

# Visualization

Mental Health Mastermind

## Defining Visualization

Visualization is imagining an object, action, place, or outcome. It can be used for motivation, relaxation, enhancing performance, and improving emotional wellness.

Technically, any time you imagine a scenario, action, place, or outcome, you are visualizing. In fact, visualization takes up a significant portion of your mental energy every day. When you're planning a meal or outfit, deciding what to say to a professor, worrying about the future, or feeling optimistic, you're likely visualizing. So, the question is, what are you visualizing and how is it impacting you?

## Positive Visualization

When used positively, visualization is an effective tool in enhancing performance, boosting motivation, mentally rehearsing a new action, and setting future positive goals. Many athletes and performers use visualization to "get in the zone" or see themselves at their peak performance level. Researchers have found that this kind of visualization has a significant impact on performance. Positive visualization is also used in mental health treatment for conditions like depression, panic, anxiety, phobias, and suicidal ideation. Research shows that the feelings elicited by the visualization help give it its power.

### **The Basic Components of a Positive Visualization:**

An effective positive visualization is personally meaningful and vivid. It includes all five sensory experiences. A positive visualization also pre-supposes the change you want to see. That is, it puts you in the scenario of taking the new action or living in the desired outcome as the present moment.

Your visualization can be literal or symbolic. For example, maybe you want to feel more confident. You may know exactly when, where, and how you would feel more confident, and you could visualize this. But it's also okay if you don't know exactly what confidence would look like. Perhaps the image of you driving your car or walking in nature symbolize this for you, even if this isn't what you would literally do if you were confident. Visualize the symbolic representation of confidence anyway. It's the feeling your visualization evokes that matters!

Taking the time for pre-work, or planning out your visualization beforehand, can help you stay focused while visualizing and elicit the desired emotion.

**Let's explore three kinds of positive visualization and experiment with pre-work for each before practicing a visualization of your choice.**

## Visualization Based on Emotions

You can approach your visualization from the starting point of the desired emotional response. In other words, how you want to feel. Spend a few minutes calling to mind feelings words or phrases related to how you want to feel. Play with the words, noticing what other feelings words or images come to mind. Take brief notes as you go to help stay engaged in the process. When you have a good sense of the feelings you want, close your eyes and let your mind wander to images of times you have felt that way or images of a future you feeling that way. Allow those feelings to bubble up as you visualize this. Notice all the sensations involved. It's okay to take notes or reference your feelings words as you do this.

### Pre-Work: Make a Feelings List

How do you want to feel in life? Make a list of the desired feelings. Play with these words, noticing what other feelings words, statements, or images come to mind.

## Visualization Based on Desired Outcomes

Name a specific desired outcome you'd like to achieve. Write a paragraph or so about what that outcome would look like, incorporating all five senses. Read over your paragraph and add any additional details that come to mind. You may also choose to write about why this change is important to you. What would it make possible in your life? Then, distill this paragraph down to a few statements or words.

Close your eyes and focusing on these statements or words, envision the scenario you just described. Keep the visualization brief if you find yourself daydreaming about something else. A few minutes of focused attention is more beneficial than a longer, less focused visualization. The key is to feel the feelings of the desired end result.

### Pre-Work: Describe Your Desired Outcome

What is your desired end result of a goal, phase of life, or situation? Write a few sentences or bullet points about what it would look like and what it would mean to you to have this happen. Be sure to include all five senses. If you can, distill it down to a single sentence or a few words.

## Visualization Based on Desired Actions

When you want to change a habit, try visualizing your new desired actions. As before, take some time to write about the new behaviors or habits you'd like to develop and why. What would this make possible for you? Be sure to include as much vivid sensory information as you can. What would it look like, sound like, smell like, feel like, etc. to take this new action?

When you have a good sense of the image of the desired action, close your eyes and see yourself taking this new action. This might involve mentally rehearsing the steps you'll need to take or seeing yourself switch from an old habit to a new habit in specific situations.

### Pre-Work: Describe Your Desired Action

What is a new behavior or habit you'd like to develop? Write a few sentences or bullet points about what it would look like and what it would mean to you to have this happen. Be sure to include all five senses. If you can, distill it down to a single sentence or a few words.

## Visualization Practice

We'll follow these steps together. You can repeat this process for a few minutes any time you'd like to practice positive visualization. Remember, it's okay to open your eyes, move your body, and review your pre-work notes at any point during the visualization process.

1. Choose your visualization to practice and review your pre-work notes. Make note of key words, phrases, or symbols.
2. Settle in. Get in a comfortable position, and allow your body to relax. Using your peripheral vision, taking slow, deep breaths, listening to music that inspires your visualization, or focusing your eyes on a single point in your environment are all ways you can do this.
3. If it helps you focus your attention, close your eyes.
4. Bring to mind a key word, phrase, or symbol from your prework. Allow positive emotions associated with this key word, phrase, or symbol to build up inside of you. It can be helpful to imagine these feelings as a light shining from your heart.
5. Engage your senses with an imagined scene. Notice where you are, what you're doing, how you're standing, what you smell, what you see, what you hear, taste, and feel. You can say list the things you perceive like this: *I see...I hear...I smell...*
6. Turn up the intensity of this scene, really focusing on how it feels to be in that scene.
7. If you are visualize yourself from the perspective of an outsider, imagine stepping into your body and experiencing the visualization from a first-person perspective.
8. As you wind down your visualization and return to the room around you, make note of any key insights that came up during the visualization.
9. If you have time, you may like to take a few minutes to journal about your experience.

Let's practice a visualization. Review your pre-work and choose the visualization that resonates most with you.

What did you observe about your visualization experience?