

April 30, 2020

Goodbye Anxiety

**How to Control Anxiety with
Relaxation and Visualization
Techniques**



Michelle Price
Dr. Stephen Price
CLOVIS HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Relaxation

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful.

- Psalm 139: 13-14

1. The Anatomy of an Anxiety Attack (Stress Response): What Goes on in Your Brain and Body

"God, our creator has built into each one of us a remarkable mechanism for staying alive. God designed the hormonal emergency alarm system to save our lives. But what happens when a person activates this system too many times for too many reasons? The alarm system is turned upside down into something that destroys life."

– Don Colbert, MD, from *Stress Less*

Did you know that anxiety attacks were designed to save your life? An anxiety attack is just the body's natural "fight-or-flight," or stress response, designed to save your life in primitive times. Understanding more about anxiety attacks make them much less scary.

Before we locked up wild animals at the local zoo and invented the supermarket, our ancestors lived close to wild beasts and hunted for their meat. When attacked by beasts they couldn't easily kill, they needed extra strength to defend themselves in a fight or a burst of energy to help them flee. Although we rarely, if ever, need that burst of energy in the same way our ancestors did, the same "fight-or-flight" response is still wired in our brains and bodies, handed down through the generations in our DNA.

Whenever we perceive a challenge or threat, a tiny part of our brain called the amygdala activates the "fight-or-flight" response. This sends a rush of adrenalin into our bloodstream to give us added strength to either fight off or escape the threat. At the same time, the body shuts down non-essential activity so we can spend every ounce of energy on survival.

During the "fight or flight" response, your body may make any or all of the following adjustments:

- 1) Your heart beats faster, pumping more blood into your muscles for extra strength while fighting.
- 2) Your breathing grows rapid to increase your oxygen supply.
- 3) Your muscles tense to prepare for action.
- 4) You experience a cold sweat, to prepare for the warmer sweat that will come with activity.
- 5) Blood vessels near the surface of your skin constrict to reduce blood loss in case you are wounded.
- 6) You shiver, and your body hairs stand up to conserve heat and keep the body from getting too cold when the peripheral blood vessels constrict.

- 7) Your pupils dilate so you can see danger more clearly.
- 8) Your digestive system shuts down, forcing extra blood to the voluntary muscles and causing dryness in the mouth as saliva flow decreases.
- 9) You may feel the need to empty your bladder and bowels to be freer for physical activity.

These physical changes helped our ancestors do things like club a bear for food or run for their life from a snarling, charging tiger.

Most threats we face today are psychological, not physical. In the case of most anxiety sufferers, our own thoughts scare us. The problem is that a psychological threat can trigger the same “fight or flight” response as a physical threat. Because the bodily changes aren’t needed to save your life, you may feel anything from a general state of tension and uneasiness to feeling like you are losing control of yourself, going crazy, or having a heart attack.

This ancient mechanism of the nervous system is a nuisance in the modern world. Unless you really need to run from a wild animal or vicious attacker, the adrenalin can be overwhelming. The rapid breathing serves no purpose if you are not running from anything and is just needless hyperventilating. In most modern situations we experience the “fight-or-flight” response as a anxiety attack.

Being overwhelmed by adrenalin or hyperventilating are not good feelings, especially if you are trying to appear calm and under control in an everyday setting like an office or a classroom. But when you understand how the “fight or flight” response works, you can regulate it to stop anxiety attacks using what I call “the relaxation reflex.”

You can learn to take total control over the physical symptoms of anxiety attacks by learning a step-by-step procedure to condition yourself to relax on cue. This conditioned relaxation reflex is developed by training your body to associate a state of complete calm with a cue word or phrase. It takes some time to develop, but this conditioned reflex will stop an anxiety attack immediately, automatically, and on command.

The most effective way to stop an anxiety attack in the moment is to counter it with an equally automatic “relaxation reflex.” A relaxation reflex is a physical, conditioned counter-response to your body’s natural “fight or flight” response.

2. The Relaxation Reflex: Why You Can Stop Anxiety Attacks (Stress Symptoms) if You Can Breathe, Flex Your Muscles, and Talk

You can create a relaxation reflex that will effectively stop anxiety attacks by learning to associate a cue word or phrase with a state of total body relaxation. If you can breathe, flex your muscles, and talk you have all the tools you need.

