

I-CAN SLEEP: Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy for Individuals with Insomnia and CANcer

Chapter 4

In this chapter you will:

- ◆ Ensure mastery of sleep restriction and stimulus control procedures before proceeding to cognitive skills training
- ◆ Be introduced to imagery as a technique for reducing stressful thoughts at bedtime and getting to sleep

Goal for the chapter:

- 1) Master the skill of imagery as a relaxation technique

COUNTING SHEEP: IMAGERY-BASED RELAXATION

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Introduction

If you have had insomnia for some time, then you have probably heard about relaxation training. There are many forms of relaxation: progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), autogenics, hypnosis, and meditation, to name a few. Imagery relaxation, also known as visualization, is a special form of relaxation therapy which has proven especially helpful for people who have difficulty sleeping. It differs from overall body relaxation methods in that it uses cognitive, or thought-focused, relaxation cues. You may argue that relaxation of the body's muscles is necessary to achieve sleep. This is true, however, relaxation of the body is not sufficient for sleep to occur. As you are probably aware, you can feel physically fatigued yet still not be able to get to sleep. For example, people with insomnia often feel tired much of the time but are still unable to get to sleep. This is because it is possible for your body to be relaxed while your mind is still wide awake with your thoughts racing a mile a minute.

Imagery works by helping your mind get to sleep along with your body. Your mind controls your thoughts, feelings, as well as necessary bodily functions such as sleeping. Most of the available research now suggests that a state of mental relaxation is necessary for getting to sleep. In short, you have to turn your mind off, or at least put it into a state of relaxation where your thoughts are free of anxiety-provoking images.

Please remember that imagery is not simply daydreaming or fantasizing. It is an active relaxation procedure that happens to involve your mind more than your muscles. With imagery, you take an active role in generating and manipulating your images, unlike daydreaming which is a passive activity. Imagery is a skill that should be practiced.

In this chapter, you will first learn the imagery method of relaxation and then apply the technique specifically to help you get to sleep. You can also use imagery to cope with mid-sleep awakenings. Please note that if you have achieved mastery with another relaxation method such as PMR you should by no means stop using it, especially if you have been successful in using it to help you get to sleep. However, consider trying the imagery technique and then decide for yourself which is the most effective for you.

If you share your room with another person, you might want to explain to him or her what your needs are when trying to practice the skill of imagery. You should stress the importance of having a quiet bedroom environment. If they insist on watching TV or reading in bed, you may have to be assertive and ask them to hold off from these activities or go to another room.

A Few Words of Caution

For the majority of people, practicing imagery is a pleasant and relaxing experience. However, a small number of people may have a negative experience using the technique. In rare cases, for example, the images generated can bring out negative or stressful emotions, or can result in the recalling a traumatic event. You can decrease the likelihood of these experiences happening to you by using the following guidelines:

1. If you start to feel very uncomfortable or anxious when using imagery, stop right away. If this happens on several occasions, stop using the technique altogether. Find another relaxation technique to use before sleeping. Report these experiences to the therapist who supplied you with this manual.
2. When generating your own images involving personal events, always visualize yourself in a place that you feel safe and happy. Try to keep the location somewhere that is current and familiar to you (e.g., recent vacation spot) rather than a place from your distant past.
3. Avoid using childhood memories to generate your images.
4. If you have recurring images of violence or death, stop using the technique. Report these to the therapist who supplied you with this manual.
5. Avoid images with any sexual content.

Preparation -- Clearing a Space to Relax

Before doing any relaxation exercise, you should clear a space for yourself. Think of this as your preparation time, similar to what athletes do before starting a practice or competing, or what musicians do to get ready for a performance. Preparation means clearing both a physical and mental space. Clearing a physical space can be as simple as creating a bedroom environment that is quiet and free from distraction. If necessary, clear up any clutter in your bedroom if you think an untidy room would bother you. Turn off the TV, radio, and any other noise-making appliances. You should not use imagery with music in the background, even if you find the music soothing. The music will distract you from your goal of trying to focus on the images in your mind. You want to be able to achieve relaxation without the aid of any devices.

