

BAPAM
PERFORMING ARTS MEDICINE



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Visualisation Techniques for Performers

What do we Mean by Visualisation?

Visualisation is the practice of imagining what you want to achieve in the future as if it were true today, directing your subconscious to be aware of the goal you have in mind. It involves using all five senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing.

Visualisation can be outcome focused – envisioning where you want to be, and process focused – following each step towards the outcome.

The best results are achieved when you use both together.

Visualisation helps to build self-confidence and reduce anxiety. It is also a helpful technique to use when you want to practise but you feel fatigued or are recovering from an injury, and a

means of continuing to practise when you are not with your instrument or in a studio.

How to Practise Visualisation

Write what you want in detail, engaging all 5 senses. Keep adding to the details until it feels as if you are living the experience. Imagine the emotion attached to the outcome. The more you can feel what it will be like to accomplish your goal, the more you'll believe it can be attained. And the more likely you'll be to act.

Take action every day toward your desired outcome. Accept that there will be setbacks. Close your eyes and imagine how you'll deal with the setbacks as they come and continue forward toward your goal.

Expand your knowledge. If more knowledge is required, research, talk to experts. Use that knowledge to further detail the steps that you have to take to get to your goal.

Make time to consider your visualisation. Visualise twice daily for a total of 10 minutes. It's most effective in the moments you wake and the moments just before you go to sleep. This will help engage the subconscious in your focused effort toward your desired outcome. Close your eyes and imagine the desired outcome. With all related senses and all emotions.

Write your desired outcome as if it's true in the present day on an index card. Read it in the morning and at night. Create a vision board and have it in your line of sight. See it as you go to bed.

Dr Terry Clark calls mental rehearsal in music "Imagery", meaning the cognitive or imaginary rehearsal of a physical skill without overt muscular movement.

The basic idea is that the senses — predominantly aural, visual,

and **kinaesthetic** — should be used to create or recreate an experience that is similar to a given physical event (**Connolly & Williamon, 2004; p. 224**). Clark highlights **Psychoneuromuscular Theory** (**Carpenter, 1894**) which demonstrates that vivid, imagined events produce neuromuscular responses similar to those of an actual experience.

Imagery ability is thought to be comprised of three distinct components:

- 1) Vividness
- 2) Controllability
- 3) Accuracy of reference

When first beginning to use imagery, he advises that it is worth spending time developing each of these three components individually before combining them all together. Once you have done so, then imagery becomes a particularly effective tool to use within your practice and skill development.

The first three exercises below have been designed to help you develop your ability within each of the three components. The fourth and final exercise is an example of how you could combine each of these components and use imagery to pre-rehearse or pre-experience an upcoming performance. This is just an example and, of course, imagery can be used for a tremendous range of functions.

Visualisation Exercises

1) Developing imagery vividness

Mental rehearsal for performance enhancement does not just involve seeing or hearing things. Rather, imagery is most effective when it involves all of your senses, including

movement, external and internal sensations, and can even involve smell and taste as well. This introductory exercise is intended to develop such imagery by helping you develop the imagery vividness of your different senses. Before beginning this exercise, take a moment to relax. Then, let yourself imagine, one after another, the following sensory experiences:

Now see:

- a sunset over the ocean
- white clouds racing over the sky
- your musical instrument, equipment or costume
- the face of a friend
- a building that you like
- a rose as it opens and blooms

Now hear:

- The sound of a rainstorm on a tin roof
- church bells ringing in the distance
- the applause of the audience at the end of a performance
- the sound of wind in the trees
- your favourite piece of music
- the voice of a famous performer

Now feel:

- The sun on your back on a hot day
- jumping into a cold bath or pool
- the grasp of a firm handshake
- walking barefoot on grass
- your fingers moving when you play your instrument, the movements of a dance or performance

Now smell:

- Your favourite perfume
- a newly mowed lawn
- burnt toast
- something you associate with your creative practice, such as a

new musical instrument, an old fabric, makeup, or a dance studio floor

Now taste:

- A lemon as you bite into it
- a cool refreshing drink
- your favourite food

Let the scene fade, slowly stretch, and open your eyes.

2) Developing control of your imagery

It is important that you have control over your experience during mental rehearsal. The following exercise can be helpful in developing this.

1. Sit down in a place where you will not be disturbed. Uncross your legs and arms. Close your eyes, and relax from your head downward. In your imagination, walk into a practice room. Notice what the room looks like. See any object generally related to your performance, such as a musical instrument, page of a script or score, prop or barre).
2. Notice details in what you see. Walk around it. Notice what you can see and hear as you do this. Look at the object from above, and then from below. Now, imagine the object growing and make it larger. Then, see it getting smaller, first back to its normal size and then smaller still. Now, change its colour. What colour is it?
3. Take a breath, and go back to the beginning. Walk into the room again. See the object again. What details do you notice now? Reach toward the object and touch it. Notice what it feels like, its texture. Either pick it up or put yourself into a position ready to use it. Notice how you make contact with it. Take time to “feel right,” and stay with this feeling for a moment.
4. Begin to perform and listen. What can you hear? Stop performing. Breathe. Begin to perform again and listen. Stop. Breathe. Do this a few more times, but when your attention

begins to waver or you begin to lose control of your imagery, finish the practice. Stop performing, step away from the instrument or object, and leave the room.

