

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.

Imagery does not need to be about a place or another person. You may find it help-to 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 step on her Fear Ladder, 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.

Taken from *Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think* by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky