

GUIDED
IMAGERY *for*
GROUPS

Fifty Visualizations
that promote **RELAXATION,**
PROBLEM-SOLVING,
CREATIVITY, and WELL-BEING

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Chapter 1



INTRODUCTION

Guided imagery is one of the most potent tools we have as individuals to manage stress, unleash our creativity, change our attitudes, set and reach goals, tap into our inner wisdom, relax, stimulate peak performance, and activate our natural healing powers.

Guided Imagery for Groups is a collection of visualizations which are formatted for easy use with groups. The book includes warm-up relaxation scripts and over fifty guided imagery scenarios which are organized into seven sections. Each section pertains to a different group objective, ranging from simple images that promote relaxation or creativity to complex visualizations that stimulate problem-solving or healing.

Guided imagery, as a teaching tool, is meant for individuals interested in probing specific issues in their lives, as well as those seeking relaxation, sensory awareness, or avenues for introspective exploration. The scripts in *Guided Imagery for Groups* span the spectrum so you can match the interests of different groups and individuals. The images are open and inviting, not controlling. In fact, these visualizations will guide students to a place where they have more control over their lives.

Guided imagery with a group can be especially powerful. Not only does each individual benefit from the personal inner journey, comparing notes afterwards allows us to learn from each other's experience. Talking about a visualization usually deepens its meaning to the individual and heightens the sense of connection to others in their separate journeys.

The group acts as a witness to what we have discovered; it also acts as a catalyst. The synergy of a group is contagious and even during the process of reading the visualization script a palpable group energy is often generated, serving to heighten the imagery experience for everyone.

Beginners in imagery learn best in a group with a guide who can direct self-exploration. Group synergy and support hasten the learning process. Later, as skills and motivation increase, self-guided sessions are possible—although reflecting on the experience and sharing insights with others are still important.

ROLE OF THE LEADER/GUIDE

■ **BE PREPARED.** Whatever script you choose for a particular situation, be sure to involve yourself with the images personally before using them in a group setting. Start by practicing on your own. Record the script and then let the tape guide you through the visualization as if you were a participant. This will give you good feedback about your pacing and inflection. Jot down your insights, or fragments of your experience. Then answer the reflection questions and share your insights with someone. This will give you an idea of what your participants might experience.

The more comfortable you are with the images and possible responses, the easier it will be to guide a group through the script.

■ **CHOOSE APPROPRIATE IMAGES.** First identify the goal you would like to achieve through guided imagery. If you want to teach people how to calm down at the end of a stressful day, look in the Calming or Centering section for an appropriate script. If you want to lead people through an exploration of values or life purpose, look in the Clarity or Congruence section. If you want to help people work

through past issues or relationships that are affecting them today, check out the Connectedness section. Guided imagery also makes an excellent segue to and from other content material.

Read through several visualizations with similar goals to find the one you think will fit the time frame, image system, and sophistication level of your group. Study the script carefully, then personalize it to your style and the group's needs by adding or eliminating warm-up information, enhancing the script with words and images that may be particularly meaningful to the group, and planning a processing activity that fits the risk level and expectations of the group.

CREATE A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT. As a group leader you have the power to control the environment in which the group learns and works. For guided imagery, make sure you create an environment that is entirely permissive. There are no right or wrong ways to visualize.

Adults learn from experience, which means that your participants will know what environment suits them best. Your group environment must make room for all of these respective experience-based comfort zones. For instance, if one person would like the lights on, and another prefers them off, try both. If some relax better on the floor, make sure their space is comfortable. If the imagery would be enhanced by an outdoor setting, go on location—or at least see that your meeting room is well ventilated.

Always make sure the room is at a comfortable temperature and free from distractions. Nothing is more disruptive to the imaging process than intrusive sounds or interruptions. Physical comfort is also essential. Backaches, headaches, and even the common cold can interfere with the hypnotic procedures of visualization. Make every effort to minimize any physical discomfort your group members may have.

