

Pilot Study Utilizing Relaxation & Guided Imagery for Male Youth in Transition



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As the theme of this Imagery International Newsletter is “Transitions”, I wanted to share a pilot study I recently completed with Dr. Marie Cuddy-Casey and Sheila Jimenez. Project Concern is a residential treatment program for pre-incarcerated male youth in Pennsylvania. It is a highly successful program and field placement for my social work interns at Immaculata University. Judges favor it because young boys from low income inner city neighborhoods can live in a therapeutic cottage system, attend school and learn how to become responsible members of the community rather than be sent to detention and holding “centers.” The majority stays for one to two years and most Transition back into society and lead productive lives. Many of them struggle with learning disorders and experience high stress in response to being separated from their homes while awaiting an uncertain future. The majority of the residents also experience major insomnia, problems with focus and high degrees of stress.

Our small pilot study utilized Relaxation and Guided Imagery (RGI) to improve sleep, focus and self-confidence with the teens at Project Concern. Since the RGI intervention could only occur on weekends, and many had home passes, it was difficult to obtain a full sample of residents (20). However, ten did volunteer and were exposed to a RGI script and daily practice. These ten residents were able to achieve heightened states of relaxation as evidenced by their heart rates post RGI which were statistically lower than pre RGI exposure ($t(10) = 2.79, p < .005$). Three participants completed a second exposure and practice. They reported greatly improved sleep, focus and considerable reduction of stress. None of these youth had had any prior exposure to stress reduction techniques. Of special note, the three teens that completed both exposures were amazed and thrilled with how easily and quickly they were able to turn ‘themselves around’—to finally be able to put themselves to sleep and focus readily on their schoolwork.



It appears that RGI within correctional populations can be an effective means of improving sleep and focus, and lowering stress and reactivity. It therefore could be a viable resource for enhancing quality of life for youth at risk. It is my hope that more Guided Imagery research can occur within correctional programs and facilities as this is definitely an underserved population that could benefit greatly.

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