Those are the 3 parts to creating a relaxation reflex:

- 1) **Breathing:** Start by establishing a slow, deep pattern of breathing that refreshes and enlivens your body.
- 2) **Muscle Relaxation:** Next, tighten and release each muscle group, one by one, to drain all of the tension from your body.
- 3) **Cue Word or Phrase:** When you reach a state of deep relaxation, repeat the same word or phrase each time you exhale.

If you practice these components on a daily basis over a period of at least 12-16 weeks, you will teach yourself to associate a state of deep, total body relaxation with your cue word. Then, whenever anxiety strikes, you can say your cue word and your body will respond with relaxation.

You might think of creating a conditioned reflex as training a mental muscle. You can't build it overnight, but when you do, you'll have a conditioned reflex in your body strong enough to overcome the anxiety response every time.

3. Deep Breathing

The first step in learning a relaxation reflex is learning to control your breathing.

How Breathing Affects Your Emotions

The ability to control your breath is the foundational skill for regulating anxiety, because your breathing pattern is closely connected to your emotional state. When I had anxiety attacks my very first symptom was hyperventilation.

If you were to notice your breathing pattern while watching a tense or disturbing scene in a movie, it is likely to be a little faster and more shallow than usual. Conversely, your breathing would be slower and deeper than normal when you are getting a massage.

Your emotional state influences your breathing pattern when you aren't thinking about it, but your breathing pattern can influence your state of mind when you do think about it. It just takes becoming aware of and making a conscious decision about how you will breathe.

If you don't believe your breathing pattern can affect your emotional state, breathe in and out really fast from the top of your lungs for sixty seconds. You will find that by intentionally taking rapid, shallow breaths, you will escalate the tension in your mind and body. If you do this long enough, you will work yourself into a state of panic.

How Breathing Alters Your Blood Chemistry

When you inhale, you breathe in oxygen. When you exhale, you breathe out carbon dioxide – a waste product. Poor breathing habits impede the natural exchange of gasses and alter your blood chemistry. When the levels of oxygen or carbon dioxide in your bloodstream fluctuate, your mind and body are thrown off balance and you are less able to cope with anxiety-producing situations.

By learning good breathing habits, you can reach optimal blood oxygen levels and achieve a pleasant, euphoric, energized state of being whenever you choose to.

Two Basic Types of Breathing

The first step to breath control is awareness of your current pattern. There are basically two types of breathing:

- 1) Upper-chest, or shallow breathing
- 2) Lower-chest, or deep breathing

Since shallow breathing from the upper chest is the normal human response to a threatening or stressful situation, it is common in people who suffer from anxiety.

Clinical studies show that people who habitually breathe from the lower chest are more confident and emotionally stable than people who breathe from the upper chest. Learning to breathe from the lower chest or abdomen will help you lower your anxiety level.

How to Become Aware of Your Breathing

The following exercise will help you understand how you currently breathe:

- 1) Put one hand on the center of your chest.
- 2) Put the other hand on your abdomen, just above the waistline.
- 3) Notice which hand rises first when you inhale.
- 4) If the hand on your chest rises first, you are breathing from the upper chest. If the hand on your abdomen rises first, you are breathing from the lower chest.

How to Breathe from the Lower Chest

Once you are aware of how you normally breathe, practice breathing from the lower chest. Here's how:

- 1) Wear loose, comfortable clothing. Lie down on your back in a soft bed and close your eyes. Relax your legs and bend your knees slightly. Rest your arms at your sides with your palms open. Keep your back as straight as possible.
- 2) Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth throughout this entire exercise. Exhale very slowly, making a slight sighing sound – as if you were trying to fog a mirror.
- 3) Put one hand on the center of your chest that rises the most with each breath.

- 4) Put your other hand on your abdomen, just above the waistline.
- 5) Now practice breathing in a way that causes the hand on your abdomen to rise before the hand on your chest. Each time you breathe in, let this hand rise as high as is comfortable.
- 6) Make sure the hand closest to your chest rises only slightly, following the movement of your abdomen on each breath.
- 7) As you exhale, make sure you completely empty your lungs.
- 8) Now you are breathing deeply and from the lower chest. Continue breathing this way for about ten minutes or until you feel calm and relaxed.

How to Breathe at a Slow, Even Pace

To further reduce anxiety, focus on maintaining a slow, regular rhythm of breathing:

- 1) Count slowly from one to four as you breathe in through your nose.
- 2) Hold each breath at the top for a count of four.
- 3) Count slowly from one to four as you breathe out through your mouth.
- 4) Continue breathing to counts of four for a period of at least ten minutes.