PREPARE THE GROUP WITH INFORMATION. In most groups you will find some people who are familiar with guided imagery and others who are complete newcomers. You may even encounter some folks who are hostile or anxious because of what they have heard about visualization. In most situations, giving information about the technique and clarifying the specific activities you will be using goes a long

way toward alleviating resistance and getting the group on the same playing field.

Information in the Relaxation Basics and Guided Imagery Basics presentation outlines (Chapters 2 and 3) will provide a good starting point. Many scripts also have introductory material in chalktalk format for your use in preparing the group.

Encourage your participants to approach the guided imagery experience with an open attitude and a vacation mentality of exploration, fun, and discovery.

■ **PREPARE THE GROUP WITH RELAXATION.** Always begin a guided imagery session with some form of relaxation. Even a few deep breaths will help people calm down and turn their attention inward. Each script has a few lines of breathing and centering. For maximum benefit, and with complicated images, use a five to twenty-minute relaxation routine to help participants reach a truly altered state of consciousness before beginning the imaging process.

If you don't have a favorite relaxation routine of your own, you'll find relaxation scripts in Chapter 4 and additional techniques suggested in the Relaxation Basics Presentation, Chapter 2.

■ **READ THE SCRIPT WITH AUTHENTIC STYLE.** There is no one right way to read relaxation and guided imagery scripts. Some narrators use an expressionless monotone. Others infuse their reading with pacing and inflection intended to heighten the imagery. Some speak with strength and authority. Others barely whisper. You need to find your own natural style.

However, there is one essential guideline for reading: take your time. Remember that your listeners do not know what is coming. They need time for the mental images to form and unfold. They need time to explore and sense. They need time to make transitions.

Listen to some pre-recorded imagery tapes to find out what feels like a comfortable pace and voice to you. Practice matching that rhythm and expressiveness. Test out different styles by reading scripts to family and friends. Listen to their feedback—and to the feedback of your groups. When you find an authentic style that works for you and your audiences, stick to it!

■ **FACILITATE PROCESSING OF IMAGES.** It may seem risky or too personal to require participants to talk about their guided imagery experience. I believe the benefits far outweigh the risks. Affirming discoveries out loud powerfully reinforces new insights or decisions. Hearing others' stories triggers new insights. Don't miss this built-in learning enhancer.

Each script is followed by one or two reflection questions. Give people a chance to affirm their insights by saying them out loud to at least one other person. Individuals can choose the level of disclosure that fits them. And if it fits your goals, spend a significant amount of time in this rich activity.

■ **LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE.** These guidelines, like most of the contents in this book, are designed to be modified time and time again by you, the group leader, as you gain more experience with guided imagery in groups. Keep notes about each visualization experience, with suggestions for improvement or adaptation. Ask for feedback from your groups about what they find particularly valuable or meaningful. Continue to experiment so you can stretch and grow along with your participants. And have fun!

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The next two chapters of *Guided Imagery for Groups* are intended to give the leader content information and process ideas for teaching about relaxation and guided imagery.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of relaxation techniques that can be used effectively for personal enjoyment and stress management. Notes to the group leader (*in italics*) suggest experiential activities to demonstrate the concepts.

Chapter 3 outlines the basic concepts of guided imagery in chalktalk format, with suggestions to the leader for inserting imagery experiences to illustrate the presentation.

The scripts in *Guided Imagery for Groups* are loosely organized into eight chapters for your convenience. There is no magic in the groupings. The categories overlap, so be sure to look through them all if your

group has a special need. The divider sections between chapters give a short capsule description of the visualizations in that section. The scripts are organized in each section from simple to more complex images.

Each visualization includes specific goals, timing techniques, hints for preparation, special considerations the leader may need to consider, warm-up concept chaktalks, reflection questions, and instructions for processing the experience in small or large groups.

Although all of the imagery scripts have a very brief relaxation component, for maximum benefit you will want to use one of the foundation **Relaxation** scripts in Chapter 4 as a prelude to group visualization.

Chapter 5, **Calming**, includes physical and mental images which help people release tension as they become calm and quiet.

