

Lesson 4

Guided imagery

Introduction

Guided imagery is an effective way of controlling anxiety and bringing about a calm state of mind. It has many great benefits, including providing a fast way of relaxing your mind, it's easy to do, and it's a pleasant technique.

Practising guided imagery on a regular basis increases and maintains your resilience to stress and anxiety, and helps you manage difficult situations better in the future.

By regularly practising guided imagery, the more easily you will be able to conjure calming images and scenarios, and the faster you will be able to slip into the altered mental state that it creates.

There are several ways to practice guided imagery, including creating recordings to help guide you, or relying on your imagination and inner voice. Before we look at exactly how to practice this technique, it's important to understand how it works.

The science

The significant stress reduction that comes through guided imagery occurs because it allows you to physically relax your body quickly and efficiently, while altering your mental state to access a deeper form of relaxation that exists on the subconscious level.

The physical relaxation reduces your tension while making your body feel better, while the mental component allows you to better manage your life and the various stresses that come with it.

While it's a powerful technique it's also one that, once learned, you can use quickly and easily in the comforts of your own home.

Guided imagery helps you take control of your mindscape by not only short-circuiting the process of reacting to imagined concerns, but by allowing us to create positive scenarios and benefit from the good feelings that come with them instead.

Value

There's no right and wrong to practising guided imagery and in minutes you can be calmer and regain control, you will be more resilient to stress and anxiety, and you will be able to manage difficult situations better. You will be able to actively take control and change the way you think, feel, and react to stressful situations and unpleasant emotions

You might picture a beautiful scene from nature, walking through a dense forest while the soothing sounds of a river pass by. Equally, you could picture a happy or relaxing event, such as a memory of a time you were particularly content, or the lucky scenario of winning the lottery and having the freedom to buy anything you want.

If there are specific scenarios or situations that are causing you anxiety, you can guide yourself through a positive version of these to alleviate your anxieties and build your confidence in managing them.

You might also imagine a wise 'guide' who joins you in these scenarios in order to answer your questions and pose questions themselves, so that you might be led to a better place in your life. Essentially, this person is nothing but a conjuring of your subconscious mind, but they are a powerful tool.

Exercise

Now you understand more about guided imagery, take a look at our video where we'll guide you through a guided imagery script.

#Step 1 Let's get comfortable...settling into a relaxed position, as if we're meditating or working on some diaphragmatic breathing exercises. If we're likely to fall asleep we'll lie down, otherwise, we can recline in a comfortable chair. However we sit, let's make sure our physical comfort isn't going to prove to be a distraction.

#Step 2 Breathe From Our Belly...Closing our eyes if we wish and focusing on our diaphragmatic breathing. Allowing our diaphragm to expand and contract as we inhale and exhale. Placing our hand on our stomach lets us check we're doing this correctly. If we feel our shoulders rise and fall instead, it means we're carrying a lot of tension in our body and aren't breathing in the most relaxed way. Taking a few moments to do some progressive muscle relaxation eases this tension and allows us to breathe in the most relaxed way.

#Step 3 Vividly Imagine A Scene...Once we're in a relaxed state, let's picture ourselves in the most calming environment we can imagine. This might mean a tropical location, or at a relaxing spa. It could be as simple as cuddling up on the sofa with our dog, or lying in the arms of someone we love. It could also mean remembering a time and place when we've felt completely relaxed and wonderful, picturing ourselves in a great scene from our favourite film, or a vividly described scene from a book.

#Step 4 Let's immerse ourselves in Sensory Details...While we're imagining the scene, let's really focus on the details and try to involve all our senses. What can we see, hear, smell and touch? How do we feel? Paying attention to these details during our everyday real life helps us bring these imagined scenes to mind.

#Step 5 And Relax...Relax into our scene and stay there for as long as we like. Enjoy our imagined surroundings and allow ourselves to completely escape from the things that are stressing us. When we feel we're ready to return to reality, let's count backwards from five to one and reassure ourselves that, once we reach 'one', we'll feel alert and serene, ready to enjoy the rest of the day. As we 'wake up,' we'll feel refreshed, calmer, as if we'd returned from a mini-break, though we never had to leave the room.

Bonus Tips

1. Try using ambient sounds that will compliment your imagery. This allows you to more fully immerse yourself in the environment of your imagined surroundings while reducing noises in the real world that might distract you.
2. If there's somewhere you need to be you might want to set an alarm to make sure you don't fall asleep or lose track of time. This way, you will be able to relax without worrying about running late.
3. The more you practice the easier you will find you can slip into a state of deep relaxation.

Wrap

You now have a powerful tool to help you bring about a calm state of mind. With practice, you can use this to help reduce your anxiety and destress at the end of a tough day.

What next?

In the next lesson, we will be looking at strategies on how to stop negative thoughts intruding your mind so that you can experience the more positive moments in your life for longer.