



IMAGERY IN THERAPY, COUNSELLING AND COACHING

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Imagery, besides representing a great variety of forms and techniques, above all can lead to a direct contact with our Greater Self, where all our drives, complexes, trauma's, potentials and resources reside. The different stages of imagery, how imagery works and can be applied, requirements and pitfalls, are presented, with examples from cases of clients, enriched with illustrations of creative expression of imagery by clients.

1. Introduction

Imagery has been employed by humans as long as we know, from pre-historic times up to today, in all fields of life. It is an innate capacity through which we experience and cope with ourselves as well as with the external world. Every action, each new step in our development is generated by our image of it.

Who we really are and how we behave is reflected in our conscious and unconscious inner images. Our imagination is probably the most powerful psychological resource we possess. It is in this domain that we can be influenced the most, psychologically, physically and behaviorally. It's small wonder that demagogues, politicians and advertising campaigns make extensive use of imagery. Three of the most important authors in the field of modern imagery therapy, Sheikh (2003), Assagioli (1965) and Jung (1963), called the imagination one of the most influential spontaneous functions of the psyche because it gives access to the creative domain, where we have the greatest freedom. It is the central arena where the personal identity is formed and where access can be obtained to surprising solutions.

Neurologist Ramachandran (2010) writes: image forming is one of the most characteristic qualities that human beings possess. It colors and forms the experience of ourselves and of the world.

Assagioli calls the imagination a core-function, it forms an essential phase which precedes and prompts all action. He pointed out that every image has a motor-tendency, it tends to produce the physical and the external acts that correspond to it. Moreover, every movement requires a previous image of the movement to be executed. Therefore, after we for instance have acquired the ability to open a door in childhood, just the image of opening the door is enough to trigger and produce the required action.

A distinguishing feature of imagery is that it can take us into a deeper state of consciousness. As we become more involved in our inner imagery, we can enter a kind of natural trance-like state, in very much the way that when we are gripped by a film, a book or a piece of music we can completely enter into and we lose all sense of time. When we make full contact with an image, it's as if it becomes pregnant. The image unfolds and reveals the energy contained within it, much as a window opens on our computer screen when we click on it.

1. An earlier version of this text was published in Guggisberg Nocelli (2022, 269-296).

As far as we can know, images, visions, daydreams, stories, myths and symbols have always played a vital social, political and therapeutic role, in every era and in all cultures. Reaching far back into prehistory and into every corner of the globe we find symbols in caves and graves, on bones and fragments of pottery, in sculpted objects and figures as well as in myths, stories and folktales. Symbolic arts and therapeutic rituals have existed for at least 100,000 years and most likely for much longer.

Fascinating forms of expression are to be found all over the world and in Europe some of the most extraordinary examples can be seen in the caves of Chauvet (35,000 years old) and Lascaux (17,000 years old) and in the Lion man of Hohlenstein-Stade (40,000 years old).²



1. Cave painting at Chauvet, 34,000 years old.

For many years it was thought that the cave paintings were intended to depict scenes from daily life (hunting for example), but in recent times this theory has proved to be scientifically unviable as far as most prehistoric art is concerned. Most archaeologists are now convinced that the caves in Spain and France were 'sacred sites', where art served spiritual and ritual purposes. But what were these? In the last twenty years the 'shamanic' theory has gained increasing support within the scientific community. According to this theory, in prehistoric times the paintings served as a medium for contacting the 'other world', the inner world of the spirit. The animals represented there are not meant to show the 'ordinary' reality of space and time, but are intended as a representation of a fifth dimensional realm.

Archaeologist David Lewis-Williams, specialist in the subjects of prehistoric art and the San, the oldest known group of people on Earth, holds that altered states of consciousness, such as the experiences of 'another world', trance, visions, hallucinations and dreams, are universal to all cultures and the origin of all religions.

2. The oldest figurative cave art paintings to date are located in the Indonesian island of Borneo and date at least 51.800 years ago. (Aubert et al. (2018).