Tips for Successful Breathing Exercises

- 1) Practice breathing as frequently as possible. At minimum, practice three times per day, for at least ten minutes per session.
- 2) Establish set times for breathing practice. You might practice first thing in the morning upon awakening, sometime during the middle of the day, and each night before going to sleep.
- 3) Besides set times, practice deep breathing from the lower chest any time you need to decrease your level of anxiety or notice that you are taking shallow breaths.
- 4) Whenever you happen to notice your breathing throughout the day, make sure you are breathing from the lower chest. You will be a more relaxed, confident, energetic person when lower-chest breathing becomes a habit.

Note: It may help to know that at first, breathing exercises are sometimes difficult for people who suffer from anxiety. It may feel like the more you try to control your breathing the more it spirals out of control. So here are two more tips:

- 5) Never force deep breathing by sheer will or work yourself into a panic trying to learn breath control. Breathing in a therapeutic way is about letting go. It's not easy to learn if you put yourself under too much pressure.
- 6) Never give up on your breathing exercises. If you have a hard time practicing at first, take a break and try again later. Give yourself the time you need to change your breathing habits. Persistence will pay off and you will learn to reduce your anxiety through breath control.

4. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Besides deep breathing, the ability to relax your muscles will also help you keep anxiety under control. Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique originally described in 1929 in a book by Chicago physician, Dr. Edmund Jacobsen. Today, it is one of the most widely used relaxation techniques in the United States, and very simple to learn. The combination of deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation is a powerful tool for regulating anxiety.

Progressive muscle relaxation involves relaxing your muscles, one at a time, in a simple, two-step process. You tense a specific muscle group and hold it for a count of eight, then release that muscle group and move on to the next part of your body.

Through practice, you will learn to recognize how a muscle group feels when tense, and when totally relaxed. When you are able to completely relax all of your major muscle groups, you will experience a pleasant mental state comparable to how you might feel after a good massage.

How to Practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation

You may practice progressive muscle relaxation while you are sitting or lying down. Start each practice session with breathing exercises. Once you are breathing slowly, evenly, and from the lower chest, you are ready to start relaxing your muscles.

Here is a more complete description of the two steps involved in progressive muscle relaxation.

Step 1: Tensing

Concentrate on the muscle group you are about to tense. Breathe in slowly and squeeze the muscles as tightly as you can for a count of eight seconds. For example, if you are working on your facial muscles, scrunch your forehead, tighten your eyes and eyebrows, clamp your jaws while contracting the muscles in your cheeks, and purse your lips together.

Really feel the tension in the muscle group and avoid tensing muscles other than the ones on which you are focused. Becoming aware of different muscle groups and exerting control over each one separately is a goal of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. Don't be concerned if your muscles shake, or you feel mild pain – this is normal.

Step 2: Releasing

After a count of eight, suddenly release all of the tension in the muscle group as you breathe out. Let all the tightness and pain flow out of the muscles. For example, if you have tensed your facial muscles, feel them become loose and limp as if the tension were running off your face like water. Concentrate on the difference between how your muscles feel in the relaxed and tensed states.

Step 3: Repeat

If a muscle group does not feel totally relaxed, wait about fifteen seconds and repeat the procedure before moving on to the next muscle group.

Work through the muscle groups in the following order each time you practice:

- Face
- Neck and shoulders
- Chest
- Back
- Stomach/abdomen
- Biceps
- Hands and forearms
- Buttocks
- Thighs and hamstrings
- Calves
- Feet

Tips for Successful Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- 1) Consult with your doctor before beginning progressive muscle relaxation if you have had any serious injuries, muscle spasms, back or neck problems. Muscle tensing exercises may make these conditions worse.
- 2) Be careful when tensing the muscles in your calves, feet, and toes. Tightening these muscles too much can cause cramping.
- 3) Release of tension from each muscle group should be sudden. If you decrease the tension gradually you will not get the full feeling of relief.
- 4) It may help to use a script to guide you when practicing progressive relaxation. You can have someone read a script to you or record your own voice. It may also help to add some soft, relaxing music in the background.
- 5) If you record a progressive muscle relaxation script, remember to pause a few seconds after releasing each muscle group. Tightening the next muscle group without taking a rest will keep you in a constant state of tension – a state you wish to avoid.
- 6) Practice progressive muscle relaxation after your breathing exercises at least twice each day. You will learn to achieve a deeper state of relaxation each time you practice. The more you practice, the more conscious control you will have over your muscles, and your ability to regulate anxiety.

