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## A Study of the Guided Imagery Process: Awareness and the Discovery of Personal Meaning

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### Abstract

This study describes the experiences of individuals using a specific guided imagery process designed to facilitate the generation of spontaneous imagery. The extent to which the procedure enhanced the subjects' discovery of meaning and awareness about their personal issues was examined. Five women participated in four guided imagery sessions held approximately one week apart. Data obtained by means of a post-session interview and the observations of the researcher were thematically interpreted. The descriptive analysis showed that the guided imagery process facilitated participants' discovery of personal meaning and increased understanding about their outer and inner lives. Subjects found the imagery enabled them to quickly discover and explore affective material related to important life experiences, issues, and relationships. It also allowed them to renew a connection with inner personal sources of creativity. Implications for counselling are discussed.

### Résumé

Cette étude décrit les expériences d'individus qui utilisent un processus d'imagerie guidée développé pour faciliter la génération d'imagerie spontanée. L'étendue sur laquelle la procédure accroît la découverte d'un sens et la conscientisation chez les sujets, en ce qui concerne des questions personnelles, est examinée. Cinq femmes ont participé à quatre sessions d'imagerie guidée tenues approximativement à une semaine d'intervalle. Des données obtenues suite à des interviews faites après la session et les observations du chercheur ont été thématiquement interprétées. L'analyse descriptive montre que le processus d'imagerie guidée aidait les participants à découvrir un sens personnel et augmentait leur niveau de compréhension de leur vie intérieure et extérieure. Les sujets ont trouvé que l'imagerie les a aidés à rapidement découvrir et à explorer le matériel affectif relié à des expériences de la vie, des questions personnelles, et des relations interpersonnelles. Cette expérience leur a aussi permis de renouer connaissance avec des ressources personnelles intérieurs de créativité. Les implications en counseling sont discutées.

The ability to generate images, mental pictures of people, objects, and things which are not immediately available to the senses, and then to reshape these into new and complex forms (Richardson, 1982), is thought to be a specifically human capacity. Singer (1974) has suggested that this ability may be evolution's greatest gift to humankind, because it can be a powerful constructive tool for living, for self-fulfillment, and for shaping the future.

During this century, an acknowledgement of the importance of internal experiences and the growing possibility of studying these phenomena has led to an increase in objective research in this area. The purposeful use of the imagination appears to be a most effective and fruitful means to explore inner processes. In recent years numerous techniques using mental imagery have been developed.

When used in a disciplined way, mental imagery offers the integrative possibility of exploring the unconscious while maintaining contact with conscious verbal faculties (Crampton, 1978; Crocker, 1984).

Imagery appears to operate within multidimensional, subjective time, which is different from clock time, and contains many patterns of possibility, so a great deal of material can be experienced within a short time span (Houston, 1982; Watkins, 1976). In order to facilitate this area of awareness, guided imagery exercises (particular mental-visual suggestions) are most often used in conjunction with relaxation exercises.

Many therapists believe that the imagery process is similar to the unconscious production of dreams, in that it stimulates the generation of spontaneous images which are affectively related (Doll, 1982). Like dreams, the procedure of imagery-making appears to avoid the rational, semantic processes in which clients may become stuck; processes which actually serve to avoid the underlying problem or issue. Assagioli (1965) and Jung (1964) concluded that the source of a large part of psychological maladjustment lies at a pre-conscious level, where thinking appears to take place in a "symbolic language." They suggested that unresolved conflicts are most easily expressed and treated in metaphorical or symbolic, non-analytical terms. The image can reveal that which is being experienced, but which may not yet be grasped or translated into words (Achterberg, 1985; Watkins, 1976).

A number of investigators have observed that images have the inherent capacity to uncover or arouse complex and intense affective reaction and to take individuals into deep emotional exploration (Horowitz, 1970; Sheehan, 1972; Singer, 1979). On another level, imagery can move personal exploration into symbolic, more universal formulations which are relevant to the individual's life and concerns.

Although a large amount of research has centred on the ways in which images are produced, the ways in which thought processes operate, and the value of imagery in memory and cognition, little attention has focused on the process by which people associate meaning to the images they produce or on the dynamic qualities or functions of imagery in the psychotherapeutic process. The possibility of assigning new or additional meaning to the obvious and immediate meaning of an image may be possible by exploring the associations, feelings, and memories which that image evokes. Research in this area has primarily focused on dreams and the unconscious material which they express. The use of guided imagery in a relaxed state is believed to tap similar areas of awareness, with the added advantage of allowing conscious exploration simultaneously (Achterberg, 1985; Progoff, 1963).

