



Lab A5-2 *Self-Treatment: Visualization and Expressive Writing*

There are many nondrug self-help options for mild symptoms or as an adjunct to medical treatment for various chronic conditions. Two that you might consider trying are visualization and expressive writing.

Imagine Yourself Well

To practice visualization, set aside 10–30 minutes of quiet, undisturbed time. Wear loose, comfortable clothing. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on a pad or carpeted floor with a pillow under your head. Do whatever you can to enhance your comfort. Dim the lights and put on soft music if you like. Practice the technique at least three or four times a week; it will likely take several weeks of practice before you really start to notice benefits.

You can engage in a general visualization exercise for relaxation by imagining yourself in a special place that you enjoy and where you feel safe, such as a beach, a beautiful garden, or a mountain trail. Although imagery most often uses your sense of sight, you can also include the experiences of your mind's other senses—smells, tastes, sounds, and other sensations such as a breeze on your face or sand beneath your feet—to make the experience more vivid and powerful.

You can also use imagery to focus on alleviating specific symptoms or illnesses. Use any image that is strong and vivid for you (this often involves using all your senses to create the image), and one that is meaningful to you. The image does not have to be physiologically accurate for it to work. Just use your imagination and trust yourself. The following are examples of images that some people have found useful:

- **Tension and stress:** a tight twisted rope slowly untwists; wax softens and melts; tension swirls out of your body and down the drain
- **Healing of cuts and injuries:** plaster covers over a crack in a wall; cells and fibers stick together with superglue; a shoe is laced up tight; jigsaw puzzle pieces come together
- **Pain:** all of the pain is placed in a large, strong metal box, closed, sealed tightly, and locked with a huge, strong padlock; you grasp the TV remote control and slowly turn down the pain volume until you can barely hear it, and then it disappears entirely; the pain is washed away by a cool, calm river flowing through your entire body
- **Infections:** white blood cells with flashing red sirens arrest and imprison harmful germs; an army equipped with powerful antibiotic missiles attacks enemy germs; a hot flame chases germs out of your entire body
- **Allergies, asthma, and lung diseases:** the tiny elastic rubber bands that constrict your airways pop open; a vacuum cleaner gently sucks the mucus from your airways; waves calmly rise and fall on the ocean surface; hyper alert immune cells in the fire station are reassured that the allergens have triggered a false alarm, and they can go back to playing their game of cards; the civil war ends with the warring sides agreeing not to attack their fellow citizens
- **Depression:** your troubles and feelings of sadness are attached to big colorful helium balloons and are floating off into a clear blue sky; a strong, warm sun breaks through dark clouds; you feel a sense of detachment and lightness, enabling you to float easily through your day
- **Diabetes:** small insulin keys unlock doors to hungry cells and allow nourishing blood sugar in; an alarm goes off and a sleeping pancreas awakens to the smell of freshly brewed coffee
- **Behavior change:** if you are somewhat shy, imagine a vivid, detailed picture of yourself walking up to people and chatting with them confidently; if you want to be more physically active, see yourself walking in the park, riding a bike, taking a dance class, or joining a sports team

(over)

LAB A5-2 (continued)

Symptom/condition targeted: _____

Imagery used (one of the previous examples or something you develop for yourself): _____

How did you feel before and after your session of visualization? _____

After several weeks of practice, did you notice any effects? _____

Expressive Journal Writing

Writing down feelings and thoughts about stressful life events has been shown to help people with chronic conditions improve their health. Use the space below to get started. Set aside a special time and write in a place where you won't be interrupted or distracted. Choose a life event that you found particularly stressful, and write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings. You may find the writing exercise to be distressing in the short term—sadness or depression are common when dealing with feelings about a stressful event—but most people report relief and contentment soon after writing for several days.