Chapter 6, **Centering**, focuses on letting go of tension or anxiety, and returning to a state of harmony and balance.

Chapter 7, **Creativity**, helps people transform, release, and create new energy, new images, new places, and new processes, challenging them to break out of old patterns and make bold changes in life habits and directions.

Chapter 8, **Congruence**, includes images that are designed to help people develop self-awareness, self-acceptance, honesty, and integrity.

Chapter 9, **Clarity**, facilitates mental and spiritual clarity.

Chapter 10, **Coping**, guides people into new strategies for coping with stress, tension, emotional pain, illness, and disease.

Chapter 11, **Connectedness**, helps people reflect on the profound relationships they have with other people, nature, themselves, and the world.

Chapter 12, **Resources**, includes tips for group leaders. This how-to primer has ideas for preparing and enhancing images, maximizing the benefits of group dynamics in processing images, responding to resistance and emotional reactions, and working with an ongoing group or class.

The bibliography provides a good starting place for furthering your education about guided imagery. The final section highlights music for relaxation and imagery, including sources for some of the most effective recordings to use with groups.

Chapter 2



RELAXATION BASICS PRESENTATION

⇒ *This outline walks you through a suggested sequence for teaching the principles of relaxation to your group. As with any teaching design, be sure to adapt it to your group and setting, personalizing the presentation with your own style and anecdotes.*

⇒ *Since relaxation is an essential prelude to effective use of guided imagery, you may want to incorporate some or all of the information in this chalktalk as an introduction to visualization.*

⇒ *The best way to learn about relaxation is to try it. In an extended course or workshop on relaxation, you might want to lead the group through several different types of relaxation sequences. Even if your time is short, you still need to provide one or two brief experiential learning opportunities.*

STRESS AND RELAXATION

☛ Stress is a fact of life: deadlines, juggling work and personal commitments, interruptions, rush hour traffic, conflict at home, or even the ringing of an alarm clock. Everyone knows the feeling of being under stress.

☛ The stress response is physical as well as perceptual or emotional. The body undergoes several powerful internal changes when we are under stress: adrenaline pours into the blood stream, preparing us to fight off the potential danger of the stressor; muscles throughout the body tense in anticipation of the challenge. Since the stressors we face these days are usually not the type we can physically fight or flee, we generate more muscle tension than we need in most situations.

Except in extremely stressful situations, such as a near-accident on the freeway or being called on to make an impromptu speech at a large gathering, we are usually unaware of the physical process of gearing up that accompanies stress. When we do nothing to discharge the tension, it accumulates, building up over the hours, days, and years. Most of us have conditioned ourselves to accept persistent muscle tension as “normal.” We tend to notice our tension only when the pain level increases to the point where we can no longer ignore it.

☛ Relaxation is the body’s natural antidote to stress. People who learn how to relax deeply can become aware of mounting tension and soothe it, before it festers into headaches, backaches, and other physical pains.

Relaxation provides an opportunity for the body to continually energize itself. It allows the body to become aware of its stressors and to produce a state in which the body can cope with them. Relaxation helps you to handle your stress, learn new concepts and behaviors, and maintain physical health.

WHAT IS RELAXATION?

☛ If you ask people what they do to relax, you are likely to get answers ranging from channel surfing to surf boarding, gardening, yoga, cat-napping, or playing the cello.

⇒ *Stop and ask the group for examples of what they do to relax. You might want to write the responses on news-*

print and refer back to them as examples, where appropriate, during the rest of your presentation. Be sure to personalize the discussion with your own experience.

Many people will suggest passive relaxation experiences—lying on a beach, listening to music. Others will focus on more active relaxation *nirvanas*—physical exercise, painting, writing, fixing the sink, or dancing. Your ultimate relaxation could be anything from scuba diving to meditation to doing the laundry.

■ Most of us, however, have not learned some of the basic skills that would help us incorporate enough relaxation into our lives to counterbalance the unhealthy effects of stress. Relaxation is an essential skill, not a diversion. And we can all improve our skill level to help us manage stress in a healthier way. No one technique will work for every person, every time you need to relax. The more strategies we know, the more likely we are to use one.

