

## **Relaxation – Imagery - Meditation - Mindfulness**

### **Release tension - Reduce fear - Lift the spirit**

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest how important these self-help practices are in promoting wellbeing. Learning to relax the body and mind has been shown to reduce the effects of stress, boost the immune system, help people feel more energetic and in control of their lives, and reduce fear, panic and anxiety.

#### **Breath work - Starts the relaxation process of 'letting go'**

It connects the outside to the inside by linking body, emotions, mind, spirit and the environment, directly influencing physical functioning and emotional wellbeing.

#### **Relaxation – Uses the mind to still the physical body**

It is usually practiced lying down and involves consciously tensing and relaxing different parts of the body in order to bring awareness to the physical body and release tension.

#### **Imagery or Visualisation - Uses the power of the mind rather than stilling it**

Imagery involves all the senses and uses the power of the mind to change reality, which depends upon what we think. Imagery is very powerful, gentle images such as sun, light, wind and water are cleansing and healing. Remembering a happy time you experienced, or going mentally to a special place which feels safe and peaceful can have a profound effect on body, mind, spirit and emotions. Imagery is meditating with an active mind with the intention of achieving something and varies depending upon your focus e.g. relaxation, wellbeing, confidence building, boosting your immune system or changing direction in life. .

#### **Guided Imagery**

The therapist may take people on a specific journey creating pleasant, gentle, calming images in order to create a feeling of peace and wellbeing. The 'Connecting with Nature' example helps to guide people but allows for personal input.

#### **Personal Imagery**

People are helped to find their own images which can be more powerful, for example going back to a peaceful place or time when they felt really happy, going into the pain using the breath or colour, using light or water to cleanse, creating an image of wellness and so on.....

#### **Meditation - Stills the mind**

Meditation is usually practiced in an upright sitting position. It aims to remove tension from the mind, stilling it of thoughts, anxieties and worries. With practice calmer states of mind can be achieved which can replace a fearful chaotic state. Thoughts can be evaluated and people begin to take charge of their life. It is often said that prayer is talking and meditation is listening. Tai Chi is a form of moving meditation. There are many different ways of meditating depending upon where you focus your awareness –counting, focusing on a candle, crystal or other object or repeating a mantra.

#### **Mindfulness – Raises awareness**

This is a way of learning to be more in the present. It offers the opportunity to enjoy life more and relate to difficulties a bit differently. Research has shown it can reduce levels of anxiety and depression, improve sleep and increase levels of wellbeing in people living with cancer.



# Working with the Breath

## The balance between holding on and letting go - allowing change to happen



The starting point for self-help is learning to relax and 'let go'. This can feel frightening at first but through working with the breath in a safe and supportive environment you will gradually feel your body start to relax. In Traditional Chinese Medicine the breath is seen as nourishing Lung energy and is closely connected with survival, feeling safe and in control.

We breathe emotionally as well as physically and talk of 'breathtaking views' and being 'breathless with excitement'. Because it is so basic to life, correct breathing often gets overlooked. We frequently shallow breathe, particularly when under stress, depriving ourselves of adequate life-giving oxygen which is the most important nutrient of all (and remember cancer cells don't like oxygen!) At the same time the air we breathe may be of poor quality. There is a big difference between the air in stuffy centrally heated buildings or polluted cities to fresh mountain air.

Being under intense pressure physically or emotionally, holding on to the past or feeling 'trapped' or 'stuck', unable to escape or not in control of a situation weakens the Lung energy. Equally, if the Lung energy is weak we are less able to cope. The more we can open up to our environment and at the same time relinquish the past, the more vital and alive we become. When we lose that vitality we stagnate and lose the ability to live in the present.

The season for Lung energy is Autumn. At this time nature looks at taking what it needs to nourish it through the winter. It is the time of harvest, gathering in, sorting the wheat from the chaff and letting go of what is no longer needed to survive the winter months. Trees shed their leaves so the sap is not drained and the leaf mould protects the earth. In the same way human beings have to keep letting go of the old and the past in order to welcome the new and the future.