Now, clear a mental space for yourself. You may be used to going over all your problems when trying to get to sleep at night. By doing this, however, you sink deeper into your problems without solving them, and make yourself more anxious in the process. The act of worrying can be like a snowball rolling down a hill--the further down it goes, the more snow it picks up and the bigger it gets. Anxiety can be like that too--the more you worry about your problems, the more anxious you get, not only about the problems themselves, but about the process of worrying as well. Being anxious in itself is anxiety-provoking!

Reduce your anxiety by trying to distance yourself from your problems, at least temporarily. Don't confuse this with running away from problems or ignoring them. Rather, stand back from your problems for the period of time you are doing imagery. Remember, you can't solve your problems while lying in bed (if you can, then by all means get up and solve them). So what will it hurt if you just get a little distance from them? Try to imagine yourself literally standing 5 metres from your problems, which you could picture as stack of papers on the ground. Or, imagine yourself setting down that heavy burden you carry on your shoulders all the time (picture a large uncomfortable sack that you put on the ground next to you). Give yourself permission to feel good and take a rest. Remember, you're not avoiding your problems or responsibilities, but just taking a mini-vacation from them.

Practice Imagery Exercises

Below are two brief but poignant imagery scenes. Get into a comfortable position and read each scene slowly. Then close your eyes and try to imagine the scene as vividly as possible. Focus on the physical and emotional sensations that you experience. Repeat this procedure several times for each scene until you feel as though you are actually in the scene. When you have achieved this, move on to the step-by-step instructions for the full imagery technique.

Imagery scene 1.

Imagine a black circle on a white background. Picture the circle as perfectly round and completely black. Focus on the contrast of black on the white background. Now imagine the circle is an oval. Picture the oval as being taller than it is wide. Now change the colour of the oval from black to blue. Change the shape and colour several more times before finishing with this image.

Imagery scene 2.

Imagine you are standing next to a running stream. It is springtime and the ice has just melted through to the water. The water is deep and swift. It looks cool and refreshing. You can see to the rocks at the bottom of the stream. Now imagine any negative thoughts you have as objects floating down the stream. They float by you and away from you quickly down the stream until they are out of your sight completely. If a distracting thought surfaces again, let the water take it again. Keep doing this for any negative thoughts that enter your mind.

Step-by-Step Instructions for Imagery

- Step 1:** Lie in bed and get into a comfortable position. Keep your arms and legs uncrossed. Close your eyes and lie quietly for a few seconds. Clear your mind of all stressful thoughts and images.
- Step 2:** Try to relax all the muscles of your body. If necessary, relax the muscles in your body in groups (feet, legs, thighs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, arms, shoulders, neck, forehead). Avoid tensing your muscles to experience relaxation. Focus on your lower body first, relaxing the legs, hips and buttocks. Move up to your upper body and relax your stomach, back, arms and neck. Take a minute to experience the feelings of relaxation and calmness in your body. Focus on the feelings of warmth and heaviness.
- Step 3:** Do some deep breathing. Take several slow deep cleansing breaths. Fill your lungs to capacity with air each time. Wait until you're feeling as relaxed as you can before proceeding. Give yourself praise for getting to this point. Use positive self-statements such as: "I feel very relaxed", "I've put away my problems and plans for now", "I feel calm", "I won't let any distracting thoughts enter my mind", "I'm going to sleep well tonight", "I deserve a good sleep and this will feel good."
- Step 4:** Conjure up a pleasant image that is particularly clear for you. Make sure that the image has scenes that are calming and are associated with positive emotions. Imagine, for example, a place where you feel safe and comfortable. You can use any image of your own creation. Counting sheep is okay, but there are probably more pleasant images you can choose from. Just make sure that any image you create contains sufficient details to keep you occupied for 10 to 15 minutes.
- If you are having trouble creating a positive image, go ahead and use the one described on the next page. Read the description several times and commit it to memory before getting into bed. Note that each series of dots (. . .) indicates a pause of 10 to 20 seconds you should inject into a scene. This is to give you a moment to enjoy the image. Remember, don't rush!
- Step 5:** Try to *passively* concentrate. In other words, don't force yourself to concentrate. Let the images come as naturally as possible. Try not to get frustrated if the image is not as vivid as you initially hoped. Remember, imagery is a skill that must be practiced. In time, your images will become more vivid, more detailed and will conjure up more positive experiences.