5. The Cue Word (5 Steps to Relaxing on Command)

When you have mastered breathing and muscle relaxation exercises, you are on your way to regulating your anxiety level in the face of a threat and successfully stopping panic attacks. The next step is to develop a verbal cue that will trigger a reduction of anxiety immediately and on command.

You can follow a 5-step process to create a conditioned relaxation reflex, so you can speed up the relaxation process and go from taking 30 minutes to relax while lying in bed with your eyes closed – to relaxing in a few seconds. In each step, you will teach yourself to relax in a shorter and shorter amount of time.

Here are the 5 steps:

Step 1: Introduce the Relaxation Cue

The goal of this step is to start developing a verbal relaxation cue, by repeating a word or phrase while you practice your normal breathing and muscle relaxation exercises. For example, you might say the word “relax” to yourself each time you exhale or let go of a muscle group. Other good cue words or phrases might be “peace,” “let go,” or “I am calm.”

Some people choose to use an affirmation as their relaxation cue. Here are some ideas for affirmations that are helpful for relaxing:

“I am full of energy and in control.”

“I am bigger than this challenge.”

“I will turn panic into power.”

“I have the peace (or power) of God within me.”

“I let whatever happens be okay.”

Pick any word or phrase you like to use as your cue. What’s important is that by repetition of your cue, and with consistent, daily practice, you will learn to associate the pleasant feelings of relaxation with that word or phrase. Then, when you start to feel the symptoms of anxiety, you can say your cue word or phrase to yourself and your anxiety will be reduced.

Note: A word or phrase is most commonly used for a relaxation cue. However, cues that call upon other senses can be used instead of a verbal cue. For instance, you might try rubbing a smooth, polished stone or smelling a pleasant scent.

When you feel like you have mastered traditional breathing and muscle relaxation exercises, move on to Step 2.

Step 2: Cut to Three Deep Breaths

In this step, you will cut your relaxation time in half by replacing your full-length breathing routine with only three deep breaths. With each breath, inhale slowly through your nose, hold it for a count of four, and

exhale slowly through your mouth. After three breaths, move right into progressive muscle relaxation, repeating your cue word as you tense and release each muscle group.

Supposing you took 30 minutes to do traditional relaxation exercises, replacing the breathing portion to three deep breaths should cut your relaxation time to 15 minutes.

When you are able to relax in 15 minutes, move on to Step 3.

Step 3: Release-only Muscle Relaxation

In this step, you will cut your relaxation time in half again by replacing your full-length muscle relaxation routine with “release-only relaxation.”

In release-only relaxation, as the name suggests, you relax all of your muscles in progressive fashion, but you skip the first step. Instead of first tensing each muscle group before releasing, you simply release each of the body's major muscle groups. You will still repeat your cue word as you release the tension from each muscle group.

Release-only relaxation allows you to practice progressive muscle relaxation in half the time. Supposing you were able to relax in 15 minutes during Step 2, practicing release-only relaxation should cut your relaxation time to 7-8 minutes.

When you are able to relax in 7-8 minutes, move on to Step 4.

Step 4: Practice your Cue in Non-Stressful Situations

In this step, you will cut your relaxation time to 30 seconds – and learn to relax without lying down or going through an extensive relaxation routine. You will do this by practicing your relaxation cue in a non-stressful environment until it becomes second nature.

Pick an object you pass often during the day. It might be a picture in the hallway of your house, a clock in the living room, or a reminder on a 3x5 card taped to the refrigerator.

Each time you pass your chosen reminder:

- 1) Take three deep breaths, exhaling through your mouth.
- 2) Think or say “relax” (or your cue word) each time you exhale, as you continue to breathe deeply and from your abdomen.
- 3) Notice any tension in your muscles and release it.

Practice your relaxation cue at least 20 times a day in non-stressful settings. By doing this you will create the habit of checking your body for tension and returning to a state of deep relaxation throughout the day. You will also strengthen your relaxation reflex, so you can use it to stop anxiety attacks in more stressful, anxiety-producing situations.

When you are confident in your ability to use your relaxation reflex in non-stressful situations, you are ready for Step 5.

Step 5: Practice your Cue in Anxiety-Producing Situations

The final step of developing a relaxation reflex is using it to stop anxiety attacks in anxiety-producing situations. To do this, use the same process from Step 4 the moment you feel the first symptoms of anxiety:

- 1) Take three deep breaths
- 2) Think or say your cue word
- 3) Release muscle tension

The sooner you call upon your relaxation cue, the more likely you will be to stop an anxiety attack. It will help to identify which anxiety symptoms you usually feel first (your heart speeding up, sweating, racing thoughts, hyperventilation, nausea, etc.).