Grief and loss are the emotional aspects of lung energy. It may be loss of a partner, relationship, animal, job, status, self-esteem, freedom, control, power, understanding, knowledge, ability, confidence, body part and our vision of the future. If Lung energy is weak we may find it hard to deal with grief and loss. When we lose something dear to us the capacity to be always 'in the moment' loses hold. Our minds centre on the past and we need to grieve to regain the present. If we never fully grieve for what is lost we remain 'stuck' in an acute awareness of that loss and may become angry, depressed or resentful.

Finding an exercise which suits your needs and learning breathing techniques helps to maximise lung capacity. Swimming, brisk walking, Chi Gung, Tai Chi, Yoga or simple stretching exercises are recommended. Shiatsu and Thai massage help to bring the focus to the breath whilst gently stretching the body.

Learning to breathe properly helps to relax the body – a prerequisite for relaxing the mind. When we are anxious or afraid, our breathing becomes rapid and shallow. Recognising when this happens and doing the simple exercise which follows calms the body and mind.

If we are fortunate at times to be able to practise near water, the air is charged with positive ions and helps us to accumulate vital energy. Choose holidays in the mountains or by the sea and go for walks in the country.

## Breathing Exercise

- When you start to practice the breathing exercise make sure you set aside time for yourself and will not be disturbed. Find a warm, comfortable place to sit or lie down. You may find it easier at first to do the exercise when you go to bed at night which will give you the added benefit of relaxing before you go to sleep.
- Make yourself comfortable and become aware of your body and where you are holding any tension, close your eyes and gently breathe into the tension. Now focus your mind on an area about 3 fingers below the navel (known as the energy source in Traditional Chinese Medicine). It often helps to rest the hands here.
- Placing the tongue on the roof of the mouth behind the upper front teeth, gently breathe in through the nose allowing the stomach to gradually rise. As you breathe in count slowly up to three. Then allow the breath out through the relaxed open mouth, allowing the tongue to drop down, to a count of four and sink the stomach back towards spine.
- Continue for a while until you feel comfortable with the exercise. It is important not to force the breath but to focus on the in breath going deep into the lower abdomen and the out breath rising to the top of the head.
- After a while breathe in through the nose to a count of 4 and out through the mouth to a count of 5, in to a count of 5, out to a count of 6. By breathing out a little more than you breathe in, the lung capacity is gradually increased. Be careful not to over breathe or force the breath.
- Once you are comfortable with doing the exercise in bed at night, start to set aside some time during the day. First of all lying down then sitting and eventually standing. You may like to play some relaxing music or burn essential oils which suit your mood.
- When you are able to stand to do the breathing, try to feel your feet firmly planted on the ground as if you have roots connecting you to the earth like a tree. Gently bend the knees and feel the head being pulled upwards towards the sky. Relax the arms by your side leaving space under the armpits and do the exercise for as long as you feel able.
- Finally start to become more aware of what triggers you to 'hold on to the breath' and when you feel stressed and tense. Learn to do the breathing at anytime, anywhere when you feel the need to release tension from the mind and body.



## Visualisation

There is no map and no path for living with cancer. We all have to find our own way with support. Having a clear vision of where you want to be in the future is the most important consideration and yet it can be the most difficult to determine.



Visualisation, or imagery as it often called now, is not a new concept. It can be described as a kind of directed daydreaming, a way of using the imagination very specifically to help mind and body heal, stay strong and even perform as needed.

There are actually two different modes involved in creative visualisation. One is the receptive and the other the active. In the receptive mode we simply relax and allow images to come to us whilst in the active mode we consciously choose and create what we wish to see or imagine.

Remember that the mind is a double edged sword, it can be powerfully creative or powerfully destructive

- You may decide to look at it in terms of timescale – 5/10/15 years.
- Maybe you would rather consider balance – health/free time/relationships/work
- At some point it will come down to questioning why you are here and your purpose.
- Using visualisation techniques can help by stimulating the reticular activating system (RAS) of the brain. It is this system that primes the brain to notice things that it wants to notice.
- For example if you buy a new car you suddenly see lots of the same model and colour. It is not that there are more around it is just that you are primed to notice them more. This is a very powerful subconscious process.
- Another example is that you may go to bed with an unresolved problem and wake up the next morning with the solution (often around 5am).
- Once you have decided what you want in the future you need to visualise it as vividly as possible as though it is actually happening now.
- Be very clear and specific, put it into a photograph or picture.
- How do you feel, what can you see, hear or smell, who else is there?
- Then you may want to write about it or draw it.

