[**Frank Niles, Ph.D.**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-niles-phd/)

**How to Use Visualization to Achieve Your Goals**

In life and work, success begins with a goal. It could be losing weight, asking for a raise, quitting smoking or starting your own business. Big or small, goals give us purpose and, like a compass, keep us headed in the right direction. Of course, it then takes lots of hard work and determination to reach your destination.

Writing over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle described the process this way: "First, have a definite, clear, practical ideal; a goal, an objective. Second, have the necessary means to achieve your ends: wisdom, money, materials, and methods. Third, adjust all your means to that end."

Unfortunately, many of us remain stuck at the goal stage. We start out with good intentions and perhaps a plan, but then we can't seem to make it happen.

There are countless reasons that this occurs -- busyness, impatience, fear and negative social pressures are some of the usual culprits -- so how do we respond to these challenges and move in the direction of our goal?

**Seeing Is Believing**

Before we can believe in a goal, we first must have an idea of what it looks like. To paraphrase the old adage: we must see it before we can believe it.

This is where visualization comes in, which is simply a technique for creating a mental image of a future event. When we visualize our desired outcome, we begin to "see" the possibility of achieving it. Through visualization, we catch a glimpse of what is, in the words of one writer, our "preferred future." When this happens, we are motivated and prepared to pursue our goal.

Visualization should not be confused with the "think it and you will be it" advice peddled by popular self-help gurus. It is not a gimmick, nor does it involve dreaming or hoping for a better future. Rather, visualization is a well-developed method of performance improvement supported by substantial scientific evidence and used by successful people across a range of fields.

Take athletes, for example. Studies show that visualization increases athletic performance by improving motivation, coordination and concentration. It also aids in relaxation and helps reduce fear and anxiety. In the words of one researcher, "visualization helps the athlete just do it and do it with confidence, poise, and perfection."

Former NBA great Jerry West is a great example of how this works. Known for hitting shots at the buzzer, he acquired the nickname "Mr. Clutch." When asked what accounted for his ability to make the big shots, West explained that he had rehearsed making those same shots countless times in his mind. Other sports legends like Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, Tiger Woods and pitcher Roy Halladay have also used visualization to improve their performance and achieve their personal best.

**Why Visualization Works**

According to research using brain imagery, visualization works because neurons in our brains, those electrically excitable cells that transmit information, interpret imagery as equivalent to a real-life action. When we visualize an act, the brain generates an impulse that tells our neurons to "perform" the movement. This creates a new neural pathway -- clusters of cells in our brain that work together to create memories or learned behaviors -- that primes our body to act in a way consistent to what we imagined. All of this occurs without actually performing the physical activity, yet it achieves a similar result.

**Putting It All Together**

Remember, you don't have to be an elite athlete to benefit from visualization. Whether you're a student, businessperson, parent or spouse, visualization will keep you tethered to your goal and increase your chances of achieving it. The power of visualization is available to all people.

There are two types of visualization, each of which serves a distinct purpose, but for greatest effect, they should be used together. The first method is *outcome visualization* and involves envisioning yourself achieving your goal. To do this, create a detailed mental image of the desired outcome using all of your senses.

For example, if your goal is to run your first marathon, visualize yourself crossing the finish line in the time you desire. Hold that mental image as long as possible. What does it feel like to pass under the finishing banner, looking at your watch, the cool air on your overheated body? Who is there to greet you as you finish? Your family? Friends? Other runners? Imagine the excitement, satisfaction, and thrill you will experience as you walk off the lactic acid and fall exhausted into their arms.

Some people find it useful to write their goal down, and then, in as much detail as possible, translate it into a visual representation. It could be a hand-drawn picture, a photograph or a diagram. The media doesn't matter, just as long as it helps you create a vivid mental image and stay motivated.

The second type of visualization is *process visualization*. It involves envisioning each of the actions necessary to achieve the outcome you want. Focus on completing each of the steps you need to achieve your goal, but not on the overall goal itself.

Back to the marathon example: Before the race, visualize yourself running well -- legs pumping like pistons, arms relaxed, breathing controlled. In your mind, break the course into sections and visualize how you will run each part, thinking about your pace, gait and split time. Imagine what it will feel like when you hit "the wall," that point in the race where your body wants to stop, and more importantly, what you must do to break through it.

You may never run a marathon. However, you can use the same principles to achieve any goal -- create a vivid mental picture of yourself succeeding, envision what you must do during each step of the process and, like a runner pushing through "the wall," use positive mental imagery to stay focused and motivated when you experience obstacles or setbacks.

Visualization does not guarantee success. It also does not replace hard work and practice. But when combined with diligent effort (and, I would add, a strong support network), it is a powerful way to achieve positive, behavioral change and create the life you desire.