Before you practice your cue word in a threatening or anxiety-producing situation, you might practice by simulating one. Practice your relaxation cue after visualizing a conflict with someone, after running up a flight of stairs, or purposefully hyperventilating. Testing your relaxation reflex in simulated situations will boost your confidence in actual settings.

When you call on your relaxation reflex in actual settings, you may do so discreetly. No one but you needs to know what you are doing. Just take your breaths, think or say your cue word quietly, and release your muscle tension.

Also, be patient with yourself. You may not feel a complete relief from anxiety the first time you practice your cue in a stressful situation. But with time and practice, your relaxation reflex will strengthen. Eventually, you will have the ability to short-circuit an anxiety attack before it begins – all in a matter of seconds.

6. Why You Can Trust the Relaxation Reflex to Work

To many people, learning to relax on cue sounds too simple to be possible. However, this technique is based upon a well-known phenomenon called “classical conditioning.” In everyday language, classical conditioning is just programming yourself to respond to a cue in a certain way. This is done by pairing that cue with something that causes the response you want.

Classical conditioning emerged from an experiment done by Russian Psychologist, Ivan Pavlov, in the 1890s. Pavlov trained a dog to salivate at the sound of a bell. He did this by ringing a bell right before the dog received food. After doing this repeatedly and over time, the dog started salivating at the sound of the bell because it associated the bell with food.

In the same way, you can teach yourself to relax when you say a cue word, provided you learn to associate that word with a state of deep relaxation through repeated practice.

Cue-controlled relaxation stops the rise of anxiety because it teaches your body a “relaxation response” to replace the “fight or flight response” to a scary situation or stress.

The Power and Permanence of a Conditioned Reflex

When I suffered from persistent anxiety attacks, I became proficient at breathing and muscle relaxation exercises, but knew that relaxing in my bed was only one part of the battle. To get my life back, I needed to be able to relax in other places and situations out in public.

I figured if Pavlov could train a dog to salivate at the sound of a bell, I could train myself to relax at the sound of a cue word or phrase.

I repeated the word “relax” every time I exhaled during breathing practice or released a muscle group during progressive muscle relaxation. I used a written script to guide me through the process of relaxing and creating a relaxation reflex, which my mom read to me every day.

My experiment with classic conditioning worked! It took daily practice over several months, but I conditioned my body to relax on command. I repeated the experiment, training myself to relax by rubbing a “worry stone” – a polished rock I kept in my pocket whenever I ventured into anxiety-producing situations. By rubbing the smooth surface of the stone, I could experience immediate and total physical relaxation.

The relaxation reflex – which has stayed indelibly programmed in my neural circuitry – allowed me to call upon my body’s natural relaxation abilities in a public setting without calling unwanted attention to myself. Having the power to relax anywhere, anytime, by saying a word or rubbing a stone, eliminated my anxiety of losing control of my body in public. In due time, I eliminated the physical symptoms that made anxiety attacks so terribly frightening.

In December of 2006, years after my recovery from my anxiety disorder, I was shopping amidst holiday crowds in a Southern California mall and felt an anxiety attack coming on for the first time in years. I began to hyperventilate. My hands and face began to tingle, and the faces of other shoppers became blurry. I sat on a bench, closed my eyes, and repeated the word “relax” over and over.

Nearly twenty years after I created it, my relaxation reflex kicked in. The anxiety attack subsided and I was able to resume shopping. That’s the power and permanence of the relaxation reflex. Today, I consider my relaxation reflex my “first aid kit” for stopping anxiety.

Just as I would wash and bandage a cut, to stop the bleeding to prevent infection – I know how to stop anxiety before it spreads, infects my mind and body, and turns into full-blown panic. That’s exactly what you will be able to do, once you develop a relaxation reflex of your own.

Visualization

1. Why Positive Thinking is Not Enough to Overcome Anxiety

Some self-help programs for anxiety disorders focus on changing your negative self-talk. Positive thinking may relieve some anxiety, but it's probably not enough. That's because thinking, in the form of self-talk, occurs on the left side of the brain. Anxiety may be produced on both sides of the brain and is more than just a case of negative thinking.

