



Exploring Imagery's Role to Increase Clinician Effectiveness — BLOG POST

By nicespeechlady.com / December 9, 2018

Athletes utilize imagery before events to improve coordination, motivation and concentration — and in the area of psychology, cognitive-behavioral therapy utilizes imagery in the process of treating anxiety and other disorders. Entertainers have used imagery for years, and the field of sales and business uses mental imagery to achieve employment objectives to move in a desired direction.

Using evidenced-based principles from the related fields of psychology and sports medicine, there appears to be a potential benefit and application for clinicians to utilize imagery for a variety of purposes — from job seeking, to improving confidence in using new approaches to improve patient outcomes. This blog post explores this possibility.

Imagery is described as using the various senses (sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell) in mental context in order to experience — in advance — what is desired, in terms of performance and experience. By association, the intended goal is more likely to occur in real-time. Imagery is creating the entirety of a new experience in one's mind as a psychological practice. Research has shown its use increases the likelihood of wanted outcomes.

What we know, based on evidenced-based principles:

- Compared to just having thoughts, mental images have been described as more “real,” according to research. This impacts our behavior, our emotions and beliefs.
- Repetition in imagining future occurrences will increase “perceived likelihood of occurrence.”
- Functional MRI testing shows topographic representation of neural structures in both real events and in imagery tasks.
- Imagery can be powerful. Research has shown that imagining that events occurred in the past — even when these did not factually occur — “inflates a person’s confidence that the event actually did occur.”
- Imagery is successful because neurons translate mental imagery information similarly to real-life experiences. When imagery is performed, an impulse is created to communicate with neurons to perform movements. New neural pathways are a result. This prepares our bodies to act in ways consistent with the imagery we have performed, a powerful benefit.



- Some sports physiology studies have shown that mental imagery, combined with physical practice, is more effective than performing the physical practice or mental imagery alone.

By application, we as clinicians could benefit from a practice of purposeful imagery. Then, by association, our patients could benefit. Would patients benefit from use of intentional clinician imagery in order to increase the likelihood of effectiveness of therapy? Some possible areas that would be beneficial to explore/some preliminary starting-points include:

- Job-Seeking Practices

Application regarding job-hunting could involve: visualizing success at answering challenging questions at interviews, identifying an ideal job opportunity out of many options or achieving effectiveness in negotiating a higher rate of pay as compared to an initial offer.

An experimental study of one type of imagery — visualization — was conducted by The Journal of Consulting Psychology. There were two groups; one group received traditional career counseling, interview coaching and education on how to use visualization techniques (as it relates to career counseling and interview coaching). The second group only received career counseling and interview coaching. Sixty days after the different types of training, 21 percent of the career counseling and interview coaching group secured new jobs; however, in contrast, 66 percent of those with additional visualization technique training secured new jobs.

- Imagery Prior to Meeting a Patient for the First Time for Rapport-Building

It may be beneficial to perform imagery prior to meeting new patients — in order to establish a positive interaction and a helpful first impression. Imagining that a beneficial connection can be established in order to forge a starting-point that is solid, for example, might be in order.

- Imagery Prior to Trying a New Treatment Approach

It could be helpful to set time aside prior to using a new treatment approach in order to increase confidence that the cueing can be well-performed. The steps of what to introduce first, second and third, for example, might be beneficial.

- Any Area a Clinician has Identified is an Area to Improve Upon



Examples of areas that clinicians may decide to improve upon may include: motivation, attitude, non-verbal communication such as increasing smiling behaviors, interaction skills between coworkers, improving productivity, time management, etc. These may be areas that a clinician could identify. A place to start may be after receiving performance review data. If our supervisor, for example, feels that an area to improve upon in the workplace may be decreasing time for documentation, it might be helpful to start a mental imagery practice. If our supervisor feels that increasing connections between clinician and patient may be of benefit, a place to begin may be in initiating intentional imagery prior to the next patient.

A Passing Daydream vs. Imagery — the Difference

Imagery involves visualizing and using other senses to practice experiencing positive outcomes that we want— in a purposeful manner. This is different from just thinking/hoping for a certain outcome, or just daydreaming. This performance improvement process can be performed by:

- Setting aside time for uninterrupted imagery on a regular basis.
- Making a commitment to a mental imagery practice.
- Lying down or sitting in a quiet area.
- Closing our eyes.
- Using paced breathing to relax our entire body.
- Imagining the visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory details.
- Observing helpful emotions (such as feeling confident, calm and successful) as we process these details.
- Identifying the goal that we want to achieve.
- Going through various steps that lead to an intended outcome.
- Imagining that challenges may present themselves, and we successfully overcome them and modify what needs to be modified in order to improve effectiveness.
- Observing any feelings that may arise and take note of this.
- Problem-solving what to do in response to any feelings or emotions that are undesirable.
- Repeating this process in a structured manner, not just on one occasion.

Evidence of the benefits of mental imagery can be found in the areas of psychology and sports science:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4595480/>

<http://oxfordre.com/psychology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.001.0001/acrefore-9780190236557-e-228>



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