2. Painting of 'Meeting between bird-man and bison', in the shaft of the Lascaux cave, 17,000 years old.

The ability to access other states of consciousness than the 'ordinary' four-dimensional one is found in all parts of the world and in all known times; it belongs to and is part of the DNA of human beings. For the San, like all shamanic societies, trance consciousness is not a secondary activity; it is the essence of life itself. The San consider the trance-state, which they attain by dancing all night, the real world, it is the primordial time, like the Dream Time of Australian Aboriginals, where the origin of life, as we live it every day, is found. (Metzner, 2010).



3. Lion man of Hohlenstein-Stade

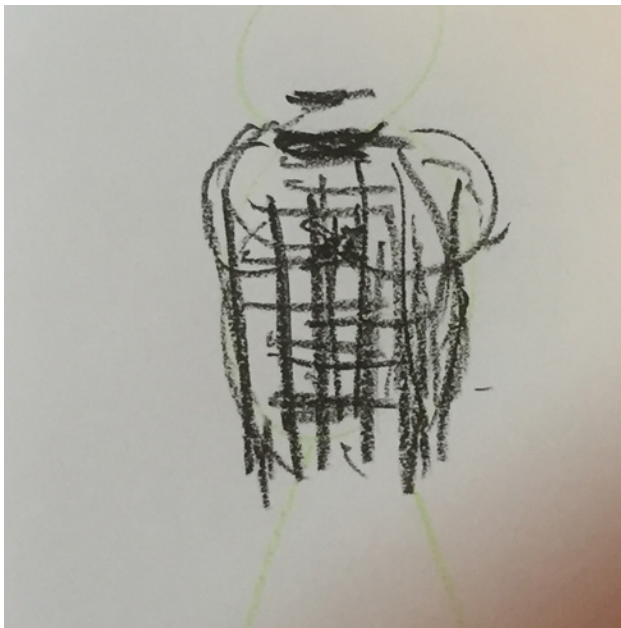
Modern humans also have access to the dimension I name 'the Greater Self'³, the inner world which holds the potential for vitality, creativity and resilience in facing challenges. Joseph Beuys called creativity a secret place that is available to all and can provide fulfilment of life when we actively and positively participate with the naturalness of a child. This fulfilment goes beyond the material with which we create.

3. I believe the term Greater Self to be more acceptable and understandable to a wide audience than for instance Higher Self, the latter term being used in Psychosynthesis theory.

If a therapist listens carefully, he (or she) regularly hears clients using images to describe their situation, for instance a client might say 'I was really down in the dumps', 'I was walking on air', 'My heart sang', 'This business stinks', 'I want a bigger slice of the cake'.

Clients not only speak, they also think and feel in images and act according to those images. In therapy therefore, imagery and the creative expression of it form an exciting field of action and change. Images, in all kind of ways and form, give a 'non-verbal voice' to what lives inside clients and imagery can provide clients with means to get in control of their lives, their autonomy, their self-confidence, their sense of meaning, all the vital major components of fulfillment and wellbeing.

Aafke, 63 years old, has been suffering from anxiety all her life. "As a child I didn't dare go anywhere, always hid behind my mother's skirt says Aafke. Now that she's so much older, she still has little courage and often feels wobbly and anxious. She does not dare to undertake new things outside the door, Aafke often feels panic arising. As she grows older, she feels guilty of not 'really living'. 'I let life slip through my fingers', she says. Aafke says she feels trapped, in an armor in her torso. In therapy Aafke wants to try to get rid of the fear and the guilt. At my suggestion she draws the picture of herself in the armor (illustration 4). It is the beginning of a process of liberation, later described in this chapter.



4. Aafke in an armor

2. The fifth dimension

Time and space represent the familiar four dimensions of 'ordinary' consciousness. Imagination opens us up to a fifth dimension, where time and space prove to be relative; it is a dimension where in principle

anything can happen, in the imagination everything is possible. Here's where human beings can be completely free. It is the arena of the Greater Self, where the way in which we live our lives is determined. It is within this Greater Self that sources can be found to help meet challenges, such as the development of coping-power and resilience during illness, overcoming a crisis or the development of a desired quality or capacity.

The characteristics of the fifth dimension are:

- intense consciousness;
- intense awareness;
- a trance-like state; as if you are dreaming (daydreams); visions;
- experience of timelessness, and also in the spatial context there seems to be no boundaries;
- images loaded with symbolic, psychic energy;
- experience of an energy field or subtle body;
- contact with revitalizing, restorative powers arises, but the same applies to contact with psychological aspects which have not yet been dealt with, like trauma.

