

# Coping with Cancer through Imagery and Artistic Expression

Jan Taal



*Imagery and artistic expression offer a 'nonverbal voice', a medium for the nonrational and the Greater Self, a source of our potential and creativity. Artistic expression enables us to rediscover and vitally renew ourselves. A long-term nonprofit project created by the author, The Imagery Toolbox enables the imagination to enter mainstream healthcare.*

Modern healthcare has become an enterprise in Western society where less time is spent with patients while their treatments are determined by protocols and medical technology. The individual needs of patients as well as their innate self-reinforcing abilities tend to be neglected. There is a critical need for healthcare to shift from treating symptoms to focusing on people with individual needs and preferences. Indeed, current medicine is obsessed with rapidly finding diagnoses and initiating treatments, but this is at the expense of humanistic, individualized, empathetic, patient-centered care.<sup>1</sup>

Imagery and artistic expression provide a means to remedy this neglect and to help individuals mobilize coping capacities and increase resilience. To make imagery tools, based on the principles of Psychosynthesis, easily accessible for those who are confronted with cancer, chronic diseases and crisis, I have developed the "Imagery Toolbox" for the School for Imagery in Amsterdam in collaboration with the Foundation Cancer in Images and the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands.

The Imagery Toolbox started with a vision almost 40 years ago. In Psychosynthesis I had discovered how the imagination is a wonderful

realm in which we can find inner wellsprings we can draw upon to discover and fortify ourselves. After many years of imagery work with persons with cancer, chronic illness and crisis, it had become very clear to me that imagery, including artistic expression, can help people significantly in coping and increasing their resilience. In many cases imagery also brought very meaningful changes regarding the person's perspective in life and spirituality. In a vision I saw how there can be a place in the mainstream of healthcare for such a Psychosynthesis-like approach: I saw 'a Chapel for Imagery in the big Cathedral of Health Care'. (JT)

In 2008 the idea of a toolbox was born, an instrument that in the long term might gain a permanent place within 'mainstream' healthcare. In 2009 the first pilot edition was produced. In 2017 the third edition, including the English version Imagery Toolbox 3.0, became available.

In this essay, I first describe how imagery and art are core functions of the psyche. I examine the benefits and pitfalls of using imagination to consciously heal illness, and I reflect on techniques needed by anyone coaching patients in the use of their imagination to confront their cancer. Finally I provide case studies of cancer patients who have used the Imagery Toolbox 3.0 and then present my conclusions.

## Confronting Cancer

People who are confronted with cancer come to the realization that they are not as safe and invincible as they once believed themselves to be. Their fundamental feelings of security are threatened, and their experience of control over their lives, their autonomy, self-confidence, sense of meaning, and happiness and wellbeing are often seriously undermined. Such loss often leads them to shock, panic, grief, powerlessness, fear and anger, which are all natural responses. In addition, cancer patients face bodily impairment and chronic fatigue, scarring and other permanent physical effects of the disease and its treatment. But they are not the only ones touched. There are all kinds of consequences for family and relationships, work and future prospects.

What can greatly help in their healing process is the use of imagery and artistic expression to access and enhance inner strength and resilience. In each of us there is a continuous stream of vital, healing energy coming from the depth of our soul. Assagioli compared this depth with the trunk and roots of a tree from which branches continue to grow.<sup>2</sup> Internal imaginary experiences and expressions in any artistic form – drawing, painting, sculpting, writing, singing, playing, movement and dance – facilitate the release of this energy, revive a sense of autonomy and can activate healing sources.

## Imagery and Art:

### Core Functions of the Psyche

Evoking imagery and making art have always been an integral part of human behaviour and probably constitute the very oldest forms of healing. We have evidence of art and the ritual use of imagery from 160,000 years ago.<sup>3</sup> Imagery and art are not only one of the defining characteristics of the human species, but are essential for identity and the development of mental, social and physical skills.<sup>4</sup>

Sheikh and Assagioli, two of the most significant writers in the field of therapeutic imagery, both name imagination as a core function of the psyche. Sheikh defines imagination as the central arena within which the personal identity is formed and also where access to deep sources of problem solving can

be found.<sup>5</sup> Assagioli states that every image has in itself a motor drive that tends to produce the physical conditions and the external acts corresponding to it.<sup>6</sup> Imagery offers us a powerful source of inspiration, healing and inner freedom.

In the case of illness and crisis, imagery and artistic expression can help to lead to an enhanced quality of life and a strengthened sense of meaning, to improved interpersonal communication and to reduced feelings of anxiety, fatigue, stress, pain and depression. Actively expressing our images empowers us; we transform powerlessness into a certain degree of control and inner strength. In the case of cancer, clinical evidence shows that imagery and art can help to increase resilience.<sup>7</sup>

Within neuropsychology the discovery of mirror neurons has confirmed the central role played by the imagination in learning processes as well as in recuperation after injury.<sup>8</sup> That which we perceive, imagine, paint, model or sing is represented and activated in our brain and this stimulates corresponding behaviour. The advertising industry uses this psychological principle extensively and motor imagery is applied widely in the world of rehabilitation and sport.<sup>9</sup>

## Using Imagery to Consciously Heal

Many studies on the placebo effect show that expectations – that is, imagining that ‘this pill helps’ – can (unconsciously) alleviate and relieve symptoms.<sup>10</sup> These results show that humans possess an innate self-reinforcing capacity, a healing potential that works on imagination. In imagery therapy we make *conscious* use of this imaging power. In this therapeutic work, one becomes deeply familiar with the image, therefore, the image must be given sufficient roots (including solid neural patterns) to enable it to become a natural part of the person.

