



STEMSS®

*Support
Together for
Emotional
and Mental
Serenity
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Relaxation, Breathwork and Visualization Exercise

Michael G Bricker MS, CADC-2, LPC (*reproduced by permission*)

For the Clinician: *This exercise uses a form of relaxation therapy that may be more effective for people who come from the experience of trauma than the standard “progressive relaxation” technique. When doing the visualization phase, it’s important to stay away from phrases like “your safe place” (often there wasn’t one) or “your happy place” (which may be associated with drugs or other escape behaviors). We introduce a technique from NLP called anchoring, which has a sound research base in Neuro-Linguistic Programming. With those caveats in mind... let’s have some fun!*

Introduction: I invite you to do a relaxation exercise together with me. This isn’t hypnosis or anything like that – you’ll be completely aware and in control at all times. I’ll be watching, but if at any time you begin to feel “flooded”, just bring your awareness back into the room and relax. As you try to relax, you might feel like you “bounce” and can’t seem to go any deeper. This is perfectly normal, especially in early recovery. Just do what you can, and it will be exactly right. You can close your eyes if you want, or you can just pick a spot in the room and let your eyes go out of focus for a bit.

At some point, when you’re feeling nice and relaxed and in control, I’ll invite you to do something called “anchoring”. Anchoring is kind of like a shortcut on your computer, or the speed-dial on your phone – it allows you to go back to a specific place very quickly without having to go through all the steps to get there. An anchor is an outward sign of an inward change – we all use them all the time. Folding your hands to pray, putting your hand over your heart or saluting for the Pledge of Allegiance are a couple of examples. So you can use anything as an anchor. The one I like is to take the fingers of the hand you normally write with, and gently circle the wrist of your other hand. This is a fairly normal gesture, and you can do it any time anywhere without anyone noticing. So... are you ready? Let’s give it a try!

Take a moment and get comfortable – this will work best if you have solid contact with the floor – both feet flat, or sitting comfortably. I invite you to sit mindfully – let yourself become fully aware of the sensation. Give in to gravity – we spend most of our time fighting the embrace of Mother Earth. Just allow yourself to sink in to a felt sense of safety as you are supported by the chair – by the floor – by the Ground of our being. (*pause 2 – 3 seconds*)

Now we’re going to do a brief relaxation exercise that you can learn and do on your own any time. Become aware of your feet – how they feel. Now relax your ankles... imagine them opening up like opening a faucet. Let all the tightness and excess muscle energy in your feet and your calves drain out through the soles of your feet. We all carry more muscle tension than we really need – don’t worry, it’ll come back if you really need it. But just for now, release that extra muscle energy back into the infinite sea of energy that surrounds us. (*1 second – continue below*)

Good. Now relax your knees, and let the tension in your thighs and legs drain out through the soles of your feet. Relax your hips – feel how the whole bottom of your body is deeply and safely relaxed. By now, your feet might be feeling a bit different than when we started...and I wonder what that's like for you. *(2-3 seconds)*

Now let your attention turn to your abdomen. Allow your stomach to relax. We carry lots of feeling energy in our abdomen – anxiety and fear in the high stomach up under the rib cage, and shame in that spot a couple of inches below your navel. Just for the moment, let all of that excess feeling energy drain down through your hips and legs and out through your feet. *(1 second)* Become aware of your chest. We carry sadness in our rib cage, and hurt in the area over the heart. Just for now, release that feeling energy and let it flow down through your body and out through your feet. *(1 second)* Now relax your shoulder blades – we carry lots of anger in our shoulders and shoulder blades. We “carry the weight of the world on our shoulders”... just for now, let the world carry YOUR weight as you enjoy feeling deeply and safely relaxed. *(1 second)* Relax your throat – we carry sadness in the front of the neck (that “lump in the throat”), and anger in the back of the neck (lots of headaches have anger behind them). Relax your face – we carry so much worry and tension in our faces – let those muscles relax into a smile. And finally... even though I know it sounds silly... relax your scalp. Almost like standing in a warm shower, let relaxation wash over you and carry away any remaining tension or worry. *(2-3 seconds)*

Now... notice what's happened to your breathing. Don't try to breathe any special kind of way... just notice your breath. Without my saying anything about it, your breathing has become slow... deep... regular. I want to remind you of a miracle you discovered on the day you were born. With the very first breath you took, life-giving energy came into your body for the first time. Oxygen comes in with your breath and goes to every single cell in your body. It breathes the gift of life into every single cell of your being. And each cell gives releases the toxic byproducts of metabolism to the outgoing breath to be carried away. Take a moment to visualize this stream of energy carried on your breath. Whatever image or sensation that comes to you is exactly right. Some people describe seeing a color, or a stream of energy, or a glow of light. But whatever your experience is, try to actually SEE the stream of positive energy flowing in with your breath, energizing your body, and carrying away any unwanted energy. Some people use a mantra like “inhale love, exhale fear – inhale peace, exhale worry”. You can try that for a moment, if you wish. *(1 second)*

This is our natural state – deeply relaxed, inwardly aware, and breathing naturally. If you would like, you can deepen this sensation by deliberately making your breathing slower... deeper... more relaxed. You can take this felt sense of safety and relaxation as deeply as you want. Take a moment and find the right “inner space”. *(1 second)* If you'd like to be able to return to this felt sense of peace very quickly, you can set that “anchor” we talked about. Just take the fingers of the hand you normally write with, and gently circle the wrist of you other hand. Take a couple of breaths and a gentle squeeze to anchor the experience. Now you can return to this felt reality of safety and relaxation any time you wish, with just a gentle squeeze of your wrist and a cleansing breath.

And now, as we begin to draw this experience to a close, thank yourself for this moment of relaxation. Take a moment to be grateful for the gift of peace that is our birthright. *(2-3 second)* Now gently allow your awareness to drift back into this place and this time, *(1 second)* When you are ready, you can open your eyes and be present. You may have a strong urge to yawn and stretch – that's a very good sign. If you find that you drifted away from awareness, that's OK too – you had exactly the right experience for YOU today. Thanks for letting me be a part of your journey today!