Student Fabian (22), who was affected by testicular cancer, was suddenly confronted in his life with great uncertainty about his future and with fear. For him, getting acquainted with imagery was a big surprise. Until then he had no experience with imagery, or meditation and the like, in fact he was skeptical about it.

After exploring his feelings and thoughts about his situation I proposed him to do the 'good, safe place' imagery exercise, in order to provide him with a first imagery experience and means to find rest, emotional balance and new energy in himself. Later on, when his ability to relax and his capability to cope with his emotions and all that was going on inside him (I-strength) had increased, we dealt directly with his fears.

Fabian writes: *It was an incredibly horrible period for me. My life came to a standstill and at the same time I was confronted with great fears and uncertainty and was abruptly faced with my own mortality. Initially I was skeptical about imagery work, but the exercise with a 'good, safe place' gave me the rest I needed and the courage to look at my fears.*



I am lying in the middle of a forest in a place without trees on the grass. There are many birds with grief. I take care of them. The sun is shining and gives me warmth and energy from above. It recharges my body. For a moment, my worries disappear and I feel relaxed.

5. The good, safe place



6. Fabian floating

It's night and I'm trying to regain strength in a restful place. I'm lying on a lake in a forest and it's peaceful. I get a sign: I see an arrow pointing upwards. Then I float up and as soon as I'm floating above the forest and the lake I'm surrounded by fireflies. That gives me more peace and a feeling of safety. I feel good.



7. Bright golden light around my body

Once again, I imagine I'm floating in the sky at night and seeing and feeling the fireflies around me. Slowly, the fireflies become one with the surface of my body and suddenly I get a vision. My whole body-surface consists of bright golden light. I can see it very clearly. The light radiates a large amount of positive strength and life energy. I also feel a lot of strength and positive energy in my body, and this feeling lasts for some days after the end of this meditation.



8. Looking for my fears

I am looking for my fears and uncertainties and I see a cave. The cave is pitch-black and I observe only a small space at the entrance. I go inside and hear and see monsters and vile creatures all around. I know there's a path that goes into the cave, but I don't want to go in yet. Suddenly I get another vision: I see myself sitting in the cave in a Buddha-like position, meditating. This time not only is the surface of my body illuminated, but my entire body consists of bright golden light. Again, I feel the strength of the light and for a few days after my meditation I feel very strong and well, despite all my worries.



9. Going deeper in the cave

I'm able to go deeper into the cave where my fears and uncertainties are dwelling. I carry with me the light that represents my positive power and my life energy and it lights up the path in the cave. The path in the cave ends in a large space above a deep abyss. I am one with the light and it makes me strong.



10. Absolute nothingness and creating light

I prepare myself to descend into the abyss. I'm still one with the light and carry the light with me. To be able to descend safely I imagine I have wings and two bright golden wings appear on my back. I'm going down a huge, long tunnel that seems to go down endlessly. Finally, I'm in a gigantic space that seems never-endingly huge. Just below the end of the tunnel there's a floating platform that I go and sit on. Around me in the dark I once again hear all sorts of horrible sounds of creatures that frighten me. I'm on the platform, meditating and feeling the power of the light. Suddenly, I realize that the sounds around me are only in my own fantasy. I am in absolute nothingness and I am creating the fears around me. This awareness gives me a soothing feeling and gradually I get to know the place: the platform and the absolute nothingness around me. I also create the light and feel strong and safe.

Fabian's experiences constitute a fine example of the natural, spontaneous ability to contact the deeper layers of the psyche. Nobody has to learn to come in contact with images and energies in his interior being, we all got this natural ability, it is innate, but there might be obstacles. Obstacles, learnt on the way in life mostly through upbringing and education, often to protect our vulnerability.