There are three stages to therapeutic use of imagery. In the first stage, we discover that inner images have great impact. For many people this is a great revelation. In the second stage, we discover that we can exert influence upon our images and can take action, make adjustments and even effect transformation. This is the area

in which most therapy and coaching work is done, where we learn to navigate in the arena of conscious and unconscious self-images, drives and potential talents and where true autonomy can be developed. Imagery work has many techniques to offer for this. The third stage is a well-kept secret, that we are quite possibly the creators of our own inner world and thereby of our own feelings, our own behaviour and our own lives and world. For an extended exploration of the Three Stages of Imagery, please refer to my previous article published in the *Psychosynthesis Quarterly* (March 2016).<sup>11</sup>

### The Pitfall of Prescribed Images

It is important to address the pitfalls of the superficial or forced use of imagery (prescribed visualizations): if you want to imagine something positive but do not really make this something of your own, it can have negative effects. A positive image may briefly evoke positive emotions, but then you may be content with this short-lived emotional experience and neglect to take further action to make the new experience your own and to give it more tangible substance in your daily life.<sup>12</sup>

Particularly in the case of serious illness, a dangerous pitfall is to pursue imposed, prescribed images, without sufficiently taking into account the person's psychological condition. Are the images 'owned' by the person or are they forced? If they are forced, the person can get the idea that he is not 'good enough' at doing the imagery, because his own images may be different or because a feeling of tension

arises. This may also express itself in anxiety or guilt. Relaxation and true acceptance of the spontaneous images for their value is the remedy for this. Spontaneous images always represent true qualities of the soul, even if we initially resist them.

### Techniques and Attitude of the Coach

Techniques used in imagery work include: observing and merging with an image, dialoguing with it, artistic expression, insight, physical and concrete integration and application in daily life. The technique that a coach or therapist chooses depends upon the client's process. Questions to ask are: What is happening? What does this client need? What may strengthen coping capacity and resilience? The coach should make these considerations without bias.

Serious illness on the part of the client often brings up the coach's own process (i.e. countertransference), especially when it comes to questions of life, death and pain. This may result in an overemphasis on physical healing. However, I am convinced that this needs to be avoided, no matter how welcome physical healing might be. A unilateral focus on physical healing can make the coaching (or therapy) limited and cramped, whilst it is often the existential, spiritual essence of life which needs to be given attention with heart and soul. For example, when Cis Bouten (64) let go of her fight against cancer, she discovered the child in herself, and this she experienced as a great joy (see the following four illustrations).



Figures 1-4. All drawings by Cis Bouten. Her reflections on each drawing appear in the box on page 25.



Figure 1. "I am fighting against cancer. A big sea of fire. But it does not seem to affect the cancer cells, they nestle themselves on the flames. Is it not better to accept that I have cancer?"

Figure 2. "Trying to accept"

Figure 3. "The two halves, acceptance and fighting, don't match, I don't feel whole. I'm a person torn in two. Then, when I put the two halves together, I feel like a tiny baby falling into a deep back hole, and yet the shafts of sunlight still penetrate through."

Figure 4: "By painting the embryo and the child's head, I am surprised to discover the child inside me. On the one hand, this is the crushed child I used to be and, on the other hand, it's the child I would so much like to have had. I feel that I need to give her attention, to spoil and pamper her."

### About the Imagery Toolbox 3.0

The Imagery Toolbox contains a great variety of imagery exercises, artistic materials, detailed information and explanation to help people to mobilize their self-strengthening potential. It is comprised of: 54 symbol cards (photos with a wide variety of symbolism); 8 audio imagery exercises (CDs and mp3s); drawing, writing and modelling material; *Singing for Your Life*, a documentary on the choir; an award-winning animation film; and the comprehensive *Course Book*.

The greatest care has been taken to make the exercises and the creative material as simple and effective as possible. The exercises are designed so that anyone can do the exercises on their own. However, guidance by a coach can be particularly useful in the beginning. A register of certified, qualified Imagery Toolbox coaches has been established.

Free downloads are available from [www.imagerytoolbox.com](http://www.imagerytoolbox.com). In addition, you can watch a short video in which six patients demonstrate and explain how they worked with the Imagery Toolbox. To see the video go to: <https://vimeo.com/285560467>

### Past and Future Scientific Research

Researchers of the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht conducted a pilot study on the effects of working with the Imagery Toolbox. The results showed that the Toolbox powerfully stimulates the imagination and mobilizes the mental healing potential of the participants.<sup>13</sup> A large research project on the effectiveness of the Toolbox is currently in preparation in collaboration with the Universities of Groningen

and Twente, Faculties Theology and Religious Studies, and Positive Psychology.

