

Well-being in Schools – an introduction to Guided Visualisation

Guided Visualisation has been around more than 30 years and is one of a number of techniques for introducing basic meditation into the classroom.

What is it? Guided Visualisation involves reading a brief story or narrative that is designed both to have a calming effect and to provide a single strand of thought for the listener to focus on. The listener is encouraged to sit silently and relax. Typically, a guided visualisation will begin with a breathing exercise (see Spiritual Practice Activity Sheet 1) to support the calming process. A typical session involving breathing exercises, guided visualisation and reflection (see Spiritual Practice Activity Sheet 3) will last 10 minutes, 15 at the most.

How it Works. By providing a calm environment and a single, simple and gentle narrative to tune in to, the listener is encouraged to focus on the story and allow other conscious thought processes to fall away. The narratives are deliberately constructed to have a calming effect and encourage a positive state of mind.

The reason for Guided Visualisation. When conscious, the mind is an extremely busy place. Left to its own devices our thoughts and feelings will range far and wide, though our bodies may be sat behind a desk or even nodding over a book. Thoughts are not neutral things, nor are they harmless. Distractions limit our capacity to work. Chewing over a bad experience can raise our stress levels and make us anxious.

It is a sad fact that thinking about a stressful situation such as a confrontation or being hurt by someone emotional brings much of the stress and anxiety producing body chemistry back into play. Developing the knack of guided visualisation helps move us on, calm us down and activates the 'wiring' in the brain that enables us to think well of others and focus on our work.

Meditation is typically done in silence. This can be difficult for some people and is certainly a problem for children. Guided Visualisation offers a simple, calming narrative to direct the thoughts. The narrative becomes the focus of thinking and gradually takes the listener on a journey to stillness. At the journey's end their should be a single focus, an object of contemplation - and a short period of silence. When the Visualisation and Stilling is at an end there should be a short period of time to reflect on the thoughts and feelings produced by the guided visualisation.

Techniques. There is no standard approach, but some things are basic requirements. A quiet space where external noises (such as another lesson going on) can be avoided helps a great deal. It helps to have a visual focus, such as a candle, and children need to be positioned so that they are not encouraged to catch each others' eye. Children should be comfortable but not slumped over a table. A comfortable, upright posture with spine against the back of the chair and shoulders erect supports breathing and alertness. The lighting of the candle can become a simple ritual to signify 'Special Time' and blown to signify the end of that time. I avoid the use of incense – it makes some children cough and there are always a few who simply don't like the smell.

The time taken should vary with the needs of the individual or group. Young children struggle to remain still so a two or three minute visualisation may be enough.

Allow time for Reflection afterwards. If the theme is suitable, Circle the Reflection and encourage sharing of experiences. If the event wasn't completely successful, explore the reasons why.

Guided Visualisation Narratives

INTRODUCTION

I am going to take you on a journey. It is a journey that will happen in our heads, in our imagination. The things you see, and do on this journey will happen in your mind. Try to see places clearly. Let the body relax and be still. Have your eyes closed. If other thoughts come into your head imagine them like clouds and let them drift away.

THE STREAM

Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe in and out let your eyes close so that you are able to see and hear more closely with the eyes and ears of your imagination.

You are walking by yourself in the countryside. It is a warm sunny day and you can feel the sun warming you. You feeling happy and enjoying the beautiful countryside. As you walk you see an old stone bridge over a river. You walk to the middle of the bridge and you can feel the warm sun on your back as you look into the water flowing by. The water moves very slowly. There are rainbow coloured silvery fish swimming lazily in the current. You notice a leaf floating on the surface of the water as it comes under the bridge. It moves slowly and you follow its progress on its way downstream. See how it flows gently downriver. Watch the direction it takes. You look up. The river winds its way into green and gold farmland. There are beautiful green hills in the distance. As the river disappears from your sight on the horizon, you bring your eyes back again to the clear water just below the bridge. Watch the gentle movement of the silver fish and the reflections of the sunlight on the water. Now it is time to make your return journey. Look up at the sun. Stretch. Begin to walk away from the bridge and follow the path, which will bring you back to this room. Open your eyes, have a big stretch and wriggle your toes.