To overcome anxiety, you must replace the scary pictures that are recorded in your mind, on the right side of the brain. That's exactly what you will learn to do in this lesson, but first it's important to understand the difference between the right and left sides of the brain. The difference between the two hemispheres explains why making your self-talk more positive may not be enough to overcome anxiety.

The Difference Between the Right and Left Hemispheres of the Brain

The left and right sides of your brain contribute differently to anxiety.

The left side of the brain is best described as a word processor or data editor. It is logical, analytical, sequential, rational, and thinks mainly in words and numbers. Anxiety exists on the left side of the brain as negative and irrational thoughts expressed in words.

Irrational thinking can certainly produce negative emotions. That's why so many self-help books concentrate so much on helping you change your thoughts.

Maybe you have followed such a program to help you think more positively or more rationally. Maybe you are practicing positive affirmations on a daily basis to try to tell yourself that there is no reason for feeling so much anxiety - but it's not going away.

Well, changing your thinking is definitely part of overcoming anxiety. However, the negative emotional memories that trigger anxiety attacks are not always stored as thoughts expressed in words. They are often stored as pictures in your imagination, on the right side of the brain.

The right side of the brain is more like a movie screen, where colorful images and scenes are played day and night. It is creative, spatial, holistic and intuitive, and thinks mainly in pictures, shapes, and colors. The right side of the brain, which is much more visual and much less rational, houses the imagination. Anxiety exists on the right side of the brain as pictures or mental images.

Since anxiety may be produced on both sides of the brain, it must be treated on both sides. This lesson will help you address anxiety on the right side of the brain through a program of visualization.

How Mental Pictures Affect Your Emotions

One night shortly after getting married, my wife and I watched a movie together before bed. The movie was a romantic comedy written to make people laugh, but I had the opposite response. While watching the movie I felt sick to my stomach. My heart beat harder. I felt a sense of impending doom.

About halfway through the movie I figured out why I was feeling anxiety instead of enjoying the movie like my wife. I had seen this same movie two years earlier on a day when my girlfriend (now my wife) suddenly and unexpectedly broke up with me, leaving me in a highly anxious state. Now two years later, just seeing the same sequence of scenes in this movie triggered all of the feelings I felt on the day of the break up.

Once I better understood how my feelings were produced by the pictures in the movie, my anxiety lessened. For the second half of the movie, I concentrated on the peaceful feeling of relaxing next to my committed and loving wife. I have since watched the movie a third time without feeling the anxiety of a broken relationship. Instead, I felt peaceful and even laughed a little.

This story illustrates the power of emotional memories in the form of mental pictures. From only one viewing, I learned to associate anxiety with the pictures of the movie. From a second viewing, I learned to associate the movie with peace, love, and well-being. Maybe you have had a similar experience when a movie or song triggered strong feelings from the past.

Three Reasons that Changing the Pictures in Your Mind Can Help You Stop Having Anxiety Attacks

There are three powerful principles to be learned from my story. They are the reasons why changing the pictures in your mind with a visualization program will help you tremendously in overcoming anxiety:

1) Strong emotional memories, positive or negative, are recorded as pictures in the right brain.

Each time you have an anxiety attack, your right brain records everything you saw around you at the time of the attack. All of the visual details from the time of the anxiety attack get filed away in your imagination like a bad movie.

For example, a person I will call Edward had his first anxiety attack while waiting at a traffic light. His mind recorded a picture of the red light overhead, the dark gravel and white painted lines at the intersection, his hands gripping the steering wheel, and the view of another car's taillights through the windshield. Even though the anxiety eventually subsided, this picture was stored in Edward's right brain along with all the feelings and physical symptoms he experienced during the panic attack.

2) Mental pictures can produce anxiety.

Emotional memories are triggered when you see the pictures you associate with it. That's why you are likely to experience anxiety attack in places or situations where you've experienced it before. In Edward's case, he will be more likely to have a anxiety attack the next time he is waiting at a red

light. When he sees the red light, the gravel and paint, and taillights through his windshield, his brain will match these images with similar images that were associated with anxiety in the past, which is likely to set off more anxiety symptoms.

Whenever you enter a situation similar to one in which you've had an anxiety attack, your right brain matches what you are seeing in the present with visual details from a stored emotional memory and triggers your anxiety response. In other words, certain surroundings or situations become associated with anxiety in your right brain – which has nothing to do with your conscious thoughts at the time.

