

Visualizing a Safe Place

Objective

To reduce your fear and anxiety by visualizing a place where you feel safe and calm.

You Should Know

When you are feeling overwhelmed by your emotions, visualization techniques can be effective in calming your mind. Research has shown that there is a scientific basis for how and why visualization works.

Studies of the brain indicate the same areas of the brain light up when you visualize an action as when you actually perform that action. For example, when you visualize lifting your right hand, it stimulates the same part of the brain that is activated when you actually lift your right hand. Athletes have used visualization for years to practice movements in their minds like swinging a tennis racket or making a foul shot. Just visualizing these motions helps improve athletic performance.

What does this mean for you? It means when you visualize a safe place that is soothing and calm, your brain will react as if you were actually in that place. Reacting to the sights, sounds, and even smells of your safe place can cause your brain to increase calming biochemicals like serotonin and decrease stress neurochemicals like cortisol.

What to Do

During the Safe Place Visualization, you will focus on a real or imaginary place where you feel relaxed, safe, and peaceful. The first step is to identify such a place. It can be a beach, forest, house of worship, spa, or a fanciful setting such as a house in the clouds or your own private island.

What safe place did you choose? _____

Now find a quiet, comfortable space to sit without being disturbed or distracted. Follow the instructions below.

1. Take several long, slow breaths and close your eyes.
2. Visualize entering your safe place and using all of your senses to explore it.
3. Observe what the space looks like. Notice details, including colors, brightness, and the objects around you. Are you alone, or are others with you? Are there other living things there, such as animals or plants? Take a few moments to enjoy your surroundings.
4. Imagine the soothing sounds around you: a soft breeze, chirping birds, ocean waves, a purring cat, or relaxing music. Focus on one sound that is especially pleasing and continue listening for a few seconds.

5. Focus on what you smell in your safe place. If your setting is outside, inhale the scent of fresh air or flowers. If your setting is inside, smell coffee brewing, incense burning, or bread baking. Notice the pleasurable aromas for several seconds.

6. Next, pay attention to your sense of touch in your safe place. If you are outside, notice the calm breeze or warm sun on your skin, grains of beach sand in your hand, or the garden vegetables you are growing. If you are inside, feel the chair or rug you are sitting on, the warmth of a roaring fireplace, or the soft fur of a dog you are petting. Take a few seconds to enjoy the sensations.

7. Finally, focus your attention on your sense of taste. What comforting food or drink are you enjoying? Is it sweet, spicy, or salty? Hot or cold? Take a moment to savor the flavors in your mouth.

8. Take a few moments to relax in your safe place, using all of your senses. Notice how calm and peaceful you feel in this place. Remember that you can return here anytime you experience distress.

9. Take a few more deep breaths and open your eyes when you are ready.

Try this exercise at least five times. Like any new “skill,” visualization can take some practice. Use the chart on the next page to record your experience when you visualize a safe place.

Rate the effectiveness of visualization on reducing your anxiety in the last column on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1= not very helpful and 10 = extremely helpful.

Reflections on This Exercise

How easy was it to visualize your safe place?

Did you visualize just one place, or did you visualize different places? List the places you visualized.

In what circumstances are you most likely to use the Safe Place Visualization?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