The purpose of this descriptive account was to explore individual experiences of five women during this process, and to examine the personal meaning which they found through it. The investigation was accomplished in two ways: Through an evaluation (based on interviews with the subjects at the end of four sessions) of each individual subject's experience of the process, and through the researcher's description of what she observed happening session by session. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How does each subject experience this guided imagery exercise and exploration?
2. How do these images help each subject gain meaning or awareness about herself?
3. In what ways are these images associated with each subject's life experiences, life issues, or relationships?

#### METHOD

##### *Subjects*

The decision to use only women in the study was based on the assumption that their issues and outlook would be similar, thus providing a more homogeneous sample. The five women chosen had some familiarity with imagery, but were not so experienced in using it that they might be influenced by pre-conceptions of the process. In addition, they had an openness to and some familiarity with self-awareness exploration, as well as a willingness and ability to express themselves and communicate openly. The subjects came from varied backgrounds and included two single women, two married women, and one divorced woman; two were professionals, two were students, and one was an artist. Ages ranged from 20 to 44 years.

##### *Instrument*

A post-session interview was developed by the researcher to facilitate disclosure of each subject's experience of the imagery process. This included the subject's experience from session to session, her overall impression of the sessions, their value in enabling her to gain awareness about specific issues, and the connection of the imagery to events or relationships in her life. The interviews, which were audio-taped, lasted one hour and were held in a quiet room.

#### PROCEDURE

The guided imagery procedure consisted of four individual one hour sessions for each subject, approximately one week apart. Sessions were conducted in a quiet room in the researcher's home, and a comfortable mat, pillow, and blanket were provided. In order to

expedite the data analysis, each session was video-taped. Sessions began with a ten minute check-in during which each subject could discuss concerns or awarenesses from previous sessions. The subject then lay down, and a relaxation (Achterberg, 1985; Crocker, 1984) and guided imagery exercise was begun. The same relaxation and imagery script (which lasted approximately 30 minutes) was used for all women and all sessions.

The imagery script and exploration were developed from a combination of techniques (Assagioli, 1965; Achterberg, 1985; Crampton, 1978; Crocker, 1984; Gallegos, 1983; Galyean, 1983; Gunnison, 1982; Leuner, 1969). Following the suggestions of Cohen and Twemlow (1981) and Shorr (1974), no attempt was made to predetermine the form or sequence of subjects' imagery after initial relaxation and starting image ("Open the Door" sequence based on Gunnison (1982) and Mintz (1979)). During the imagery exploration, the researcher acted as guide, using responses which followed Egan's (1986) first level format to facilitate exploration of images or issues as they were evoked. A debriefing period of approximately 15 minutes followed each session, during which the subject was encouraged to share further awarenesses or concerns.

Subjects were asked to keep a personal journal during the study in order to record on-going perceptions. They were also encouraged to create or find material (poems, songs, drawings, pictures) which related to their imagery or personal process. One week after the fourth session, subjects were interviewed individually. After one month, subjects were contacted and asked to submit a written follow-up to describe any additional awarenesses or experiences which related to the sessions. Some subjects initiated further phone contact during the following five months.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Individual Interviews*

The audio-taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed to find units of meaning or descriptions of themes according to the research questions.

### *Guided Imagery Sessions*

The sessional video-tapes were analyzed through transcriptural notes of both verbal exchanges between researcher and subject and non-verbal behaviour of subjects. These transcripts were analyzed in the same manner as the audio-taped interviews, creating meaning themes in relation to the research questions. Results were obtained

through an integrated use of the individual subjects' impressions and the researcher's own observations.

## RESULTS

### *Experience of the Guided Imagery*

The method appeared to facilitate the generation of vivid images for all participants; the powerful intensity and realness of the images and the ability of the process to take them quickly into deep emotional exploration were most frequently mentioned as surprising elements of the experience. All subjects reported kinesthetic body reactions at some time. The quality of the imagery landscape was observed to change over the course of the sessions (for example, it was described as clearer and more concrete). Subjects' ability and willingness to engage in decisive interactions with images increased over time in all cases. Each woman emphasized in the interview that the lack of intellectual or analytical focus was an advantage in allowing her to access feelings more directly than in strictly verbal therapy.

