

Chapter Twenty

Guided Imagery for Youth Groups

“Imagination and fiction make up more than
three quarters of our real life.”

—Simone Weil



Guided imagery can be utilized with people of all ages. It is an effective educational tool for a wide variety of age groups, including very young children and very sophisticated adults. This innovative educational technique can be part of a formal lesson plan in a school classroom, part of an adult or family education program on serious themes, or it can be used with school-age children in informal youth groups.

The guided imagery exercises that follow are designed specifically for informal youth education, such as meetings of groups like BBYO, Young Judea, NFTY, USY, and NCSY, in summer camps, weekend retreats, etc. As with many of the scripts in other chapters in this book, there is no reason why many of these exercises cannot be used in other places as well, even though they are designed specifically for one setting. Most of the exercises in this book can be used in almost any setting.

The decisions as to which script fits which setting, and what modifications are made in the script, depend largely upon your discretion and judgment as facilitator. I suggest that you make the decision based on the size, age, and maturity level of the group, the goals of the session, time available, and how this exercise fits in with the overall program of the group. An important factor always, of course, is your level of comfort and familiarity with the group.

The introductory exercise in this chapter is designed to demonstrate what guided imagery is. It is for groups that have not had an experience with this method previously, to show them that it can be both educational and fun to learn how to better use the God-given gift of our imagination, and to help children realize that the fantasy world is a useful and playful part of their brain's capacity to be creative and intelligent. Guided imagery should be presented in a fun way, while at the same time explaining that the same technique is used by adults too, for learning, growth, and discovery.

Put Your Magein David on the Ceiling

As the group leader, you should introduce this exercise with a brief explanation about different parts of our brain. You might begin with the following:

There are parts of our brain that help us memorize important things, like our telephone number, address, and those of our friends and relatives. There is another part of our brain that helps us to discover new ideas and make valuable inventions, such as creating new medicines to cure sick people, new computer games, writing novels and poetry, and discovering ways to make cars safer, planes faster, etc. In this exercise we shall be using the part of our brain (usually referred to as our "right brain") which is the creative part. To use this part of our brain we need to use our imagination and let ourselves loosen up a bit and be playful with our minds.

You may suggest to participants that they try not to permit too much "reality" to block their usage of fanciful guided imagery. By explaining that this is a "mind game," the participants will be able to let their imagination reign free without the blocks that normally surface in our thinking, such as "This does not ring true," or "I could never do this in the real world," or "Such a thing would never really happen." This is not reality, but imagination and education. In the end, it can be very useful and promote growth.

Anyone who is not in the mood, or for whatever other reason does not wish to participate, may just sit and watch the others. It is counterproductive to pressure someone to participate in this kind of activity. Time should be left for questions and discussion, if desired by participants, before the exercise begins. It is important that anyone who so wishes also has a chance to talk about the experience at the conclusion of the guided imagery exercise. Now let's begin.

We are going to do an activity called "imagining." To use our imagination effectively, it is helpful to close our eyes and feel relaxed. Take a deep breath, and when you breathe out pretend that all the tension and tiredness inside you is going out of your body with your breath. Imagine that there is a Magein David (a Jewish star) hanging on a chain around your neck. Pretend that the Magein David flies off your neck and begins to twirl around in the air. Let it now attach itself to the ceiling. . . . Have the Magein David move around the ceiling in circles. Let the Magein David become twice its former size. . . . Now see how it turns a bright red color, and let it come down from the ceiling and hang on the wall. . . .

As it hangs on the wall, you see six smaller Magein Davids all around it, each a different color. . . . Let the Magein Davids all turn into velvet now, as you walk over and touch them, and see how smooth they are. . . . Let the Magein Davids join together on the wall and do a dance. . . . While they are doing that, you hear the Jewish national anthem, "Hatikvah," playing in the background. . . . Out of each of the seven Magein Davids, there is an Israeli

flag that pops out from its center. . . . All the Magein Davids now turn into wood, painted with blue-and-white stripes, and they march out the front door onto the lawn. . . .

Watch how the Magein Davids on the lawn become double their size, and join together doing a horah. Behind them is a klezmer group playing "Hatikvah". . . . Look at the houses on your street. From all their doors come more Magein Davids, and they all walk toward your front lawn and join in the horah. . . . The horah becomes so exciting that the Magein Davids jump high into the air as they dance. . . . As the horah, continues you see a squadron of El Al planes flying overhead in the sky. . . .

The planes begin to form a large circle in the sky and jump up and down as if they are dancing the horah. Out of each plane come thousands of paper Magein Davids dropping all over your city, blanketing the entire area with paper Magein Davids in all colors. . . . Now these thousands of Magein Davids turn into wood and become thirty times their size. . . . They join together and dance the horah, so that there are horahs all over the city, and dozens more klezmer bands come to play "Hatikvah" for them. . . .

Each Magein David turns into a delicious cookie and stops dancing. . . . Watch as all the people in the city go outside and find thousands of cookie Magein Davids, wrapped in cellophane. They pick them up and eat them. . . . When they bring them into the house, the Magein Davids turn from cookies into different kinds of food. Some of them become chicken, and some potatoes, some vegetables, and others bread. . . . Everyone has enough food from the Magein Davids for the next year. . . .