In Fabian's case, it turned out that despite his skepticism, he was quite capable of entering the inner world of images. The careful way in which he was introduced into it, first with relaxation interventions and then with the suggestion of a good, safe place, helped him to become familiar with his inner world. His ability to connect with his inner world turned out to be sufficient and helped him to navigate step-by-step inside the wondrous interior realm. The latter is not always the case with clients and the therapist or coach needs to

4. The illustrations are from the *Course Book Imagery Toolbox* (Taal, 2017)

learn what his client can handle. In some clients there may be such complexes or trauma beneath the skin that the 'I', the one who experiences and participates in the unfolding imagery process, is inundated with disturbing emotions and images. It is important that the therapist or coach closely monitors what a client can handle. In the beginning, careful, small imagery interventions are recommended, so that the therapist can learn on the way what the client can handle.

3. I-strength

Psychological I-strength is the all-decisive capacity to psychologically deal with the challenges a person faces in the inner and outer domain.

Fabian in the example above was able to contact his fears after he accustomed himself to connect with the inner world of his imagination, first by way of the imagery of the good, safe place. It confronted him with his grief. He was able to take care of the sad birds. The sun started to shine and he relaxed. Soon after Fabian discovered he could easily fly in his inner world and he discovered a beneficent golden light. All of this showed a sufficient degree of I-strength to try to cope with his fears.

Imagery by its very nature tends to open doors to deeper layers in the psyche, which includes unexpected positive and disturbing psychic energies. Resistance often blocks contact with these contents. The function of resistance, in any form, is protection of the emotional and psychological stability of the person. It defends the person against psychic disintegration or pain that is not bearable yet. In therapy, and in any coaching or counselling where imagery is used, utmost attention has to be given to what and in what degree the client is able to deal with the involved images and associated processes. It should be avoided that the client is inundated with material from the unconscious that results in disintegration or excessive imbalance.

4. Inner resources

In each person there is an innate source of vitality and creativity, from which qualities, desires, motivations and potential, latent abilities continue to emerge, like the roots and trunk of a tree from which branches continue to grow when given the chance. This fundamental truth for me is the backbone of therapeutic work. During many years of therapy work I witnessed manifold extraordinary examples of it, although in most cases there were initially obstructions hindering the flow from the vital source. Obstacles and resistances are in general nothing less than protecting the purity of inner glow. The attempt to free oneself of all that hinders the free flow of vital energy can take a long time or will happen only partially or seemingly not at all. In my view on therapy, it is the primary task of a therapist to transmit to the client that client's inner vital resources certainly do exist, not necessarily communicated in a verbal way, but certainly in the attitude of the therapist.

A second fundamental factor in therapy is the degree of motivation of the client.

Probably the biggest mystery in modern medicine is the fact that a pill which contains no active ingredient whatsoever can nevertheless produce a healing effect. The same applies to a 'pretend' injection or a 'pretend' operation. The factors which evoke the expectation (imagination) of cure or relief are notably the size, price and color of the placebo-pill, the conviction and enthusiasm of the doctor (the doctor as a walking placebo) and the novelty of the medication. Even if it is told and shown that the pill is a placebo, it has a positive healing effect (Kaptchuk et al; 2010).

It appears that a placebo by means of our expectations and imagination can awaken an 'inner therapist' or 'inner pharmacy', evoking the inner resources in our Greater Self. The placebo effect is in reality an imagery effect.

In the following diagrams the way imagery works is shown (Illustrations 11, 12 and 13)

The Greater Self represents all that's inside us but we are not directly conscious of, in particular our unused talents and possibilities, desires, drives, complexes and trauma.

