

 Coping Exercise n/a Client No

Visualization for Stress Reduction

Symptoms of stress can manifest in a range of physical, psychosocial, and behavioral problems, such as headaches, muscular tension, irritability, anxiety, and an inability to cope with life in general [1]. While stress is a common experience, stress-related symptoms do not need to rule one's life. One technique that is effective in reducing the instances and intensity of everyday stressors is visualization.

Visualization is a relatively simple process that significantly reduces stress levels in both physical and psychological states [2]. Visualization is, in essence, the practice of creating detailed mental imagery of a peaceful setting so that visual representations of calm and relaxation can be connected to a physiologically relaxed state [2].

From the Ancient Greeks to modern-day elite athletes, visualization and imagery have been used through the annals of history to help bring added balance to our minds and bodies. Visualization techniques have been shown to reduce physiological and psychological tension related to stress, enhance well-being, lower anxiety, decrease symptoms of depression, and improve stress-related skin conditions [3,4,5].

The addition of mindful breathing techniques can further reinforce the effectiveness of visualization for stress reduction [6]. The reduction in stress from visualizing a pleasant beach scene, for instance, is more profound when preceded by a short deep-breathing exercise. Moreover, visualization effectively reduces stress when imagery incorporates supplementary sensory information, such as auditory, motor, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory elements [7].

Psychologist Emil Coué once said that the power of the imagination far exceeds that of the will. While we might not simply *will* ourselves into a relaxed state, we can *imagine* that relaxed state. Indeed, visualization profoundly affects stress reduction partly because people who visualize an imagined scene react as though they experienced it [7]. This exercise will guide clients through visualization for stress reduction by connecting the sensations of relaxation with peaceful visual imagery during times of stress.



Author

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Goal

This exercise aims to help clients connect the sensations of relaxation with peaceful visual imagery during times of stress. In this way, they may use their imagination to create a calming and relaxing place in the mind to better manage and reduce experiences of stress.



Advice

- Before beginning this exercise, please ensure the client's environment is comfortable, quiet, and free of distractions like mobile devices. Clients should find a quiet place where they will not be disturbed.
- This exercise provides two potential options for visualization. One version allows clients to create their imagery, while the second version follows a more structured format that fills in most of the details. The most suitable option is dependent on the preferences and creative ability of the client in question.
- If you choose to personally guide your client(s) through this visualization, you may add a layer of experience by asking them to explore all five senses while visualizing. For this purpose, we have included a curated list of questions and prompts that can be found in Appendix. These are designed to help clients explore all five senses and think about the extra details that will bring their visualization to life.
- Remind clients that it may feel strange to immerse themselves fully as they begin to use visualization for stress reduction. However, with practice, this will become easier, more effective, and feel more natural.
- As clients practice visualization, they should be encouraged to include as much sensory information as possible. For instance, in the visualization of a beach setting, clients might imagine a cool breeze on their skin, sunlight hitting the bright blue water, the sound of birds chirping and waves lapping on the shore, the scent of the sea air, and the taste of a cold drink so that the image becomes as detailed as possible. The inclusion of this additional sensory detail creates a powerfully relaxing experience that will help reduce stress levels.
- Clients who find it difficult to tune into all the senses at one time should begin with their strongest sense first. With practice, the others will improve in time. Clients can gradually add sounds, textures, smells, and temperatures until they have created a vivid scene. The use of ambient sounds or music that compliment imagery may also help obscure real-life distractions and help the client feel more immersed within their visualization.
- It may help clients set the alarm or timer so that they can better relax without the worry of losing track of time. In doing so, they will be more likely to relax, knowing that their schedule will not be affected.



References

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Visualization for Stress Reduction

Stress is a normal part of life. You can experience stress from your environment, your body, and even your thoughts. People experience stress differently, but some common signs are intense feelings of tension, anxiety, and worry; raised blood pressure; problems with sleep, memory, and concentration, and generally feeling overwhelmed. Sometimes, we react to stressful experiences by indulging in harmful behaviors, such as smoking or drinking more alcohol than usual. However, there are more helpful ways to manage stress.

Visualization is one way to help you feel more relaxed and reduce feelings of stress. Visualization involves using your imagination to transport you to a calm, peaceful place in your mind, free from stress. This helps put your mind and body in a more relaxed state and allows you to think more clearly about stressful situations. This exercise will help you use your imagination to connect the feeling of being relaxed to peaceful imagery during times of stress. With practice, you can return to this place as a temporary escape when you find yourself in a stressful situation.

Version 1: Creative visualization/Semi-structured visualization

First, find a suitable place to sit or lie down, then get into a position where your body feels relaxed and comfortable. Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. Allow your stomach to expand and contract as you inhale and exhale with each breath. Notice any muscles that feel tight and think about relaxing those areas, loosening any stress-related tension in your body.

Now, think about a place where you feel relaxed, peaceful, and happy. Picture yourself in the most relaxing environment you can imagine. The setting for your visualization can be anywhere so long as it is a place where feelings of stress and tension would be the furthest thing from your mind. It may be a place you have visited in the past or created in your imagination - this is entirely up to you.

Some people might imagine lying down in a meadow filled with wildflowers. Perhaps you notice long grass growing under your feet or a path that leads you through a lush forest. Your scene might be a quiet beach; a cool, shady spot in the woods; snuggled in front of a fireplace; fishing; or another setting that is peaceful and relaxing to you.

