

The Power of Imagery

Imagery can be used to help you calm down before you enter a situation that is likely to make you feel anxious. Imagery can also give you the courage to stay in situations long enough to experience the natural reduction in anxiety that occurs over time. It helps to imagine scenes that are tranquil and relaxing to you, or inspirational ideas that increase your commitment to facing anxiety. Relaxing scenes may be actual places you know that feel safe and calming, or they may be tranquil scenes you create in your mind. Inspirational imagery can include people, music, or situations that increase your courage and confidence. The specific scene is less important than how the image makes you feel and whether it helps you face your anxiety.

The more senses you can incorporate into your image, the more helpful your imagery is likely to be. If you can imagine the smells, sounds, sights, and tactile sensations of the scene, you will improve your ability to relax or get inspired. For example, if you imagine yourself walking along a tree-lined mountain path, you may want to focus your attention on the birds singing, the light dancing through the tree branches, the smell of pine, the greenness of the forest, and the cool breeze as it touches your skin. If you have an inspirational scene from a movie, and you want to use this image to help you tolerate a higher level of anxiety, you might imagine how this person looks, the music playing in the background, and the feeling of courage in your chest. Each of your senses can contribute to your experience of relaxation and/or confidence.

It can help to anticipate and prepare for situations in which you are likely to get angry. It is best to use imagery before entering a situation in which you are at high risk for losing your temper.

1. Relaxation imagery: Calming down before entering these situations prepares you to handle events that might normally trigger anger or anxiety. The imagery methods described as well as lowering anxiety can also be used to prepare you for situations in which you are at risk for losing your temper.

2. Plan and Prepare responses: In addition to using imagery to calm yourself; you can use imagery to plan and prepare the types of responses you want to make.

3. Feeling calm, confident and assertive: It is helpful to rehearse and construct an ideal image of how you want to respond; the image can help guide your responses in the actual situation

Plan and Prepare Responses so as to feel confident and assertive

You may find it helpful to imagine yourself saying what you want to say, in the manner in which you want to say it, and getting the response you hope to get. Just in case things don't turn out as well as you hope, it may be helpful to imagine how you can handle problems that might occur. Mentally rehearsing responses to challenging situations can help you feel more confident and less threatened if things go poorly. In turn, this confidence can help you

respond in effective and adaptive ways, rather than simply erupting in anger when things don't work out or running away in fear. Imagery works, in part, because it helps you think through possible problem areas and design your response in advance. Furthermore, it can be helpful to see yourself as effective and relaxed in a high-risk, stressful situation.

If you can identify a situation that is going to be stressful and in which you are at high risk for experiencing anger or fear, you have the opportunity to plan, write out, and rehearse exactly what you want to say and how you want to say it. This script can help you develop a strategy targeted to what you want to achieve and enter the situation with a greater degree of confidence.

Feeling calm, confident and assertive

Imagery does not need to be about a place or another person. You may find it helpful vividly recall experiences in which you felt confident and capable. Jolene was nervous about an upcoming meeting with her manager. In the past she had found ways to avoid such meetings, but this was now a fear she wanted to confront, and she was committed to taking that step. Before the meeting, she decided to use imagery to help calm herself, boost her confidence, and put herself in a better frame of mind. One area of her life where Jolene felt confident was her part-time job as a piano teacher. She decided to imagine vividly how she felt when she worked with her piano students. She remembered and imagined her sense of pride and accomplishment when her students played music well. She heard the music in her mind and felt the cooling air of the window fan in her piano room. She felt her back straighten, and she took on the posture of a successful teacher. After spending five minutes imagining this scene, Jolene felt calmer, more confident, and more capable. When she entered the meeting with her manager, she was able to sit tall in her chair, and she felt more prepared to stay in the situation and tolerate whatever anxiety arose.