Now turn yourself into a Magein David, and go outside onto your lawn. . . . You find there all the neighbors who are also Magein Davids, and you all join in dancing the horah. . . .

We will now bring our imagination exercise to an end. Very gradually, allow all the pictures and sounds in your mind to fade away. . . . Return to this room, open your eyes, and take a big stretch. . . . You are feeling good and are pleased with the results of your mental exercise. . . .

During the discussion that follows, the leader should allow the participants, without being judgmental, to express any reactions they have. Explain to them that there is no right or wrong way of doing such an exercise in our imagination. There is no better or worse way to use fantasy. Whatever each person did was fine. There is no grading or evaluating when it comes to the imagination. Imagination is a very private matter. We may compare our reactions to doing a guided imagery exercise with seeing a painting or listening to music. Each person reacts in her or his own fashion, differently and individually, and no one's reaction is superior in any way to that of another. The

results of the discussion may show what a wide variety of reactions participants had, and how each is in its own way legitimate and interesting. It will also be a good opening for participants to be willing to do other guided imagery exercises. They may express the idea (or the leader may) that this is one more way to expand their ability to be creative in life.

Imagination Calisthenics

You can begin this exercise, or any guided imagery exercise (especially at beginners' levels) with some brief explanations about the use of fantasy and imagination. Scientists and educators compare our power to imagine with the power of muscles in our body. When we use our muscles, we strengthen them and make them more supple and flexible. Just as muscles that are not used become weaker, so too our imagination does not have the full ability to be creative and innovative when it is not exercised. Our power to be creative is related to our capacity to develop our spiritual selves, and thus, when we develop our creativity, we also develop our spirituality. (These explanations should be tailored to the age and maturity of the participants.)

In this exercise, we will try to use our imagination muscles the way we would our body muscles. We can call it doing "imagination calisthenics." To do this well, it helps to try to relax and close our eyes. . . . Take a few deep breaths and see how you can control your own sense of relaxation. . . . A yawn or two, and some stretching, will also help you relax. . . .

We are going to practice with writing implements. In your imagination, take a pencil in your hand, and write a sentence. . . . Now let the pencil turn into a red felt pen. . . . Use this red pen to write in other languages. Since we are imagining, you don't need to worry if you know the language or not. Write a word in Greek. . . . Now write one in French. . . . Now write a whole sentence in Hebrew. . . .

Let the pen turn into a paintbrush. Go over to the wall and paint a design on the wall. What design did you paint? Now walk outside and notice some homeless people sitting on the ground. . . . Take your paintbrush and paint a new set of clothes on them. . . . See how comfortable they are now. . . . Let your paintbrush turn into a sponge, and with one whisk over their heads they suddenly are clean as a whistle, smelling like a fancy cologne. . . . Invite the homeless people to walk with you for a few blocks to an empty lot. . . . Now each of you has a paintbrush in your hand. . . . Paint a house in the air. As you paint it, let it become real. . . . Go inside the house with your new friends and paint some furniture, drapes, carpets, and television sets. . . . Paint some computers and other office equipment such as telephones, printers, and anything else you want. . . . As you paint it, it becomes real. . . .

Ask one friend to sit down and show him how to type on the computer

using a word-processing program with which you are familiar. . . . Print out what the person wrote and take it to a large publishing house in New York City. The few pages turn into a three-hundred-page novel, and the publisher agrees to put it on the market. . . . It becomes a bestselling book, and both you and your friend become very wealthy. . . .

Now go to the bank, open an account, and deposit the large sum of money you have earned from the famous novel. Go to a builder and tell him to build several large apartment buildings to house the homeless. Write a large check to pay for the new buildings. . . . Use your paintbrush to bring new furniture to every new apartment in the building. . . .

Take out your checkbook and write another check to establish a job placement service. A director and staff are hired, with spacious, well-appointed offices. See that everyone in all the new apartment buildings has a new job, and can support themselves. . . . Notice how happy all the people living in the buildings are, and how their lives have improved so much through your efforts. . . .

Go to the newspaper in your city and place a full-page advertisement. Sit down at a computer and compose the text of the ad. In it you publicize the obligation of giving tzedakah, and helping everyone climb out of poverty and homelessness. Write a check and pay for the advertisement. . . .

The next day, you receive many phone calls from all over the state from people who want to help in your program to eliminate poverty. They write large checks, and you build counseling centers, health centers, job training facilities, and everything that is needed to help thousands of people establish new, constructive lives. . . .

Since this project was so successful, you go back to the newspaper and place another full-page advertisement about another problem, such as drugs, or violence. Sit down at the computer and compose the advertisement. The responses to your ad have helped ease the problems in great measure. Watch how these problems are eliminated from society after you initiate new ideas for the community. . . . (Pause)

Having done so many good things, you now can take a rest, and end this exercise. When I count to three, you will open your eyes, stretch, and come back to this room. . . . One. . . two. . . three. . . .

Allow ample time to discuss this exercise, without being critical or judgmental in any way. Talk about the differences between reality and imagination. Explore the notion that imagination cannot solve problems, but it can often lead to solutions, and to new ideas about how to solve problems. You may ask participants to offer thoughts