

Using imagery to relax (garden)

The aim of this information sheet is to remind you about how using imagery as a relaxation technique can help you to manage your stress. You should have already practised this technique with an occupational therapist or as part of the cardiovascular rehab programme. You may want to ask a family member or friend to read it out to help you relax. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to your occupational therapist or a member of the cardiovascular rehabilitation team.

What is the purpose of the technique?

Relaxation can help to relieve the symptoms of stress. Although the cause of the anxiety will not disappear, you will probably feel more able to deal with it once you have released the tension in your body and cleared your thoughts. Using your imagination to visualise relaxing scenes, such as a garden, can help you feel calmer. Don't worry if you find it difficult to relax at first. It is a skill that needs to be learned and it will come with practice.

How do I prepare to relax?

This visualisation lasts about 15–20 minutes, so make sure you will not be disturbed – unplug the phone, let other people at home know that you are not to be disturbed. Make sure that you are warm, and that the room is as quiet as possible. It is also easier to relax with the lights either off or dimmed. Then find a position which is most comfortable for you, either sitting in a chair or lying on your back. Loosen any tight clothing and remove your shoes. If you are sitting in a chair, make sure that your back is straight and your feet are in contact with the floor. If your feet do not reach the floor, you could place a cushion or some books underneath them. If you are lying down, you may find that you need a cushion under your head or that you need to raise your knees.

If you can, ask a friend or family member to read the next sections to you.

What do I need to do?

When you are ready, gently close your eyes. Allow a scene to appear in your imagination, in your mind's eye. Imagine that you are standing on the edge of a beautiful garden. It is a place that you know well and you feel very safe and at peace here. There are five steps leading down to the garden from where you are – begin to walk towards the garden, and when you walk down each step you will feel more and more relaxed, and more and more at peace. Walk down those steps now ..1..2..3..4..5 and enter the garden. Look around the garden and fill it with all the sights and sounds and smells you wish to find here. What can you see? Perhaps there is grass and trees, flowers and birds. What colours are they? Perhaps there is also water, a stream or waterfall, or a pond, and in the distance beyond the garden, perhaps you can see hills or fields or mountains. What are the sounds that you can hear in the garden? Perhaps it is very quiet, or you may be able to hear birds singing, or water flowing down a stream or waterfall. Or the

sound of wind in the trees. Can you feel the ground under your feet? Are you standing on grass, or on a path? Is it warm? What else can you feel? Can you smell the flowers? And the grass? And the freshness of the air? Breathe in that clean air, and with each breath, breathe in peace and tranquillity, and breathe out tension and anxiety. With each breath you will feel more relaxed and more peaceful.

Now, in front of you, in the garden, you will find a beautiful, multi-coloured balloon with a basket below it on the ground. Climb into the basket and make yourself comfortable – it is perfectly safe. Allow the balloon to rise off the ground – you may wish the balloon to rise only a few inches – and don't go any higher than you feel comfortable with. As you float in the air, you will find that you feel lighter and lighter, and more and more relaxed.

You will find a pen and paper in the basket with you. Take some time to write down those things that keep coming into your mind, any things you may have which are worrying you. And now, just hold up the paper and let it be carried away from the balloon in the breeze – watch it gradually disappear into the distance, and take some time to enjoy floating in your balloon, completely relaxed, free from any thoughts or worries. And now, follow my voice as the balloon gently comes back down, descending very gradually back to the garden.

And the basket is back safely on the ground – climb out of the basket. Soon it will be time to leave the garden, but before you go, remind yourself of all the sights and sounds and smells that are here. And remember this place of peace and rest and tranquillity exists inside yourself. It will always be here and so whenever you wish you can return again to this garden, and perhaps go up again in the balloon.

And so, remembering this, you once again ascend the five steps that led down to the garden. And with each step up, the image of the garden will become fainter and fainter..1..2..3..4..5.

How do I end the relaxation session?

Allow the garden to become fainter and fainter, smaller and smaller until eventually it disappears like the dot on an old television screen. And then, once again become aware of your breathing, notice whether your breath is fast or slow, deep or shallow, regular or irregular. And compare how you are breathing now with how you were breathing at the beginning of the relaxation. Become aware of your body once again. Feel the contact between your body and the chair or the floor. Allow your awareness to expand to include the sounds you may be able to hear in the room or from outside. And then gradually begin to return some movement to your body, perhaps by just wiggling your fingers or your toes. And then when you feel ready, gradually begin to open your eyes. If you are lying down, roll over on to one side before sitting up, and sit quietly for a few moments before standing up.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about this relaxation technique, contact **occupational therapy** on 020 7188 4180, Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm or the **cardiovascular rehabilitation team** on 020 7188 0946, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

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