5. Let the scene fade, and slowly bring your attention back to your present environment.

3) Developing accuracy of reference

When we imagine performing a particular activity, it is very important that what we are imagining closely resembles the actual thing we are imagining doing. This refers to the timing of the activity, what we see and hear while performing the activity, and what it feels like to perform the activity, and even any emotions that might be associated with that activity. This type of vivid, accurate mental imagery enhances our preparation, sharpens our technique, and deepens our performance presence.

One of the best and easiest ways to develop detailed and accurate imagery ability is to alternate back and forth between doing the activity and imagining the activity. This works across disciplines.

Here's how to apply it in your own practice:

1. Choose a short, simple action or phrase relevant to your discipline:

- A musical scale or phrase
- A spoken line or monologue
- A short dance sequence or gesture
- A specific emotional reaction or stage entrance

2. Physically perform the action, paying close attention to one specific sensory element (e.g., sound, movement quality, facial expression, rhythm, etc.).

3. Now pause and imagine yourself doing the same action. Focus on the same sensory element—what it sounds like, looks like, or feels like in your body.

4. Repeat this cycle of performing and imagining three times, each time shifting your focus to a different sensory aspect:

- Sound – What does the action sound like (your voice, instrument, or movement in space)?
- Physical sensation – How does your body feel during the action (muscle tension, balance, breath)?
- Visual imagery – What do you see around you or in your mind's eye? Try both:
 - First-person view (through your own eyes)
 - Third-person view (watching yourself from the outside, like on stage or film)

5. Finally, combine all sensory and emotional elements as you alternate between performing and imagining. Make the mental version as rich and detailed as the real one.

Once you've practiced with a simple action, expand this method to more complex or emotionally rich material:

- Musicians: A musical phrase, dynamic shift, or solo entry
- Actors: An emotional moment, stage movement, or character interaction
- Dancers: A sequence of choreography, spatial pattern, or expressive gesture
- Singers: A vocal run, breath phrase, or expressive delivery
- Multidisciplinary artists: Any action involving integration of sound, movement, text, or emotion

4) Guided Imagery

This final exercise is now an opportunity to put the three different skill components together. To begin, pick two performances:

1) A performance that you have given recently that stands out in your mind as having been a positive experience, whatever that might mean to you

2) An upcoming performance.

Briefly take a moment to describe the two performances to yourself: the venue, what you will be performing, possible audience members, etc.

First, relive a previous positive experience, develop awareness of feel

1. Imagine yourself walking into a big room, and in front of you, you see a chair and a large screen. Sit down, and watch a film of this previous positive performance. Notice what you are doing to prepare yourself, and when you begin performing, notice the sound and movements, how you are expressing yourself, the positioning of your body, and your facial expression. As you come to the end of your performance, notice what you look and sound like.

2. Having just finished watching yourself, what is your response? What are you feeling?

3. Now, see yourself about to perform again, and this time, imagine yourself getting up from your chair and stepping into the film. You are now about to perform from the inside, looking through your own eyes.

4. Prepare yourself and give your best performance. Notice where and what you are paying attention to, notice the sound, and notice how you are expressing yourself. In particular, pay attention to the physical sensations when you perform. What are the key aspects of your performance? Complete the performance and notice what you are feeling now.

Upcoming performance

1. Hold these feelings and imagine you have arrived at the venue for your upcoming performance. Find a place in the venue where you can momentarily store your bags and feel at home. Walk into the hall where you will be performing and notice what you see and hear as you walk around. Perhaps go to the back of the hall and notice what you can see from the audience's point of view. Now walk onto the stage and look around and listen carefully to the hall. Make yourself at home on stage.

2. Imagine that you have now completed your warm-up and are standing backstage in the few minutes before your performance. What are you wearing? Who else is with you? Describe how you are feeling: physically, mentally. Imagine yourself going through your normal routines to get yourself into the proper mental state.

3. The hall lights are dimmed, and the stage manager tells you it's time to go on. Imagine yourself stepping out onto the stage, smiling at the audience, feeling relaxed and confident. Describe the audience. Describe what the hall looks like, i.e. the colour of the walls, the stage floor, the temperature, any smells...

4. Put yourself in a position ready to perform. What are you feeling/experiencing? Take a moment to recreate those feelings and sensations from your previous performance, then begin.

5. Notice what you can see and hear as you perform and pay attention to your physical sensations and feelings. Deliver your performance perfectly.

6. For a moment, float out of your body and notice what you can see and hear from the audience's perspective. Notice how you are responding as a member of the audience. Now, float back into yourself and complete your performance.

7. You come to the end of your performance, what do you notice? About yourself? The environment? How do you feel?

8. Imagine yourself walking off stage, confident and happy with how you played.

9. As you finish, notice what and how you feel, and then bring yourself back to your present environment.

Further Reading

Harnessing Mental Imagery for Performers | Dr Anna Waters | BAPAM

Imagining the music: Methods for assessing musical imagery ability – Terry Clark, Aaron Williamon, 2012

Connolly C and Williamon A (2004), Mental skills training, in A Williamon (ed), Musical Excellence (pp. 221-245), Oxford University Press. – Centre for Performance Science

Imagining is Not Doing but Involves Specific Motor Commands: A Review of Experimental Data Related to Motor Inhibition – PMC

Resource Information

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