THE MIND/BODY CONNECTION

■ The goal of relaxation is to release unnecessary muscle tension and quiet the mind. Relaxation can take many forms, ranging on a continuum from *body-focused* tension relief (breathing, stretching, massage, progressive relaxation), to *combination strategies* that integrate physical and mental approaches for relaxation (passive progressive relaxation, yoga, autogenics), to *mostly mental* techniques (meditation, guided imagery) that calm, center, or clarify.

■ From the whole person perspective, the mind and body can't be divided so neatly. The mind and body work together in harmony to bring about relaxation. Physical relaxation creates peace of mind as a by-product. Mental uncluttering slows down breathing and reduces tension. Integrated mind/body approaches can be particularly powerful.

■ All the different forms of relaxation are important because they appeal to different people and may be appropriate for different life situations. And they are all stress reducers. Let's look briefly at the variety of relaxation options, beginning with the *mostly physical* end of the continuum.

BODY-FOCUSED TECHNIQUES

BREATHING. The easiest body-only technique for relaxation is something you've been doing since your precipitous arrival in the world: breathing. Since we breathe unconsciously, most of us don't pay much attention to the process. Yet breathing is the key to relaxation for stress management. A yawn, a big breath, and a deep sigh provide instant stress relief. Sustained deep breathing can counteract the ill effects of the stress response.

↪ Stop and insert a breathing experience here. Use the Quick Breathe script from page 34 if you have time. Otherwise, try the simple yawn and sigh, inviting people to imagine they are blowing tension out of their body with every exhalation. Or introduce your favorite breathing technique.

Breathing deeply stretches the muscles of the upper torso, while bringing increased oxygen to the bloodstream and increased capacity to expel wastes and release tension as we exhale. Since breathing is our natural tension-releaser, it is a powerful building block for all other forms of relaxation.

STRETCHING. Stretching is another natural stress reliever. Properly stretching your muscles and tendons has numerous benefits, among them the achievement of a relaxed and peaceful state. When you stretch, the fibers of your muscles are separated slightly, allowing more blood to reach and revitalize each muscle cell. Your heart and respiratory rates slow down, your digestive tract resumes its coating function, and you are physically stable.

There are several different stretching techniques for each muscle of the body. For relaxation benefit, concentrate on the muscle groups where you feel stress and tension the most—usually the neck/upper body, the back, and the legs.

Never rush the stretching process. Hold each stretch for up to thirty seconds while breathing regularly and deeply. Start slowly. Extend your stretch to a point where you can feel the muscle itself slightly stretching. To avoid any physical stress, never stretch to the point of muscular discomfort.

⇒ *Stop and ask people to scan their body for tension, focus on an area that feels tight, then gently stretch that muscle group for 30 seconds, breathing deeply, and imagining the tension blowing out with their breath.*

MASSAGE. The gentle rubbing of forehead, face, and head at your desk, a deep-muscle, full-body manipulation at the health club, or a stimulation of acupressure points by a trained massage therapist are all excellent ways to help tense muscles let go and relax.

The relaxation effects of both massage and stretching can be enhanced by heat. Try a hot tub or heating pad to warm up your muscles beforehand. Everyone knows the magical restorative power of a long, hot bath.

EXERCISE. Physical exercise of any type is a double-barreled stress antidote. Exercise gives us a natural way to work off our accumulated tension—and we benefit from the rebound effect of relaxation that naturally follows exertion.

SYSTEMATIC PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION. Probably the most well-known relaxation technique involves the intentional tightening and release of every muscle in the body, one by one. Practice with this technique helps people become more aware of the sensations of tension, so they can tune into them more quickly and activate the relaxation response.

BODY/MIND TECHNIQUES

Yoga, passive progressive relaxation, and autogenic relaxation are three types of body/mind techniques that combine the strictly physical approaches with mental processes to enhance relaxation.

YOGA. The system of exercises and meditations we call yoga dates back eight thousand years. The purpose of yoga is to create a union of body, mind, and spirit.

