

Guided Imagery & Visualization
Developed by The Center For Mind Body Medicine

I. What is Imagery?

Guided imagery is a form of deliberate and directed daydreaming, and uses all of the senses. The unconscious mind communicates information and inspiration to the conscious mind and to the body as well. Imagery makes thoughts vivid and is connected with many important functions in the brain.

II. Experiential Exercise: Lemon Imagery

To illustrate the effect of imagery on physiological processes, we will examine the process of eating a lemon

Script for Lemon Imagery:

Take a deep breath and allow your eyes to close.... I would like you to imagine now that you are standing in your kitchen or the kitchen of someone you know... in front of you is a cutting board..... Next to the cutting board is a good, sharp knife.....

Take a few moments to imagine the kitchen...the color of the countertops..... the appliances..... the cupboards.....notice if there are windows..... and so on.....

Also notice any kitchen smells or sounds - the running of a dishwasher or the hum of a refrigerator....or the sound of a clock on the wall...take some time to notice everything, using all of your senses, what do you see....what do you hear....what do you smell...how do you feel being there in your kitchen.....

Now imagine that on the cutting board sits a plump, fresh, juicy lemon..... in your mind, hold the lemon in one hand, feeling its weight and textures.....

Then place it back on the board and carefully cut it in half with the knife..... Feel the resistance to the knife and how it gives way as the lemon splits.....

Notice the pale yellow of the pulp, the whiteness of the inner peel, and see whether you have cut through a seed or two.

Carefully cut one of the halves in two..... Notice where a drop or two of juice has pearled on the surface of one of the quarters....

*Now imagine lifting this lemon wedge to your mouth, smelling the sharp fresh scent.....
Now bite into the sour, juicy pulp.*

The lemon imagery is a simple illustration of imagery's ability to trigger a physical response. Imagery pertains not only to visual images—that is, things you can see—but also to auditory images or sounds as well as images of smell, taste, movement and touch. Imagery brings about physiological changes because it activates parts of the brain virtually identical to those you experience in a real situation where you are actually seeing or hearing or smelling. When you imagine the lemon, for example, the optical cortex, that part of your brain that is concerned with receiving sensory images through your eyes, is stimulated in much the same way it would be if you actually saw a lemon.

The impact of images on brain activity opens up all kinds of possibilities for self-healing and improved immune functioning. We can use imagery to engage our parasympathetic nervous system and reduce our stress response.

Research has shown the usefulness of imagery in lowering blood pressure or heart rate, decreasing anxiety, improving mood and reducing the symptoms of PTSD. Imagery has also been shown to improve immune function for people with illnesses such as cancer & HIV.

Guided imagery can be active or passive. **Active imagery** is when we use words and sometimes music to guide you through an imagery experience. **Passive imagery** is when images come to you spontaneously that are yours alone. Both active and passive imagery have an effect on your brain and body.

III. Experiential Exercise: Safe Place Imagery

Just as negative images can provoke fear and distress, positive images can evoke warmth, relaxation, peace, and love. Because the body responds in essentially the same way to made-up imagery as it does to real experiences, positive healing images such as a relaxing safe place can be an effective tool for stress and pain management. Creating a safe or comfortable place provides a kind of mental and emotional time out.

Safe Place Script

We are going to use imagery now to help you go to a safe and comfortable place where you can relax. Creating a safe or comfortable place provides a kind of mental and emotional time out.

Sit comfortably, breathe, and relax, trusting that your imagination will do the work for you. Feel yourself supported by the chair or the floor.

Allow yourself to go to a place that feels comfortable and safe to you, perhaps a place in nature you particularly like, or a place indoors that feels just right for you. You may know the place well or never have seen it before.

If you find yourself moving from place to place, enjoy the process, and eventually allow yourself to come to rest in one place.

Look around you. What do you see? What do you hear or smell? How do you feel? What are you wearing? Make yourself comfortable wherever you are.

Are you alone, or is someone else there? Perhaps an animal? Make this special place perfect for yourself.

You may like to add something or take something away from this place. If you would like to bring someone else into this place, please do so. This is your own special place, your safe and comfortable place.

Breathe deeply, and enjoy the feelings of relaxation and comfort. Know that you can return to this place anytime you wish to relax and be replenished.

Knowing you can return whenever you like, gently come back to the room and become aware of yourself, sitting or lying down, breathing deeply, connected to this space in this room.

...Slowly open your eyes.

IV. Homework

Please practice safe place imagery at home and write about your experience in your weekly reflections

- Think about how you might use the Safe Place Imagery at home?
 - Use the Safe Place imagery regularly, either when you feel especially upset or agitated or simply at a certain time every day.
 - You may go back to the same safe place or to a new safe place. Be open to whatever comes to you.
 - Allow 15-20 minutes for this exercise when you begin to use it. With practice you may be able to find and enjoy the benefits of your safe place in far less time.
- Remember, if these exercises are difficult the first time, try again later. The more often you do it, the easier it will become. The work of guided imagery is about accepting the wisdom of your own unconscious.