Anchoring

There is also a technique called ‘anchoring’ that you can use (optional). In this method we make an anchor by putting our thumb and forefinger together. Negative feelings go on the non-dominant hand and positive on our dominant hand

Feeling loved, cherished and welcomed

Close your eyes and think of a time when you experienced being welcomed—perhaps when you met a dear old friend. Remember the joyous look on their face when they first saw you. Or you might remember a surprise party that was given for you. You were the centre of attention.

Touch your thumb to a finger on your dominant hand and hold it for thirty seconds. After thirty seconds let go and relax your right hand. You have now made an anchor of a welcoming experience.

Future pacing

The Neuro Linguistic Programming folks call this step future pacing. It consists of imagining a time in the future when you will confront a new situation that triggers something from your past: for example, going to a party where you don’t know anyone, or starting a new job. You future pace it by firing your positive anchor and imagining yourself in the new situation. See, hear, and feel yourself handling it well. After you’ve done that, run through the imaginary scene again without the positive anchor. What future pacing actually amounts to is a positive dress rehearsal.

Here are some things you might anchor:

I think of a time during adulthood when:

- I respectfully said I would not do something.
- I wanted something and went after it.
- I expressed anger respectfully.
- I expressed anger in a straightforward and valuing way.
- I left a painful situation.
- I was speaking to an authority figure in a coherent and articulate manner.

Making a stacked Anchor:

You can make a stacked anchor if you like. A stacked anchor is where you take an experience your anchoring and (A) anchor it for 30 seconds (then bring your mind back to the here and now) and then anchor another experience your anchoring (B) for 30 seconds (and even a third one (C) if you have one. See the example below

Anchoring feeling more secure and less fearful

In this example I make a *stacked* anchor to help me feel more secure in situations I fear. This involves thinking of one, two or even three experiences in your life where you felt the most secure. If you have trouble thinking of these, you can simply imagine a scene of absolute security. The two experiences I used to make my security anchor were:

- A. A memory of being held in a love embrace by someone who loved me unconditionally at that moment
- B. A memory of being wrapped in my soft quilt, waking up after ten hours of sleep and having no obligations or responsibilities

Whenever a part of me gets really scared, I fire the anchor. It's wonderful! It takes me out of any fearful state. The fearful feelings try to come back, but the anchor interrupts an "awfulizing spiral." It gives me some moments of safety and relief. Sometimes it relieves my fears completely.

You can also anchor negative feelings on your non-dominant hand and link them both together (optional) so that the positive experiences on the dominant hand override the negative feelings on the non-dominant hand (by firing both anchors at the same time and letting go of the negative stuff on the non-dominant hand). This is optional (see H E A L below)

HEAL

HEAL is a technique that can help give a structure to use with imagery work

H: Have a positive experience

E: Enrich it (smells, sounds, sights, and tactile sensations etc.)

A: Absorb it

L: Link positive to negative (optional):

In this example I use anchors but you don't have to use them if you prefer not to - it still works

Relaxation exercise

Start by noticing any places in you that feel tight or contracted or any negative material you have and make anchor of it on your non-dominant hand

H: Imagine being in relaxing settings, such as on the beach under a warm sun or walking along a forest glade and relax your non-dominant hand anchor and anchor these positive feelings on your dominant hand. Really get into that relaxing scene by using your senses: the smells and sounds, the sun or cool breeze on your skin.

E: Open to relaxation, and feel what it's like. Let it fill you, becoming more intense. Stay with it, help it last. Let go more and more as you relax. Give yourself over to a delicious sense of calm. Notice different aspects of this experience, keeping it fresh for you. Feel a growing tranquillity. Notice how it is in your body that sense of relaxation

A: Sense that relaxation is sinking into you, becoming a part of you. As you become more relaxed, you can feel any tension or resistance falling away.

L: Relaxation is sinking into and easing places inside you that have been tight or contracted. Tension is easing as relaxation settles down into it like a gentle rain. When you want, let go of any negative material you anchored on your non-dominant hand and just stay with the sense of relaxation.

Bibliography

[*Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think* by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky](#)

[*Hardwiring Happiness: How to reshape your brain and your life* by Richard Hanson](#)

[Bradshaw, John: "Homecoming"](#)