Mental rehearsal is a technique that can be useful for regulating emotions and changing behavior. This technique entails mentally practicing how you want to feel and act in a given situation. Mental rehearsal can greatly enhance your success at any activity.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Everyone has heard the old adage, “practice makes perfect.” Well, mental rehearsal can help you perfect any behavior by practicing the behavior in your mind beforehand. Research has shown that mental practice can be just as effective as real practice. In a number of ways, the brain doesn’t know the difference between an imagined and a real event. By creating mental images of desirable behavior, you are creating the equivalent of memories that can serve as new models for behavior.

Successful individuals in a variety of fields use imagery to improve their performance. Many business people, professionals and athletes use imagery. For example, most Olympic athletes mentally rehearse their events before actually performing in them. The professional golfer, Jack Nicklaus, practices mentally before each golf shot. Says Nicklaus, “I never hit a shot without having a sharp picture of it in my head. First, I ‘see’ where I want the ball to finish. Then, I ‘see’ it going there, its trajectory and landing. The next scene shows me making the swing that will turn the previous images into reality.”

How to Utilize This Technique:

- **Value The Process:** Mental rehearsal is more than wishful thinking or daydreaming. In daydreaming we often jump right away to the final goal. When doing mental rehearsal, you must imagine the final goal as well as each step in the process.

- **Relax:** The first step in doing mental rehearsal is to relax. So, begin by sitting back in a chair in a comfortable position. Then, practice some diaphragmatic breathing or progressive muscle relaxation in order to become more relaxed.

- **Imagine:** Once you are feeling relaxed, imagine what it is you want to achieve. Imagine it as vividly as you can from beginning to end. Involve as many of your senses as you can; that is, sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Imagine the achievement several times. Remember, the more you practice, the better you get.

An Example of a Situation in Which You Could Use Mental Rehearsal:

- As an example, if you were having a problem being assertive because of fear and lack of self-confidence, you might use mental rehearsal to help lessen your fears and change your behavior. Of course you might also prepare yourself by undergoing assertiveness training and reading some books on the subject.

- To do the Mental Rehearsal, relax as described above. Then imagine a situation in which you have been passive – or one which you have avoided altogether. Vividly imagine how you would like to assertively behave in that situation. Play it through in your mind from beginning to end in great detail – with all of the sights, sounds, body sensations and feelings of confidence that you can muster. Imagine your body posture, your body language and the tempo and tone of your voice. See the situation from a “first person” perspective - or in other words, through your own eyes. This is more effective than practicing how you want to think, feel and act from a detached, “third person” perspective. Imagine exactly what you would say if you were being assertive. Practice imagining the scene several times. Do this every day for a week or two and then try the behavior out for real.