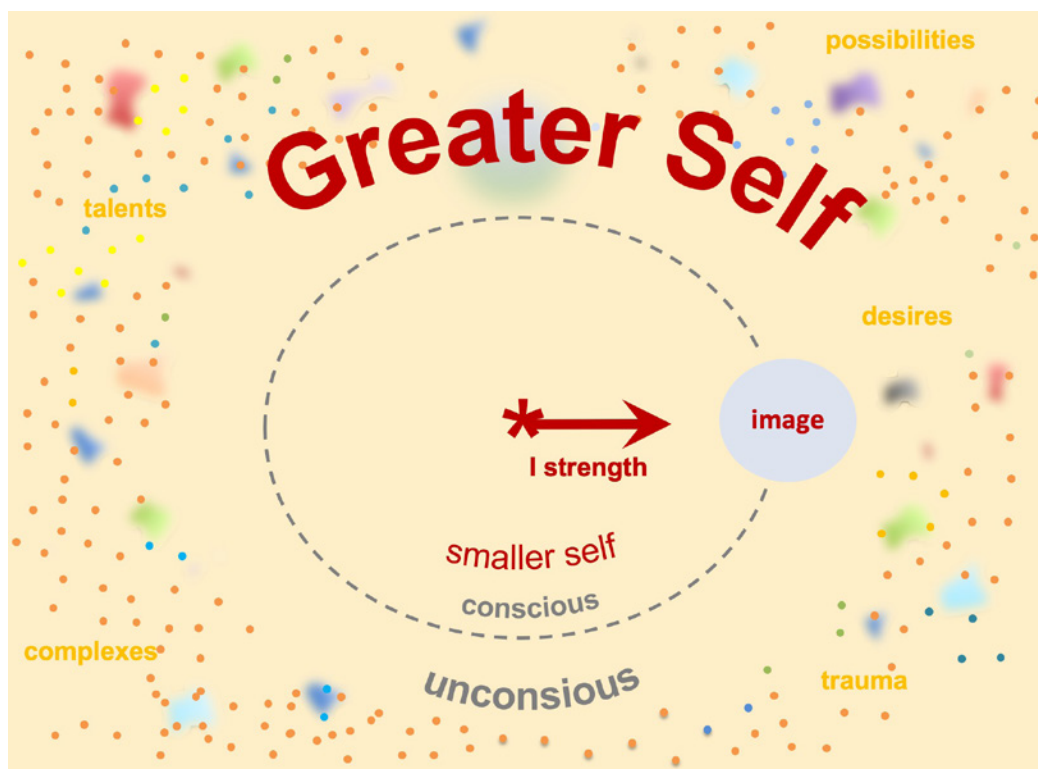


Illustration 11

In the second diagram the several imagery interventions are mentioned through which the subject contacts the image. If this contact is done I-strong, which means not just thinking or seeing the image, but really connecting to it with inner feeling and touch, the image will become 'pregnant' with energy, quality and felt meaning.