**Developing a clear vision can help you to move on in life.**

# Connecting with Nature - A Guided Imagery

## Mountains

- Focus on the breath and start to let go.
- Take yourself to a snow covered mountain top, it is dark and still and you are waiting in anticipation for the sun to rise. Breathe in the clear mountain air and absorb the smells.
- As the sun comes up you catch your breath at the panoramic views around.
- Take the breath to the feet and see the snow melting beneath them, turning to water as it cascades down the mountainside in rivulets and waterfalls.
- Follow the water as it flows into streams, rivers and out to sea.



## Water

- The strength of water lies in its ability to change shape and energy depending upon its situation – ice to steam, snow, calm lakes, flowing rivers, cascading waterfalls, meandering streams, pounding seas and erupting geysers.
- Water flows round the hard rocks not attempting to push through but gradually wearing them away and absorbing their minerals – listen to it.
- Think of the power of the sea as the surf brings you into shore if you only have the confidence to feel safe and let go knowing life will support you.
- Water energy provides the willpower to move us forward.
- Water from the sea evaporates and causes clouds to form over the land releasing cooling water to nourish the roots of the tree.

## Wood

- Take yourself deep into the woods – see the mix of mature trees and young saplings. The rain is absorbed into the roots to nourish the tree. Without moisture the tree becomes stiff, as does the body.
- The tree needs to be firmly rooted in the ground but the branches must be flexible so they don't snap in the wind.
- See the buds on the trees uncurling into green leaves as spring arrives.
- In order to expand and grow the tree needs the warmth of the sun.

## Fire

- Feel the warmth of fire energy - it can come from the sun, a fire or a hug.
- Picture yourself lying on a beach, warm and relaxed under a blue sky.
- Too much fire burns the tree and it withers and dies. Too little warmth leaves it damp and rotting. Sun can scorch the earth or provide energy for growth.
- Fire dies down to ashes which feed the earth

## Earth

- See yourself lying in a meadow. Feel yourself supported by the earth.
- Our earth energy is strengthened by taking care of our own needs first. Once we are well nourished, we have energy to share. Then we can support others.
- If we are hungry, deprived of love and unsupported it is hard to give to others.
- Continuing to give without receiving depletes our energies and we 'go into the red'

Now slowly return to the mountaintop. See again the places you have been. Which place would you most like to revisit now. Go back there for a few minutes then when you are ready open your eyes, stretch, and gradually come back into the room.



## 10 Step Meditation Practice

1. **Place and time:** Find a private and relatively quiet place and make sure you will not be disturbed. Choose a time early morning or around sunset. Keep a clock close by and start with 10 minutes, working up to half an hour with practice.
2. **Seating and posture:** Make sure you are comfortable, either sitting on a pillow on the floor cross legged or on an upright chair. Keep your back straight and let the shoulders soften and drop. Focus on your body, relaxing parts that are tight by breathing into them. Decide where you want to place your hands. Resting the hands on the knees with the palms uppermost reflects an openness to receive, resting them on the abdomen helps you to feel more centred.
3. **Beginning:** Close your eyes (or if you want to keep them open focus on a spot on the floor) Take a breath in and let it out with a sigh. Gently remind yourself that the next few minutes are for you and you can afford to drop everything else.
4. **Breath:** Bring your attention to your breathing, becoming aware of the natural flow of the breath. Breathe in through the nose and allow the stomach to rise filling it with energy. Breathe out through the mouth and allow the stomach to sink back towards the spine sending the breath out into space. Keep repeating this allowing the breath to gently sweep its way through body and mind.
5. **Thoughts:** When a thought distracts you just acknowledge it and breathe it away.
6. **Feelings:** When feelings arise, do not resist them. Just allow them to be. Observe them from a distance. Let them run their natural course. If you feel yourself stuck, move position, straighten your posture and go back to the breathing.
7. **Pain:** If you feel pain bring your awareness to it and surround it with the breath. If the pain is persistent move gently to release the tension and return to your posture and breathing. It may help to lean against a wall or the back of the chair. Avoid excessive movement but don't let pain dominate your experience.
8. **Restlessness and Sleepiness:** If you are agitated by thoughts or feelings or find yourself unable to sit still just keep coming back to the breath and posture. If sleepiness overtakes you breathe a little more deeply, open your eyes for a while and sit up tall. You need to be in a relaxed state as in sleeping but aware.
9. **Counting breaths:** A good way to deal with distractions is to focus on the abdomen below the navel and go back to counting, for example just breathing in to a slow count of 1 and out to a slow count of 2. Sometimes it helps to internally repeat words. You could breathe in to the word 'energy' and out to the word 'relax'.
10. **Discipline:** With regular practice you can use meditation at any time of day to bring you back to the present moment, reduce stress and still the mind.