Besides real-life situations, what we see in our imagination also has a profound effect on how we think, feel, and behave. That's because our imaginative right brain does not distinguish between what is imagined and what is real. Brain research has shown that when we imagine something, our mind responds as if it is actually happening. Put simply, the pictures in your mind directly impact your emotions.

When I suffered from anxiety, I could bring on an anxiety attack by just picturing myself stuck in a classroom. I would imagine the doors and windows of the classroom locking, and the air leaving the room. Just imagining it left me feeling trapped, panicked, and gasping for breath. Maybe you have similar anxiety-producing pictures stored away in your mind.

3) Mental pictures can also produce peace of mind.

If your imagination is powerful enough to set off your anxiety response, it is also powerful enough to stop it. You can harness the power of your imagination and put it to work for you. By exerting conscious control over your imagination, you can stop using it to trigger anxiety, and instead, use it to achieve peace of mind.

You can disarm the triggers for emotional memories (anxiety attacks) by changing the pictures in your mind. In our example of Edward, he could picture himself waiting at red light while he is relaxed. This would help his right brain associate the scene at the traffic light with a sense of peace instead of anxiety.

In the same way you learn to associate anxiety with a certain picture or situation – you can learn to associate a state of peaceful energy with the very same situation. You can do this with a consistent program of visualization, using the power of your imagination to erase and replace the emotional memories that trigger anxiety.

2. How to Enter the “Alpha State,” Your Mind’s Most Impressionable State

You might think of changing the pictures in your mind as breaking into your mind’s video storeroom and stealing, throwing away or erasing all of the bad videos that produce anxiety and replacing them with brand new videos that produce a sense of peace and calm. Visualization is most powerful when your brain is in the Alpha state. This is the mind’s most impressionable (or reprogrammable) state.

Scientists have identified four basic levels of brain activity, measured in cycles per second and clearly visible in the graphs produced by electroencephalograms (EEG). In the deepest level of unconsciousness – the Delta state – your brain cycles in the area of one-half to four cycles per second. At four to seven cycles per second – the Theta state – you experience deep, comfortable sleep.

In our normal waking lives, our brains are in the Beta state, producing between fourteen and forty cycles per second. In Beta, the rational, analytical left brain dominates. You are able to organize information in your mind and make logical decisions. You have conscious awareness of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.

The Alpha state – the level at which you can most easily change your mental pictures and thoughts – lies in between Theta and Beta, when your brain produces waves in the range of seven to fourteen cycles per second.

The Alpha state is the level of consciousness you experience just before you fall asleep. As your mind enters the Alpha state and begins to let go of consciousness, the left brain's analytical thought gives way to the passive, undirected, reflection of the right brain. You feel relaxed, sleepy, and only minimally aware of your senses. You no longer exert control over rational thought and speech. In this highly creative state, you are likely to remember things you thought you had forgotten. Solutions to problems may come to you with absolute ease.

In the Alpha state, the right brain takes over, and thoughts change from words to pictures. With your mind relaxed and open, you can replace anxiety-producing pictures with positive, productive and peaceful images.

Here are five steps to achieve the Alpha state (you may want to use a recorded script set:

- 1) Place: Find a quiet place free of any noise or distraction.
- 2) Position: Get as comfortable as possible, either lying on your back with your arms at your sides or sitting in an upright position with your feet firmly planted on the floor and your hands resting in your lap, palms up.
- 3) Breath: Begin with deep breathing. Breathe slowly and evenly from the lower abdomen with your stomach rising before your chest each time you inhale.
- 4) Release Tension: Relax all of your muscles using progressive muscle relaxation techniques. Tighten and release each muscle group in your body, one at a time, taking notice of the difference between tension and relaxation.
- 5) Count: With your eyes closed, count down slowly from ten to one while visualizing yourself walking down a staircase. When you reach the last step in the countdown, you will have entered the Alpha State.

In the next section I will share three ways to reprogram your mind while in the Alpha state. When you first practice this, you can simply picture a peaceful image like taking a stroll on a sandy beach or walking in a secluded forest to deepen your relaxation.

When you are ready to come out of the Alpha state, count forward slowly from one to five, then open your eyes.

Practice two or three times a day until you can enter Alpha with relative ease. This may take a week or two of consistent practice, but once you can reach the Alpha state regularly, you can use this state to more easily break into your mind's video storeroom and change the pictures in your mind to overcome anxiety.

3. Three Ways to Change the Pictures in Your Mind

1. Create an Imaginary Retreat

You can relieve anxiety by creating an imaginary retreat in your mind – a relaxing and safe place you can always visit when you feel tense or anxious. Creating an imaginary inner space gives your mind a place to rest and escape from anxiety-producing thoughts or situations.