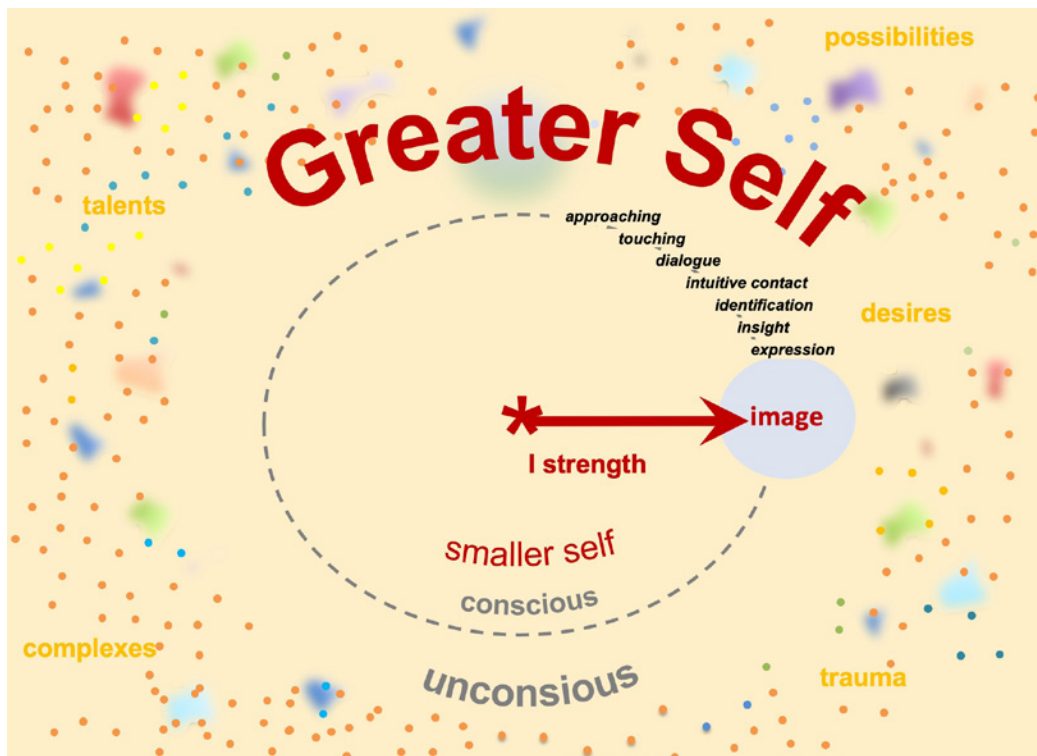


Illustration 12

In the third diagram the latter is symbolized with the flow of vitality of the Tree of Life, but any archetype or core quality can be put here, for instance Pure Water Source, Light, Ideal Mother or Father, and so on.

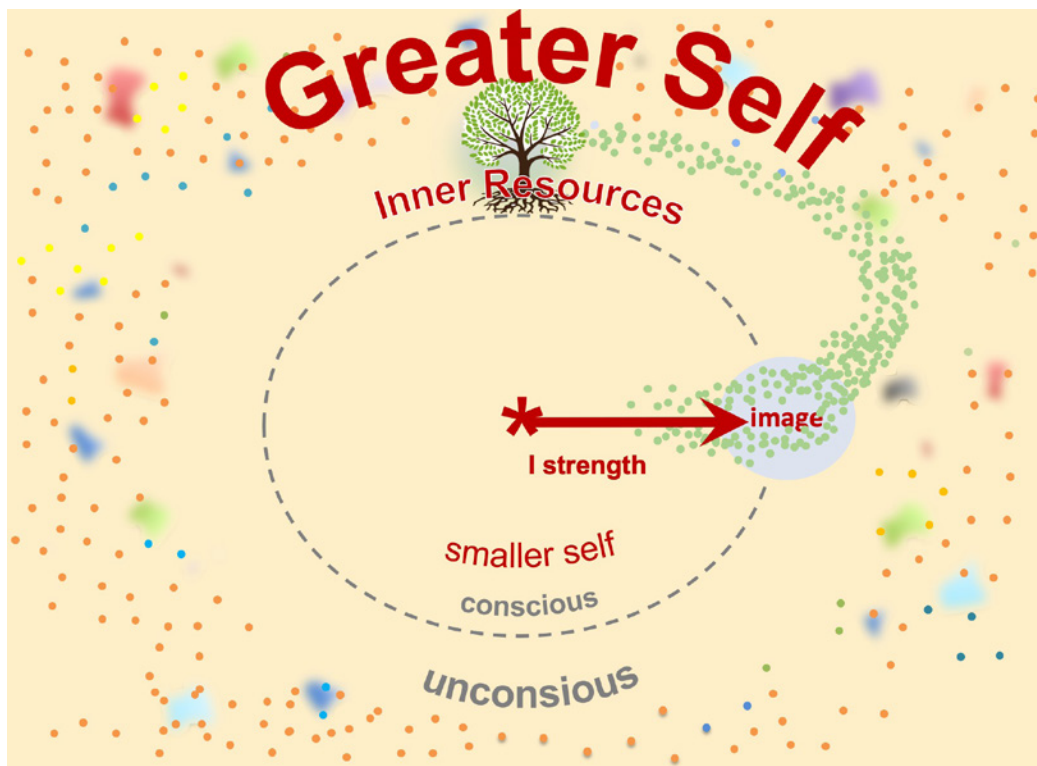


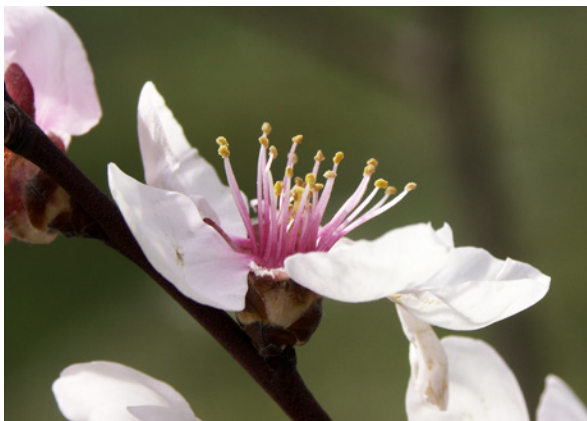
Illustration 13

The more the subject makes the image his own, firmly grounded in his body and emotions, the more the core quality the image represents will become available to the subject.