- Step 6:** Be creative in your use of adjectives when conjuring up details of the image. Images with vivid colours, sounds and physical sensations are the most powerful. If you use the same image a number of times, try to experience new details of the image.
- Step 7:** Keep the image in your mind for at least 15 minutes. Estimate the passage of time in your head; don't clock-watch. In fact, you should not open your eyes at all. At times, intrusive thoughts may come into your mind. You should try not to focus on them or let them go beyond the awareness level. Rather, let them pass and continue to focus on your image. If you like, you can use a counter-image to cope with negative thoughts.
- Step 8:** As you begin to feel tired, let the image slowly drift from your mind. When this happens, the details of the image will lose clarity. This is alright, because your goal is to allow your mind to be taken over by a state of sleepiness.

Beach Scene

It is summer. You are walking a beach alone . . . You are the only person for miles. It is almost dusk and the sun is setting. The sky, which was a deep blue only an hour ago, is now slowly turning yellow and orange. . . There are still clouds in the sky. They are billowy and soft like a pillow. You remember how hot the day was earlier. The temperature is still warm. . . You feel calm and pleasant inside. The sand feels cool beneath your bare feet. Each foot sinks a little into the soft sand as you walk along the beach. You take a minute to stand still and feel the cool sand between your toes. You wiggle your toes to savour the softness of the sand. . .

Turning toward the ocean, you can smell the salt water. The clean salt breeze blows gently against your face. . . warms your nose . . . It feels cool and refreshing. . . You look out toward the sea and spy a lone sailboat on the horizon. Its red sail is fully raised. The sailboat is moving east slowly. You see the wake it leaves in the water as it moves along.

Looking at the sky, the setting sun looks like a bright orange ball. It colours the sky with shades of orange and yellow... Your eyes follow the sky down until it meets the horizon. You notice the rippling reflection of the orange and yellow in the water. It looks like the water is a giant mirror reflecting everything above.

You walk up to the water and let the tide rush over your toes. The water feels cool and refreshing. As you walk, your feet sink into the wet sand. All is quiet, calm and peaceful. The only sounds you hear are the waves of the ocean as they roll against the shore. You notice the rhythm of the waves as they wash up on the beach. The sound is soothing and relaxing. . . Your whole body is calm and relaxed.

You feel warm inside. You sit down on the beach in the warm sand . . . The warmth cradles your body as you settle in . . . Closing your eyes, you tune out all your thoughts and focus on the sounds and smells of the ocean surf. You feel warmer and heavier. . . The place you have made for yourself in the sand is cosy and comfy. You lie back and rest your head in a pillow of soft white sand . . . The soft breeze blows around your head . . . You can think of no other place in the world you would rather be right now--no other way you would rather feel . . . You are absolutely calm and comfortable . . . The gentle rhythm of the surf carries you deeper into relaxation . . . Your whole body is relaxed and your mind is calm and clear. . . Sleep is coming on--you can feel it overtake your body . . . Slowly you begin to drift off



Common Problems Encountered During Imagery Relaxation

Lack of confidence in producing mental images. You don't have to have a 'great imagination' to practice this skill. Creativity is also not a requirement. Anyone can do imagery training. All that is required is motivation and a little patience. In fact, people who are anxious and worry about their problems a lot are often very good at imagery! This is because they have lots of practice imagining all their problems and their negative consequences. What people have difficulty with is focusing on positive relaxing images. You may be used to having a lot of negative or stress-provoking images occupy your thoughts, especially when trying to get to sleep at night. If this is the case, you should practice with simple, short, positive images before proceeding to longer detailed ones. Use this practice to build up your confidence with using the procedure.