The discipline of yoga focuses on developing three areas for optimal health. First, the physical body is strengthened through exercises to tone muscles, lubricate joints, increase flexibility, increase stamina, and develop vitality. Second, focused breathing creates chemical and emotional balance, and replaces negative emotions like anger and jealousy—which may cause illness—with positive emotions like joy, trust and

love—which are associated with health. Third, the mind is focused on affirmations, which are similar to the power of prayer. The synthesis of these three powerful areas brings about a life harmony, which promotes health and healing.

☛ **PASSIVE PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION.** Passive progressive relaxation uses the principle of systematically attending to tension in the various muscle groups of the body, but instead of using muscle contraction and release to achieve relaxation, you use mental imagery to visualize the tension draining away from the muscles.

⇒ *Use the Passive Progressive Relaxation script from page 35 to demonstrate.*

The first few experiences with this (and any) relaxation technique may not bring complete relaxation. As with any skill, it takes practice. So stick with it until you can relax deeply.

After several sessions, the routine will begin to feel comfortable, and you can adapt it to meet your own needs. You may need more time with one muscle group than with another. You may find more effective mental images for yourself. Or you may want to abbreviate the sequence for a quick relaxation break.

☛ **AUTOGENIC RELAXATION.** Autogenic relaxation routines combine deep, rhythmic breathing with images of draining or melting tension away, rather than tightening and relaxing muscles. Autogenics use imagery to enhance sensations and promote circulation. Verbal statements, such as “my arms are warm and heavy,” are repeated over and over as people concentrate on specific areas of their body.

Autogenic means self-produced, and many routines insert positive self-suggestions when in a deeply relaxed state. Specific problems such as smoking and overeating can be addressed with autogenic training, by using the basic techniques combined with verbal formulas that suggest control and mastery over the problem.

MIND-FOCUSED TECHNIQUES

Meditation and guided imagery are similar in style and intended outcome: both are strictly mental techniques which result in relaxation.

■ **MEDITATION.** Meditation has been practiced by people in religious contexts for five thousand years. Dr. Herbert Benson is responsible for identifying the relaxation benefits of meditative states and incorporating them into an effective secular technique he calls the “relaxation response.”

Like autogenic strategies, meditation begins with a quiet environment, a passive, uncritical attitude, and rhythmic breathing. But the goal of meditation is to clear the mind—and then concentrate on a single mental focus (sound, image, object, phrase) for an extended period of time.

Meditation is not so much *doing* as it is *not doing* something, and learning to just *be*. The ability to concentrate in a relaxed, flowing, noncontrolling way is essential to the process. Benefits such as a lowered body metabolism, clarity of perception, alertness, renewal of energy, and a state of serenity are common.

■ **GUIDED IMAGERY AND VISUALIZATION.** Guided imagery capitalizes on the incredible capacity of the imagination to create and recreate sensory images that have a powerful impact on the mind and body.

⇒ *Use this as a transition to the Guided Imagery Basics Presentation, page 26, or insert key points from the chalktalk.*

RELAXATION ENHANCEMENTS

■ **ENVIRONMENT.** Make sure the place you choose for relaxation is comfortable, warm, and free from distractions. Take the phone off the hook and dim the lights, if these help. Many people find an outdoor setting is ideal for relaxation.

■ **TIMING.** Experiment until you find the best time of day for relaxation. Perhaps you want to start the day with tranquillity. Perhaps lunchtime is the best time for your relaxation break.

■ **DURATION.** When you are learning a particular relaxation skill, it will probably take fifteen to thirty minutes to achieve a relaxed state. As your skill level increases, you may be able to relax more quickly. Different techniques may take more or less time. You are the best judge of how much time to spend.

MUSIC. Many people enjoy musical accompaniment for relaxation. The point of any relaxation routine is to find your own internal music and rhythm, so make sure any external music enhances rather than interferes with that process.

