began walking to the next village, seven-and-a-half miles away, my stomach flip-flopped. It would have been a long hike for me even *before* my hip problems had begun.

But as we crossed pastures full of sheep and wandered through forest glades, I relaxed. The scenery was gorgeous; a 200-year-old pub welcomed us with good food and ale. And my hip felt strong.

Later that afternoon, when the church spires of Stow-on-the-Wold appeared on the horizon, I was exhausted but ecstatic. I waved my hiking poles over my head in triumph.

Each day offered a new adventure. Despite blisters and sore muscles, I had accomplished a feat that had been, one year earlier, just a picture in my mind.

Four months after my Cotswolds achievement, I dislocated my bionic hip. I didn't need surgery, but I still felt I was back to square one. After a few weeks, however, I realized I was actually ahead of the game; my tried-and-true visualization skills could help me face any future challenges.

Instead of concentrating on just one trip, I'm now taking the long view: retraining my hip-supporting muscles and maintaining that fitness so that I'll stay mobile for good. 🌱

Laurel's Top 3 Success Strategies

1

Gather a support team. “My physical therapist, acupuncturist, and bodyworker did more than address my pain,” Laurel says. “Each offered creative ideas for staying positive.”

2

Reward yourself. Laurel kept herself motivated with the occasional treat. “For meeting my exercise goals, I'd reward myself with a latte, a facial, or new hiking clothes for my Cotswold trek,” she says.

3

Manage stress. Stress lowers immunity and heightens depression and anxiety. To de-stress, Laurel used progressive muscle relaxation and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) tapping.



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