WOODLAND PATH

Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe in and out let your eyes close so that you are able to see and hear more closely with the eyes and ears of your imagination.

It is a warm sunny day and you see yourself walking alone along a woodland path. Shafts of light come through the leaves and light up the forest floor. Your path is covered in dead leaves. They feel soft underfoot. As you walk you can smell the earth. Stop. Listen to the sounds around you. There are birds singing in the trees. You hear the sound of a stream flowing close by. You walk slowly towards the sound of the water. You see a small clearing ahead of you. In the middle is a pool of still water. Stand by the clear water. Notice your reflection. Sit down and enjoy the quietness. Notice how you feel as you sit there. You see a small stone on the ground. Pick it up and throw it into the middle of the pool. Ripples form perfect circles until they lap the shore. You stay for a few moments feeling the goodness of the place. Now its time to go .You get up slowly and make your way back along the path, storing away clearly in your memory all the details so that you will be able to come back whenever you want. Open your eyes and bring attention back to the classroom. Give yourself a big stretch and wriggle your toes in your shoes.

THE WATERFALL

Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe in and out let your eyes close so that you are able to see and hear more closely with the eyes and ears of your imagination.

Ahead of you is a path that winds into a valley. The valley is full of fresh-smelling pine trees. The path is gravelled. The stones crunch under your feet as you walk down the path to the valley floor.

As you walk further into the valley you hear the sound of fast-flowing water in the valley below. You come to the rushing stream. A path follows the stream down the valley and towards the sea. Your ears are full of the sound of the fast-flowing water gushing over stones. Your eyes are dazzled by the sun glittering on the water.

You follow the path slowly towards the sea. Ahead you hear the roar of falling water. There are rocks blocking the path in front of you. There is a path through the rocks. You squeeze your way through the rocks and come to a waterfall. The water flows over the rocks into a beautiful pool of crystal-clear water.

The water is so clear and fresh that you decide to swim in the pool of water. When you are enjoying being under the water, the sun shines down and turns the water into dazzling rainbow colours. You swim around in the shallow little pool of dazzling water. The sun goes behind a cloud for a moment and the water becomes crystal clear again.

You climb out onto the grass and lie on the grass until you are dry. It is time for you to find your way back up the wooded hillside to the top of the valley. Slowly, you walk up the path, following the setting sun. It is now time to leave the valley and bring your attention back to the classroom. When you are ready open your eyes have a big stretch and wriggle your toes in your shoes.

SEA SHORE

Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe in and out let your eyes close so that you are able to see and hear more closely with the eyes and ears of your imagination.

With the sun shining down on you, I want you to imagine you are walking along a beach. You hear the sound of the waves. The tide is out and the sea is a long way out. You walk slowly across the golden sand towards the sea. The sun is on your face and the smell of the sea is on the breeze.

The sand beneath our feet is now wet. The gentle waves are rolling in and washing gently past your feet. You decide to go for a swim. The sea is very calm beyond the waves lapping onto the beach. The water is warm and crystal clear. Beneath you fish swim around smooth rocks set in the golden sand. Seaweed sways gently in the gentle tide. There are shells on the seabed. You reach down and gather an oyster shell that is still closed. You rise to the surface and you are back in the beautiful sunshine glittering on the sea.

You swim back to the shore. You stand up on the beach and hold up the oyster. Slowly you open the oyster. Inside is a beautiful pearl. As you look at the pearl happy memories from a holiday come flooding back.

Now it is time to return. Open your eyes. Stretch and wriggle your toes in your shoes.

Further Reading.

Michael Beesley. **Stilling: A Pathway for Spiritual Learning in the National Curriculum**, Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education, 2003.

Dr. Andrew Curran. **The Little Book of Big Stuff about the Brain**, Crown House Publishing Ltd.,2008.