Guided Imagery: Dealing with Public Speaking Anxiety

[Adapted from materials from Rochester College Department of Speech and Inner Health Studio]

Many people experience anxiety associated with public speaking, such as giving a presentation or a speech. The anxiety is natural and normal. This guided imagery will help you relax and visualize the calm and successful process of speaking publicly. Visualizing success can promote increased confidence. Relaxation can help you manage the anxiety so that you can do the best you can while speaking publicly.

Begin by becoming very relaxed. Make yourself comfortable in a setting free of distractions for the next few minutes. Find a naturally relaxed sitting position and open posture, your hands resting in your lap or at your sides, your legs uncrossed, and your head balanced in a neutral position.

Start to relax your body. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose and notice your lungs and chest expanding. Hold the breath gently…. And let it out through your mouth….

Breathe in again...pause...and exhale fully….

Breathe in…pause... and out.…

In.... Out….

In…. Out….

Keep breathing naturally. With each breath out, you become more and more relaxed.

If any anxious thoughts linger, leave them where they are for the moment. You can tend to them later.

[Pause.]

Pick a spot in the room for your eyes to comfortably focus on. Hold the focus briefly, and then let that focus go soft. If you choose, you can let your eyes close anytime you like.

Notice some areas in your body where tension tends to linger: your shoulders, jaws, neck, back, chest, stomach, and hands.

Focus first on your shoulders. See how your shoulders relax as your attention is focused on them. Feel the muscles as they loosen and your shoulders as they ease off....

Allow your jaws to relax. Let your lower jaw drop slightly, allowing a slight space between your upper and lower teeth. Feel the muscles of your face become smooth, loose, and relaxed.

Turn your attention to your neck. See how you can let the tension go as you relax the muscles of your neck. Let the relaxation flow down the length of your spine, relaxing all the muscles along the way. Feel the relaxation in your neck and back.

As you become aware of the rhythm of your breathing, let the tension in your chest dissipate with each breath and feel your stomach muscles smooth themselves out and the calm settle in.

Now focus on your hands. Open and close your hands a few times…wiggle your fingers… and then relax. Let your hands be limp and loose.

Scan your body now for any other areas that might be tense. For each area, imagine directing your breath to that area. Imagine breathing in relaxation....and breathing out tension. Breathing in a feeling of relaxation, and exhaling all the tension. Feel your muscles more relaxed with each breath.

Continue to scan your body, relaxing each area.

[Pause.]

Now you are feeling calm and relaxed. Your whole body feels heavy, and you feel grounded, centered, and peaceful.

[Pause.]

Surround yourself with this feeling of relaxation as you think about public speaking. Notice your reaction, physically and emotionally, when you think about public speaking…. Perhaps in the past this has been a source of anxiety for you.... Notice now how you can be calm and relaxed while thinking about speaking in public.

Calm and relaxed.

In the future, you will recognize your physical and emotional signs when you get a public speaking opportunity, and you will know that they are signs of excitement. This is a positive feeling that fills you with energy. The thought of speaking in front of people fills you with good feelings of excitement and anticipation.

You may even be feeling a little excited now, just as you think about public speaking. Let this feeling subside as you return to a state of deep relaxation.

Take a deep breath in..., hold it..., and exhale….

Breathe in... And out….

In.... Out....

Continue to breathe deeply. Notice how you relax a little more each time you exhale.

Breathe in.... And relax, breathing out….

Breathe in.... Relax....

In.... Relax.....

Keep breathing slowly, deeply, and calmly. You can relax like this any time you want to. Whenever you want to feel calm, you can breathe deeply and relax...like you are relaxing now.

[Pause.]

Now let's begin the process visualizing your successfully speaking in public and enjoying the positive experience.

In this visualization, imagine that everything goes perfectly. Imagine what it would be like to be a confident public speaker. Create in your mind image of an excellent public speaker.... imagine a confident, well spoken person.... see yourself be that person. Picture yourself as a great public speaker.

Begin to create a mental picture of yourself preparing to give a speech. Imagine that you have prepared ahead of time. You know your topic well to talk about it with people. You remember the key points. You know you don't have to memorize your speech word for word. You have practiced a few times. You are feeling confident, excited.... You're looking forward to speaking.

After your diligent preparation, you are ready to tell people what you know. On the day you are to talk to your audience, you have already had a good night's sleep. You are excited, eager to get started.

Imagine going to the place where you will speak. You are looking forward to talk about your topic. You are excited, eager to talk in public. You can't wait to share your knowledge. You know your material. Words will come easily exactly as you need them. What's more important, you will get the concepts across to your audience.

Picture being at the location where you will speak. Many people have gathered to see you. You sense the positive, welcoming feeling in the room. You love it. They want to hear what you are going to say, and you can't wait to tell them.

Imagine walking calmly up to the front of the room, ready to speak. The audience waits expectantly. Picture all the details of this scene. See yourself standing at the front of the room, feeling confident. See the friendly, encouraging people in front of you, waiting to hear you speak. You smile to them.

See yourself beginning your speech. Enthusiastic. Confident. You know what the audience is hoping to hear. You focus on what they want to know. Your phrases and words are well timed. All throughout your speech, you are breathing calmly, deeply…. You maintain a comfortable, smooth rhythm. You talk with smooth, clear speech. Ideas flow. Your hard work and extensive preparation allow your public speaking to be easy, almost automatic. Everything seems so familiar. It is such a great feeling!

See yourself as you enjoy this moment. You are confident, comfortable, and having a great time. The anticipatory excitement you felt at the beginning has smoothed into a feeling of confidence and calm.

You feel so at home in front of all these people. They listen, enjoying hearing you speak as much as you are enjoying speaking. You enjoy this experience immensely.

When you reach your conclusion and speak the final words of your prepared speech, imagine inviting the audience to ask questions. You answer every question easily, proficiently, and thoughtfully. See your excellent answers satisfying each member of the audience.

The audience is pleased with your performance. You are pleased with your performance. The exhilaration at having completed this public speaking fills you with joy, contentment, and pride. It feels great to have done this. You have done public speaking while being relaxed, calm, confident, and assertive.

Practicing this visualization in your mind is like performing actual public speaking. If you are able to do this visualization and be calm, you can also speak in public calmly. Congratulate yourself for completing this challenge.

Now you have completed this visualization experience, you are feeling more mentally prepared for the process of public speaking. You may even find that completing this guided imagery exercise helps you feel motivated, helps you feel calm, confident, and in control.

Begin to wake up your mind and body.... returning your awareness to the present.

Wiggle your fingers. Feel your hands and arms reawakening.

Wake up your feet and legs by wiggling your toes.

Shrug your shoulders.... Turn your head from side to side.... Feel your body waking up.

When you are feeling awake and alert, you can return to your usual activities, feeling calm, refreshed, energized, motivated, and confident.