Frustration and increased anxiety. You may have difficulty learning this skill at first. Don't allow yourself to get frustrated as this will only serve to increase your tension and arousal level. If you feel yourself getting frustrated, stop working on the present image and switch to a simpler one.

Concentration. You may get distracted by sounds, sensations or thoughts. However, think of imagery as a way of pushing thoughts and feelings out of the way. If you are still having difficulty, try focusing on your breathing for a while. Breathe slowly and deeply. Count each inhale and exhale: "Inhale one... exhale two... inhale three...exhale four."

Focusing on the outcome and not enjoying the experience. Don't fall into the trap of focusing on falling asleep so much that you keep yourself awake in the process. Imagery should be pleasurable no matter what the end result. The more you think about trying to fall asleep, the more aroused you will get. Just try to put those thoughts aside and give yourself permission to relax with some pleasant images.

Tips for Using Imagery

1. Imagery has many other useful applications such as pain control and stress management. You are free to explore these other uses of imagery to expand your range of stress management techniques. As a suggestion, however, you may find it helpful to reserve your use of imagery to cope with sleep problems as a means of focusing and simplifying your self-management program. There are other advantages to this. You will find it easier to develop specific skills for specific purposes. Thus, if you are using PMR as a relaxation technique to reduce pain and cope with stress during the day, then you should continue developing this skill. It might get confusing to use one relaxation method for several different purposes.
2. Another reason to keep your relaxation techniques separate is that it would be beneficial to build a strong association between your use of imagery and getting to sleep. That is, you want to reach the point in your program where the mere process of using the technique will make you sleepy. This is why it is important to use imagery every night until you have mastered the technique. You should use it on all nights, even nights when you feel you don't need help getting to sleep. In fact, these nights are the most important nights to use imagery. This is because you want to build up the association between imagery and the onset of sleep. Another reason is that during training, your goal is to build confidence in using imagery to get to sleep. You have to allow yourself to have successes when learning any skill. Having a series of nights when it is easy to get to sleep is a great way to build confidence.
4. Always give yourself praise and use positive self-statements such as:
"I feel quiet" "I will be asleep soon"
"I am able to feel relaxed" "I am doing well "
"I've succeeded with this before" "I can do this, I'm doing this now"
5. Above all, enjoy the experience! Imagery should be a pleasant experience. Using it to help you fall asleep is only one application of imagery. Don't always focus on the end result, however. You should enjoy it while you're doing it as well. Even if you don't get to sleep, you have just done something pleasant for yourself.

How Imagery Works

One of the reasons imagery is so effective is that it makes use of the power of your mind's visualization potential. Almost 60% of your brain is made to process visual material. Imagery also has a number of positive effects on your body. For one, it is an effective relaxation technique on its own. By using imagery effectively, you can lower your heart rate, blood pressure, and reduce tension in your muscles. Emotionally, imagery is also worthwhile because pleasant images bring on pleasant feelings. If you are upset, anxious or frustrated getting into bed, you can use imagery to evoke more positive emotions. Generally, it is difficult to be distressed and feeling good at the same time. Imagery helps you set aside negative feelings. Similarly, it is virtually impossible to think about more than one thing at a time. Imagery is a method of diverting your attention from negative thoughts about sleeping to your pleasant mental image. If you sustain this long enough, sleep will eventually come.

Another benefit of imagery is that it is good for pain control. You are probably aware by now of the benefits of having distracting activities for coping with pain. During the daytime, it is easier to find activities to divert your attention from your pain. At night, however, when you climb into bed, you are alone with your pain. It becomes more difficult to take your mind off of it. Imagery is a great strategy for diverting your attention from your pain, at least until you can get to sleep.