Now, you will add detail to your imagined scene by exploring all your senses - sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste - as if you were there in that setting. For example, you might think about the feel of a fire's warmth or cozy blanket against your skin, the sweet taste of hot chocolate around a campfire, or the sound of fresh snow beneath your feet.

Now, it is time to enjoy the scene you have created and allow yourself to spend some time taking it all in. Appreciate being there for a few minutes, allowing yourself to feel like you are there in your peaceful place. You might notice your heart rate and breathing slow down as you let go of the stress you have been feeling. Close your eyes and continue taking slow, deep breaths as you visualize the stress leaving your body in waves with each exhale. With each breath in, imagine calming waves moving into your body. Tell yourself that you will feel relaxed and less stressed when you open your eyes.

When you are ready, count back from ten. Open your eyes and gently take yourself out of the scene and back to the present moment.

Version 2: Scripted visualization - The Private Garden

Find a quiet space where you will not be interrupted. Close your eyes, take a few slow deep breaths in through your nose, and exhale through your mouth. Relax any tension you notice in your body as you clear your mind and allow yourself to get comfortable.

Now, imagine yourself slowly walking along a pleasant path lined with blooming wildflowers. It is a beautiful day, and the sun feels warm on your skin. You feel relaxed, calm, and happy. Before long, you come to a large iron gate. You know this gate will take you to a place where you feel appreciated, accepted, and free from harm. The gate creaks softly as you push it open and enter your private garden.

As you look around your garden, you see that it is brimming with your favorite, most cherished things. Everything you find pleasant and calming can be found here. Perhaps there are flowers, trees, or animals. You might hear the sound of bird calls, running water, or even gentle, soothing music. As you look around, you begin to notice all the colors and objects in your garden. You cannot help but notice how wonderfully pleasing they are.

Look at the shapes and patterns that surround you and notice their variety. As you look at the ground and then to the sky, you can see the point where they meet. Your private garden is serene and tranquil. It is a place where you feel calm and rested. Everything co-exists here peacefully.

As you look at your surroundings, think about how the things in this place might feel if you were to reach out and touch them. Spend some time exploring. Notice the air; how does it feel on your skin? Can you feel a breeze? As you explore your garden, you notice that some objects are soft and smooth, some feel warm to the touch, others are cool and jagged. Take the time to feel the stillness, serenity, and calmness of your garden. You now notice the sounds that you hear. Every noise you hear sounds soothing, pleasing to the ear, and comforting.

Spend some time here and feel yourself relax even further as you identify more of the sounds in your garden. As you listen, also become aware of the scents you might smell here. What do you smell? Take a deep breath in and notice the comforting fragrances that are present.

Enjoy the time you spend in your private garden and imagine yourself becoming calmer and more relaxed. When you feel like you are ready to leave your private garden, slowly walk back towards the iron gate through which you entered.

You feel remarkably relaxed and content. These pleasant feelings will stay with you for the rest of the day.

You gently push the gate open and see the path that led you here. As you walk along the path, returning to the here and now, remember that you can come back to this place at any time. As you open your eyes, you feel refreshed, alert, and ready to continue with your day.



Reflection questions

How did it feel to complete this exercise?

On a scale of 1-10 (1 = not stressed at all, 10 = extremely stressed), how would you rate the stress you felt before this exercise?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not stressed at all					Extremely stressed				

On a scale of 1-10 (1 = not stressed at all, 10 = extremely stressed), how would you rate the stress you feel after completing this visualization exercise?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not stressed at all					Extremely stressed				

What details of your visualization created the greatest feeling of calm for you?



Appendix: Sensory questions and prompts

Sight

- What do you see if you look up? For example, you might notice sunlight flickering through the leaves of the trees above.
- What movements or areas of stillness attract your attention?
- What does the sky look like? Is it clear? Are there clouds?
- Is it daylight, or do you see the moon shining?
- Do you see the sun setting in the distance?
- Do you see waves gently lapping on the shore? Or trees moving in the wind?
- What colors, shapes, and textures do you see in your surroundings?
- What kinds of trees or plants do you see?
- Look down. Is the ground smooth or uneven beneath your feet?

Touch

- Notice what is in front of you. If you were to reach out, what would you touch? How would it feel?
- Notice the air around you. Is there a breeze? Is it warm? Cool? How does it feel on your skin?
- Do you feel the sun on your skin?
- What are you wearing? How does the fabric feel against your skin?
- Are you barefoot? What do you feel underfoot?
- What is on the ground/floor around you? How would it feel to touch it?

Smell

- What do you smell?
- What special scents are part of this scene? For example, freshly baked cookies, the smell of flowers, pine needles, or freshly cut grass.
- Identify three things you can smell.
- Do you smell the earthy scent of a campfire? Or perhaps the scent of salty sea air?

Sound

- What sounds do you hear? For example, do you hear birdsong, the splash of a waterfall, or the leaves rustling in the wind? Maybe you can hear twigs cracking under your feet as you walk.
- Is music playing? If so, what kind of music? How does this music make you feel?
- Can you identify any animal calls?
- Is there water nearby? If so, is it moving rapidly like a waterfall or more like a slow-moving river?
- What can you hear that is nearby? Or far away, in the distance?
- If you listen carefully, what is happening in the gaps between these sounds?



Taste

- Do you have a drink in your hand? What flavors do you taste as you drink?
- Is it raining? How does the rain taste on your tongue?
- Run your tongue over your teeth and cheeks, notice the taste in your mouth at this moment. Do you sense sweetness or bitterness? Perhaps you notice a neutral taste?
- Breathe in the air. How does it taste?
- Notice three things that you can taste.