DOZING. Falling asleep is fine if you're at home or at the beach, but dozing is not so fine if you're driving or at your desk. Set an alarm or timer if you're likely to fall asleep. Do not use relaxation techniques behind the wheel.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY. If it is difficult to relax at first, don't give up! Stop your session, but try again later. You *will* learn to relax. Your body will respond progressively to each technique. It may take time and several relaxation sessions before you completely relax and feel ready to continue. Listen to yourself. How you feel will provide you with feedback on your progress.

With practice you will develop a greater control, which allows you to remain relaxed, yet conscious, during your relaxation session. In time you will discover and master an optimal point to maintain. For many it is the point just before sleep and just before awakening, called the "twilight" state of consciousness.

PERSONALIZING RELAXATION

❖ The *practice* of relaxation is never as simple as the *concept* of relaxation. It may be a simple thing to explain, yet to actually reap the benefits of relaxation demands more than an explanation. You will need to practice. As with any new skill, your first few relaxation attempts may not measure up to your hopes, though with practice you can learn to relax when you need to.

❖ Remember, just as there is no one way to decorate a room, there is no one right way to relax. Experiment. Try several different paths to relaxation, trusting that you know what works best for you. Feel free to adapt and modify the techniques, adding the personal touches that make relaxation easier and more likely to be part of a regular routine.

Like moving into a new room or a new house, the practice of relaxation may take a little getting used to. However, in time, you make the necessary changes, and the room becomes your own and your house becomes your home.

Chapter 3



GUIDED IMAGERY BASICS PRESENTATION

- ⇒ *Relaxation and guided imagery go hand in hand, so if you haven't used the entire Relaxation Basics Presentation, you may want to extract a few key points about relaxation to use as a warm-up to this presentation.*
- ⇒ *If you have time for an extended session on imagery, choose one or more brief scripts to use as guided imagery demonstrations at appropriate points during this presentation.*
- ⇒ *If your time is brief, just hit the key points in this outline and move directly to the visualization script of your choice.*

WHAT IS GUIDED IMAGERY?

■ Visualization is a process in which you use mental images to explore your inner psychic and creative space. You do it every day. When you wake up in the morning and think about what you have to do that day, you probably *picture* how these tasks will be done. When you realize that you must shop for groceries today, you inadvertently *picture* which ones you will need to buy. Lovers use imagery as they anticipate and recall the joys of being together. All of us daydream for entertainment.

■ Guided imagery takes this process one step further by *guiding* the images toward a specific life-enhancing goal, such as relaxing, healing, promoting personal growth, exploring alternatives, clarifying values, stimulating creativity, or managing stress.

Performers use imagery to heighten concentration. Managers use imagery as they plan strategies for tackling daily tasks. Diabetics use imagery to lower their blood sugar level. Athletes use imagery to enhance their performance. Cancer patients use imagery to bolster their immune responses.

SKILL, NOT MAGIC

■ Research is beginning to document the significant power of our mental processes to positively affect our well-being, yet guided imagery is not magic. It is not a panacea for all that ails us. It is no substitute for traditional physical or mental health care.

■ Your mind's eye is one of the most potent tools you have for triggering relaxation and promoting changes in attitude, perspective, or feelings. The effectiveness of guided imagery is grounded in the mind/body connection. As far as your body is concerned, sensory *images* have nearly the same impact as actual sensory *experiences*. Your body reacts physiologically to the imagined smell of baking bread in the same way it would to walking into a bakery. Mentally anticipating a fearful event can be just as frightening (or even more!) than the event itself.

Guided imagery offers an opportunity to harness the natural power of your imagination to work for physical and mental health. It is a skill which can grow more useful with regular practice.

ALWAYS BEGIN WITH RELAXATION

■ Placing your body and mind in a state of active relaxation is the best preparation for the use of guided imagery. You will find that relaxation is to guided imagery as a cone is to ice cream: without it, you've got no handle on the real thing. Relaxation must precede, interact with, and be enhanced by guided imagery.

■ The benefits of guided imagery are mainly mental in nature; however, preparing for visualization is both a mental and physical task. The mind must *be prepared* to be explored, expanded, enhanced, and en-