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Imagery - Mental Stress Management

Introduction:

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing.

You will be aware of how particular environments can be very relaxing, while others can be intensely stressful. The idea behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you use your imagination to recreate and enjoy a situation that is very relaxing. The more intensely you imagine the situation, the more relaxing the experience will be.

This sounds unlikely. In fact, the effectiveness of imagery can be shown very effectively if you have access to the biofeedback equipment we discussed in the introduction to this section. By imagining a pleasant scene (which reduces stress) you can actually see or hear the stress in your body reduce. By imagining an unpleasant and stressful situation, you can see the stress in your body increase. This very real effect can be quite alarming when you see it happen the first time!

Using the Tool:

Imagery in Relaxation

One common use of relaxation imagery is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as safe, peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image with, for example, sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of cool white wine, the warmth of the sun, and so on. 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 want.

Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve creating mental pictures of stress flowing out of your 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 prepare for the event in your mind.

Aside from allowing you to rehearse mentally, imagery also allows you to practice in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practiced in handling it. This is a technique used very commonly by top sports people, who learn good performance habits by repeatedly rehearsing performances in their imagination. When the unusual eventualities they have rehearsed using imagery occur, they have good, pre-prepared, habitual responses to them.

Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals, helping to give you self-confidence. This is another technique used by successful athletes.

Summary:

With imagery, you substitute actual experience with scenes from your imagination. Your body reacts to these imagined scenes almost as if they were real.

To relax with imagery, imagine a warm, comfortable, safe and pleasant place, and enjoy it in your imagination.

Imagery can be shown to work by using biofeedback devices that measure body stress. By imagining pleasant and unpleasant scenes, you can actually see or hear the changing levels of stress in your body change.

<http://www.mindtools.com/stress/RelaxationTechniques/Imagery.htm>