Guided Imagery for Anxiety

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Have You Tried Guided Imagery for Anxiety Management?

Wouldn't it be nice if you could escape from your problems? Wouldn't it be great if you could be magically transported from your own home to a location of your dreams surrounded by the people and things that you love the most? Wouldn't it be amazing if you could go there any time you wanted, for free?

People with high levels of stress and anxiety are always looking for the easy answers. The speedy solution sounds appealing because anxiety is very physically and emotionally taxing. They want to find the quick fix that makes their symptoms dissipate rapidly with minimal effort on their part. Usually, such requests are lofty and impractical – but not this time.

This time is different because there is a useful technique called guided imagery that can fulfill all of the goals listed above and more. Guided imagery can whisk you away from your life to another place at another time. Even better, guided imagery is easy to learn, and with practice you can increase your ability to find higher levels of the relaxation you seek.

What is Guided Imagery?

Depending on what you read, you will find different definitions for guided imagery. The variations exist because guided imagery has become so useful across various settings that each group has changed the definition to suit their needs.

One option is that guided imagery is a method of forming mental images that permit you to take a peaceful journey. Another definition is that guided imagery is a program of directed and suggested thoughts that guide your mind and imagination towards a calm and focused state.

Mental health therapists consider guided imagery to be a consistently useful intervention for those with high stress, anxiety and depression.

Benefits of Guided Imagery

There are many practical benefits to using guided imagery. They span a wide range and include aspects of physical and mental health.

If you are not convinced of the positives of guided imagery, consider what it can do for you. It can:

- Create a sense of physical and mental relaxation.
- Lower blood pressure.
- Help you achieve goals and desired changes in your life.
- Prepare you for an important performance or event.

- Add a sense of self-control and independence in your life.

Next page: deep breathing and getting started.

First Thing's First – Breathe

Guided imagery is a second-tiered relaxation technique. This means that you must learn at least one other relaxation to use it effectively. In this case, deep breathing is the primary technique.

The good news is that on its own deep breathing is highly effective in promoting relaxation and reducing stress and anxiety. When paired with guided imagery, you create quite a powerful team.

Deep breathing is the simplest and most basic relaxation skill available. Many other techniques utilize deep breathing skills as a step in their process, so learning and perfecting them now will be very helpful later.

Before you begin deep breathing, pay attention to your normal breathing patterns. Chances are good that you are a “chest breather.” Don’t worry, though. Many people are. Chest breathing, or shallow breathing, involves only inhaling enough to fill the top part of your lungs and chest.

If there are any newborn babies in your life, study their breathing. Babies typically breathe by pushing their stomach in and out. Somewhere along the line, you began to breathe in a way that promotes stress and anxiety. That needs to change.

To practice deep breathing, set aside at least five minutes several times per day. Assume a comfortable position either sitting or laying down. If sitting, put your feet flat on the floor to feel grounded and steady. Put your right hand on your stomach and left hand on your chest. As you breathe in, feel your right hand moving in and out while your left remains still. The goal is to fill your lungs entirely by using your diaphragm to suck in more air.

Most people move their shoulders when breathing deeply, but this only partially fills the lungs. Work to extend the seconds inhaling and exhaling by using your diaphragm and your stomach. Five seconds in and seven seconds out is a great goal but three in and five out might be your starting point.

Deep breathing provides access to extra oxygen which allows your heart to slow down. Repeat as needed to gain a sense of physical relaxation.

How to Use Guided Imagery

Now that your body is feeling calmer, you can target your mind. Guided imagery can be done in many places at many different times of day. To get the most out of your imagery session, set aside at least 10 - 15 minutes, though more may yield better results.

During the early stages of your experience with guided imagery, experiment with different rooms of your house that provide different levels of relaxation. Relaxing in nature can prove very beneficial, so you may want to complete several trials outdoors.

Before you begin, remember this: relaxation takes time. Guided imagery will feel uncomfortable and strange at first. Don’t fight this discomfort. Let it remind you that doing new things can be challenging; challenging but worthwhile.

Next page: the guided imagery process.

How to Use Guided Imagery

Guided imageries come in many shapes and sizes but a popular version involves you finding your “safe place.” The process looks like this:

1. Imagine a Place

Imagine a comfortable, special place in your mind. It can be real or imagined. People often choose a favorite vacation spot or a place that brings feelings of peace and safety from childhood. It can be a place you’ve seen on TV or a perfect combination of favorites spots. Beaches regularly come to mind, but parks, concert venues, sports stadiums and even restaurants are suitable locations.

2. Immerse Yourself

Once there, begin to immerse yourself in all the location has to offer. You can do this by adding your senses to your imagination.

Normally when you imagine a location, you focus on the sights that are around you. This is great, but it is only the starting point.

Expand to your sense of touch by considering how warm the sun is on your face or how the breeze is blowing your clothes.

Expand to your sense of smell by taking in the fragrances of the tropical flowers or the spices of the food cooking in the kitchen.

What do you hear at your location? Are there birds singing from the trees or the crashing of waves against the shoreline.

Lastly, imagine what you would taste at your special place. Remember that you do not need to be eating to taste something. For example, at the beach you can taste the spray of salt water or the gritty sand in your teeth. Maybe you can taste your own sweat as it forms on your lips.

The addition of all senses enables you to fully transport yourself to another location that breeds peace.

3. Optimize

After you exploit your senses, you can move towards optimizing your safe location. While there, you can engage in whatever activity you imagine for yourself. Some only like to lay on the beach while others take the opportunity to draw or paint in their minds.

Your imagination gives you the tools and security to freely express yourself without fear of judgment. What do you want to say? Who do you want to say it to? What feelings need expressed? This is the time to do it.

Now that it has been expressed in your imagination, you can determine if you want to communicate the same in real life.

4. Return Home

When the time comes to leave your place, imagine that you are following a trail, path or street towards home. Be sure to remind yourself that this place you created belongs to you. You can return any time you would like.

Conclusion

If you need a break from the life around you, it’s time to explore the world of guided imagery. Whether you use it for damage control when symptoms are high or as prevention before anxiety builds, this relaxation can bring the peace of mind you have been seeking.

A happy, calmer you is waiting … in your imagination.