Think about a place you would consider paradise. Carefully picture how it looks, and the sounds and smells you might experience there.

Your imaginary retreat might be a palace on a cliff overlooking the ocean, a monastery in the desert, or a warm, sunny beach. It can be anything or any place you desire.

The important thing is that you create a place in your mind that you can visit any time just by closing your eyes. Then when you are in an anxiety-producing situation, you simply close your eyes and take a trip to your personal place of tranquility. You may want to write out and record a script that describes your imaginary retreat in words.

2. Strengthen Your Relaxation Reflex

Once you develop it, you can use your imaginary retreat to strengthen your relaxation reflex. You can do this by combining peaceful mental imagery, with deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and your cue word or phrase. This adds a visual cue to your relaxation reflex, making it stronger.

To strengthen your relaxation reflex with visualization, you may listen and follow along with a pre-recorded script, or you may want to write out your own script and either have someone read it to you or record your own voice with soft music in the background.

Whichever you choose, here are the steps to adding a visual cue to your relaxation reflex.

- 1) Begin each relaxation session with breathing exercises.

- 2) Using progressive muscle relaxation, tense and relax each muscle group until your body feels limp.
- 3) Once your breathing is slow and deep and the tension in your muscles has been released, it is time to visit your imaginary retreat.
- 4) While visiting your imaginary retreat, repeat your cue word or phrase. With repeated practice, you will learn to associate this verbal cue with the deep state of calm you feel there.
- 5) When you find yourself in a anxiety-producing situation, repeat your cue word and picture your imaginary retreat in your mind. By countering the panic with words and pictures, you will engage both sides of the brain and be more likely to stop the anxiety.

3. Picture Yourself Overcoming Your Fears

Another way to use visualization in your recovery from anxiety is to picture yourself successfully overcoming something that you fear. If you can close your eyes and imagine yourself overcoming a fear, you are actually preparing your mind to do it in real life.

Remember, the reason your imagination is so powerful is that its housed on the right side of the brain. Neuroscientists tell us that the right side of the brain doesn't know the difference between what is real and what isn't.

When you see yourself overcoming a fear in your imagination, your mind records the experience as if it actually happened. Through visualization, you can actually erase and replace anxiety on the right side of your brain, and by doing so, program your brain to relax, and have fewer anxiety symptoms.

Most people with anxiety have vivid and creative imaginations. The problem is, we use the power of our imagination to scare ourselves by picturing things that cause panic and anxiety. Harnessing the creative power of your imagination and making it work for you is a key to freedom from anxiety. By changing the pictures in your mind, you can change the picture of your actual life.

4. Ten Tips for Effective Visualization

The ability to imagine things effectively does not come naturally for everyone. For some of us, this is a skill to be developed over time.

To help you along, here are ten tips to help you visualize more effectively:

Tip 1: Write out and record a script that describes your visualization in words. You might find it easier to stay with the visualization process if you have spoken words to guide you.

Tip 2: Enjoy the process. Visualization can be like taking a mental vacation. As you write out your script, treat it like planning a real vacation.

Tip 3: Let your imagination run free. Use your creativity to either come up with an imaginary place that feels safe and inviting to you or picture yourself overcoming your worst fears and fulfilling your wildest dreams.

Tip 4: Include as many sensory details as possible - touch, taste, smell, sounds, and sights. The more senses you imagine, the more powerful the visualization. If you have trouble including all of the senses, start by imagining your strongest sense first and include the others over time.

Tip 5: Add as much description to your script as possible to make your visualization real. Use a thesaurus to come up with adjectives if you need to.

Tip 6: Practice deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation before starting your visualization. This will help put your mind in the Alpha state in which visualization is more effective.

Tip 7: Make your script long enough to give your body time to get into a deep state of relaxation. You might want to create a script that takes at least twenty minutes when read slowly.

Tip 8: Record your script in a soft voice with relaxing music in the background. You might also ask a familiar person with a relaxing voice to read it for you.

Tip 9: Add relaxing statements or positive affirmations to your visualization process, such as: "My body feels calm and relaxed from head to toe," or "I am a healthy, capable person, able to meet any challenge."

Tip 10: Practice visualization at least twice a day. Practice as often as you can while doing relaxation exercises. The more consistently you practice, the sooner you will change the pictures in your mind – which can change the picture of your life.