### *Awareness/Meaning*

All subjects indicated they had been able to learn more about themselves and their life issues through the sessions, although three women indicated they were unsure of the specific meaning of some of the images. All subjects stated they were able to generate more alternatives regarding their concerns, and to see issues more clearly or in a new way. The experience of the imagery promoted affective release or expression for all participants, as well as facilitating the recovery of old, sometimes forgotten concerns and/or memories.

All subjects encountered an image of a positive "guide" at some time in the sessions. Interaction with this figure was observed to lead to a shift in individual subjects' attitudes, increased understanding about an issue, or a change in perception. All participants described a "turning point" of awareness or integration occurring either within or outside the sessions.

All women appeared to gain information or awareness about the way they operated within the world. In particular, each subject stated that the experience facilitated an acknowledgement of her own needs and/or a feeling that she could love and care for herself. All participants were observed to experience an increased sense of personal empowerment as their interactions in the imagery continued over time, and an increased interest and joy in exploring their inner life. In addition, all subjects reported that their understanding of the imagery continued to increase over time (one month follow-up and subsequent contacts).

*Associations with Life (events, people)*

Images were perceived as being representative of events and relationships within the past or present life of all subjects, either directly (the image was the same or directly reminded the subject of someone or something) or indirectly (the “feeling” was the same). Although it was observed that the interaction with the images related to participants’ way of operating in the world, three subjects additionally indicated that changes over time in the imagery coincided with changes in their lives, such as an increase in feelings of control, improvement in decision making ability, or increased self-awareness.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the guided imagery method is particularly useful in facilitating the disclosure and exploration of deep emotional material that may not be uncovered for many sessions by verbal interaction alone. Singer (1981) noted that the imagery process allows the individual to identify major motivational patterns and orientation through self-reflection and the growing awareness of recurring imaginative themes. The experience of the imagery promoted emotional release or expression for all subjects, often surprising individuals with its intensity and ability to go directly to the feeling of the issue through release of sadness, grief, guilt or anger.

The strength of the imagery process appears to rest partly in its ability to bypass intellectual blocking which many clients engage in, and to move quickly into deeper, underlying areas of concern. This finding supports the work of other researchers who observed the capacity of the imagery to arouse intense affective reactions that were meaningfully related to individuals’ issues.

In addition, subjects noted that as they became more comfortable with the imagery process, they began to practise creating positive interactions within their imagery, and to experience an empowering both within and outside the sessions. Achterberg (1985) and Houston’s (1982) research supports this finding, suggesting that imagery-making can be utilized to help an individual gain a sense of mastery within her own life.

Images, like personal awareness, always have the capacity to multiply and develop further. That is why intellectual interpretation can never completely capture the meaning of an image. Inviting the images into one’s life, dialoguing with them, drawing them, and seeing their reflections in one’s outer life facilitates the integration of meaning. Subjects indicated that they were deeply affected by the imagery itself, and acknowledged its power to touch and move them. One of the most valuable aspects of this process seems to be its

capacity to bring subjects into a closer, more trusting connection with their own inner creative process.

### *Implications for Counselling*

The guided imagery process seems to be particularly effective when deep exploration of an issue is desired. Imagery may be used in counselling to reveal the client's attitudes, strengths, and conflicts. It may also be valuable in enabling the client to contact, explore and express his/her inner world in a creative, supportive way. In addition, it may facilitate an ongoing participation by the individual in expanding awareness and perception, which can ultimately result in more positive behaviour patterns.

The greatest integrative value appears to be gained from a combination of imagery generation and verbal processing of the material. Imagery may be used in every session, but some clients may benefit from a single imagery session followed by integrative verbal sessions.

A simple imagery procedure may be used during a verbal session to introduce the client to the relaxation and imagery process, or to quickly deepen exploration: Ask the individual to close her/his eyes, take a few deep, relaxing breaths, and allow an image to come up. Exploration is then directed by the client, with the therapist providing focusing cues. The technique of focusing on a body part, another person, or an emotion, and allowing an image to arise spontaneously can easily be utilized. For deeper, more extended explorations, the particular imagery exercise used in this study ("open the door") seems valuable.

Caution is recommended in using imagery with schizophrenics or seriously depressed clients. The tendency of any client to have difficulty differentiating between reality and imagination can present an obvious problem in using these procedures.

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#### *About the Author*

Cally Farr currently has a private counselling/therapy practice in Victoria, British Columbia. Her present work focuses on using imagery and symbols to explore unconscious memories from the family of origin. Her future plans include classes to teach practitioners how to use the guided imagery process in their counselling work.

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