### Case Studies of the Imagery Toolbox

The following sections provide just a few examples of how people have successfully worked with the various techniques available in the Imagery Toolbox.

#### Example of working with a symbol card



To meet her needs, cancer patient Maria chooses the photograph of a flower from the set of symbol cards (at left).

The *Course Book* instructs her to look at the flower carefully for a while and then to close her eyes. She is instructed to wait and see how the image evolves.



"I see it becomes a tree," she says. "It is my tree and it can grow. I myself am sitting at the bottom of the tree and I want to go upwards. It's the little rounds that rise (in the drawing). If I stay under the ground, scared, maybe I will feel safe but nothing will happen. Standing still is no life. I can grow and blossom." Maria has hung the drawing in

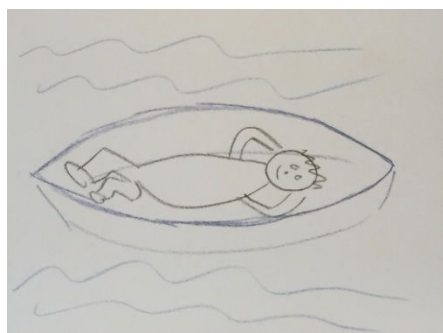
her living room so that she can see it. It strengthens her to think, “This is what I’m going for, I will not stay in my fear.”

#### Example of ‘imagery of the good, safe place’

David (38) has just finished his treatment for bowel cancer. The treatment went well but David is full of worries and stress. He is afraid that he won’t live to see old age and that he won’t be able to take care of his family. David is full of shame and feels that he has failed. He wants to be back at work as quickly as possible so that he can follow his planned career path and can provide for his wife and children, but he feels weak.

David feels a heavy pressure in his chest. The image of this pressure that comes up for him is a cog, a cog that is standing still.

As he makes contact with the cog, he heaves a deep sigh. There’s a “cog standing still” in his chest but he doesn’t understand what it has to tell him. It gives him a feeling of “nothingness,” something he experiences as extremely negative. But in the process, he starts to discover that this “standing still” also brings him rest after his disturbing period of illness and treatment, time to let go of his worries and to just breathe. In short, to take time for himself and his family and to let his career take care of itself.



When David does the audio exercise “Imagery of the good place,” he learns to relax. To his astonishment, a spontaneous image comes very easily to him. David sees himself lying in a boat on a gently flowing river. The way the river carries the boat slowly onward is a wonderful feeling. At the end of the exercise, he relates that he has never actually been in a boat on a river in his life. David finds this most extraordinary and also very comforting. Following this, David carries on practicing and receives a number of images that are very helpful to him: playing in a child’s pool of balls, stretched out on his back on an island, enjoying lying on a bed of leaves which turns into “sitting on a rubber cloud.” (See the four illustrations below.)

From all these images David chooses ‘sitting on a cloud’ as his core image. He frames this sketch and hangs it in a prominent place in his house. He also uses the image ‘lying in the boat on the river’ regularly. He lets it go through his chest and it brings him rest.

Six months later David reports that he is doing well. He is working at full capacity again, but he allows himself regular rest periods and no longer works overtime. The exercises have worked so well for him that he is now coaching colleagues.<sup>14</sup>



## Singing for Your Life Choirs

In order to promote artistic expression that enables coping with cancer on a larger Dutch national scale, the Foundation Cancer in Images (*Kanker in Beeld*) was established on the initiative of the Amsterdam School for Imagery

in 1997. Since then this organization has been initiating exhibitions, ateliers, art, drama and writing courses, choirs and research throughout The Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>



*Singing for Your Life Choir in The Netherlands. Photo © Billie-Jo Krul*

The development of the choirs has been truly phenomenal, with 36 choirs throughout the Netherlands. In Wales and England a number of choirs also have been established, with similar levels of success. Apart from the fact that singing and music-making have of themselves a particularly healing effect,<sup>16</sup> these choirs are also characterized by their spirit of togetherness, their solidarity and the implicit shared knowledge about “what cancer does to you.” All this seems to offer great support and empowerment to the people involved. Researchers have studied the effects of singing on the members of the choirs of Tenovus in Wales. Notable improvements were found in vitality, pain reduction, social functioning, state of mind, reduction in levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms and positive effects on components of the immune system.<sup>17</sup>

In order to inspire people to become choir members and to go singing, the Imagery Toolbox 3.0 contains the documentary *Singing for Your Life*, specially made for the Toolbox with the collaboration of five choirs from the network of Singing for Your Life.

## Conclusion

In an era where technology and lack of time prevail and the costs of healthcare are constantly increasing, self-reinforcing methods such as imagery and artistic expression are important additions in the

care for patients. When illness or crisis hits, we are often forced into an intimate meeting with ourselves, and both imagery and artistic expression can contribute significantly to promoting our inner and outer coping and resilience. The Imagery Toolbox is a low-cost intervention that can help cancer patients to foster autonomy and well-being. In particular, it offers patients appropriate methods for aftercare as well as for regaining their well-being and perspective. To conclude, imagery and art deserve a permanent place in mainstream healthcare.

(References appear on the next page.)



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