

TWU Counseling Center

Imagery in Stress Reduction

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing. We are all aware of how particular environments can be very relaxing, while others can be intensely stressful. The principle behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you can use your imagination to recreate a place or scene that is very relaxing. The more intensely you use your imagination to recreate the place or situation, the stronger and more realistic the experience will be.

What is imagery?

Remember that your brain is a mass of nerve cells. Your sense organs convert signals from your environment into nerve impulses. These feed into the areas of your brain that interpret that environment. Imagery seeks to create a similar set of nerve impulses that can feed into those areas of the brain that experience the outside world.

This can be illustrated very effectively if you have access to equipment that measures body stress (this functions by measuring, for example, muscle electrical activity, electrical conductivity through skin sweat, etc.). By imagining a pleasant scene, which reduces stress, you can cause a needle on the machine to move in one direction. By imagining an unpleasant and stressful situation, you can move it in the opposite direction. This can be quite alarming when you see it happen the first time!

How to use imagery when stressed:

You can use imagery in the following ways to reduce stress:

One common use of imagery in relaxation is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image, with sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of cool iced tea, the warmth of sun, etc. Use the imagined place as a retreat from stress and pressure.

Scenes can involve complex images such as lying on a beach in a deserted cove. You may 'see' cliffs, sea and sand around you, 'hear' the waves crashing against rocks, 'smell' the salt in the air, and feel the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze on your body. Other images might include looking at a mountain view, swimming in a tropical pool, or whatever - you will be able to come up with the most effective images for yourself.

Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve mental pictures of stress flowing out of the body, or of stress, distractions and everyday concerns being folded away and locked into a padlocked chest.

Imagery in preparation and rehearsal:

You can also use imagery in rehearsal before a big event, allowing you to run through it in your mind. It allows you to practice in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practiced in handling it. Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals. This help to give you the self-confidence you need to do something well.