## Mindfulness

Unlike visualisation, mindfulness is not about trying to be somewhere else, it is simply being aware of where you are in the present moment. Practising mindfulness helps to create a mental environment which is harmonious and peaceful and conducive to clarity of thought.

Mindfulness is not just another technique, it is a way of living and staying in a 'good place'.

It is also about learning to step back, breathe, take a wider perspective and respond to a situation through choice rather than on automatic pilot.

Learning mindfulness can help us to balance the reasonable mind (logical, left brain thinking) with the emotional mind (the impulsive, passionate reaction) and merge them to form the wise mind which allows us to connect to our intuition and 'gut feeling'.



We can choose to act, react or walk away being aware of our choice. We can choose our battles, focus on what we can change and let go of things over which we have no control. Flying through brick walls becomes painful after a while!!!!

Sometimes it is important to just observe thoughts and feelings in a non-judgemental way and let them go. Sometimes it is just about learning acceptance – things are what they are.

( Find out more about Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)

What we do with our time from moment to moment, hour to hour and from one year to the next can affect our wellbeing and our ability to deal skilfully with stress. Spending too much time thinking about the past can lead to depression. On the other hand too much time worrying about the future can cause anxiety.

How often do you find yourself getting so focused on the goal you want to achieve that you lose touch with what you are doing right now to get there? Do you rush through activities without being really attentive, to the point where you never quite reach that goal?

### **Spend a few minutes to write down:**

What nourishes your energy?

What drains your energy?

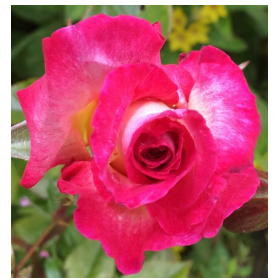
How can you increase the nourishing activities?

## **Focusing the mind and connecting with yourself**

- Observe your state of mind 4 or 5 times during the day.
- Be aware of your energy levels and how you are feeling
  - Energy levels ok – energetic, confident, calm, flexible, focused, fun
  - Low energy – tired, lethargic, bored
  - Burn out – discouraged, stuck
  - Anxious – angry, fearful, scattered thinking
- Focus on your breath, taking slower, deeper, breaths to instil calmness and confidence. Check your posture – are you slumped, tense or relaxed?
- Pay more attention to what makes you more vulnerable to being in an emotional state of mind. For example how do various foods, drinks and lack sleep affect you?
- Place something in your working environment which prompts you to refocus yourself – maybe an image or an object. Use a screen saver on the computer which is restful.
- Monitor your internal talk. If you are blaming or criticising yourself – stop! Substitute a more positive message.
- Act on priorities when necessary, but be prepared to keep changing the priority as things develop. However, it is important at times to look at how you set your priorities, take time out to step back from them, and just do what you want to do.
- Learn to pace yourself and find a way to 'Go with the flow' .
- If you have a tendency towards perfectionism, find a way to live with 'good enough'.
- Clearing clutter from your environment helps to clear it from your mind.
- Visualise past moments of peace and happiness. Visualise yourself being healthy, happy and successful in the future.

Research has shown that relaxation, visualisation, meditation and mindfulness can:

- Increase general wellbeing
- Lower stress
- Reduce anxiety and depression
- Ease pain



**“Don’t worry about what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and do that because what the world needs is people who come alive.”**

**Howard Thurman**