There is a wide range of imagery interventions available. It is the role of the therapist to choose in consultation with the client which intervention suits best. Often there will be a sequence of several imagery interventions used. For instance, after perceiving an image, by seeing it or feeling it intuitively, a drawing can be made or a text or poem can be written after which a dialogue can be started or an identification (becoming the image, emotionally and physically) can be done.

An interesting example of how I-strong contact with an image made it 'pregnant' and thereafter 'gave birth' to a vital flow of energy, insight and meaning, is provided by Maria, who was recovering from breast cancer and the medical treatments. For what she needed to recover and get back to life Maria chose a symbol card (photograph) with a flower from the Imagery Toolbox.⁵ When she focused on it and then closed her eyes, the image developed into a tree (illustrations 14 and 15).

It's my tree, and it can grow. I am sitting under the tree and I want to climb up. It's the little round things that are climbing up. If I stay under the ground out of fear, I might feel safe but then absolutely nothing can happen. I also want to come up, that's the little circles, like a flower, then I can bloom, then I can live again. I want to take more risks again, I can grow. The drawing hung in the house for a while so that I could see it. That strengthens what I want to go for, in order not to stay stuck in my fear.



14. Symbol card (from the Imagery Toolbox)



15. Drawing by Maria

5. The Imagery Toolbox, a production of the Amsterdam School for Imagery, contains a wide range of accessible imagery exercises and creative materials for persons coping with cancer, chronic illness or a crisis.
www.imagerytoolbox.com

5. The stages in therapeutic imagery work

Imagery can bring us into contact with a whole other dimension where unprecedented forces have their being, a dimension which exists beyond the boundaries of time and space. It is, however, a dimension which has its own pitfalls, particularly if we do not have the necessary strength to cope with the immeasurable forces which dwell there.

If we wish to enter the realm of this fifth dimension and benefit from it, skills and strength are necessary and the technical term I use for this is 'I-strength'. Can I find my way in the wondrous inner world and can I maintain my autonomy, or will I be taken over by the forces which reside in that immense realm? The mastery of the skills we need can be divided into three stages.

The process of imagery begins with the discovery that inner images have great impact. Our unconscious self-images and our perception of the world constantly influence our feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Becoming aware of the images that influence us can be a huge and often confronting revelation and this experience forms the first step in the process.

At first the images maybe observed like scenes in a theatre and one may leave it at that, Carl Jung wrote. But if the observer understands that his own drama is being performed on this inner stage, he cannot remain indifferent, and he will notice that he is being addressed by the unconscious, that the images have a purposeful relationship to his conscious situation.⁶ By engaging with our images, we get to know aspects of our nature which we would not allow anybody else to show us and which we ourselves would never have admitted.

In the second stage we discover that we can exert influence upon our images and that within this inner world of images we can act, make adjustments and even effect transformation. This is the area in which most therapy, counselling and coaching work is done, where we learn to navigate in the enormous arena of conscious and unconscious self-images, drives and potential talents and where true autonomy can be developed. Imagery has many techniques to offer for this.

In the third stage we come to the realization that 'our inner world' of feelings, convictions, complexes and self-images, in fact determines our experience of the world 'out there'. In becoming conscious of this, we can become capable of owning all aspects of our psyche, energies, emotions, tendencies and convictions, which we find within us. We learn to cope with them and we discover the creative capacity by which life in all its many facets is brought into being. Carl Jung in his last major publication postulated that both the observer and connected phenomenon ultimately stem from an underlying unified transcendental reality from which everything emerges and to which everything returns, the *Unus Mundus*.⁷

The third stage culminates in a state of consciousness in which 'owner' and 'creator' become one, in which the inner and the outer world spring from the same source and where the barriers of time and space prove to be an illusion. Subject ('I') and object (the world)

6. Jung, 1963, p. 495.

7. Jung, 1963, p. 533–538.

merge in an experience of complete non-duality. Nobel Prize winner Eugene Wigner came to the same conclusion based on the findings of quantum physics. The universe that we perceive, our outside world, does not exist independently of perception. There must always be an observer for the observed to exist. But to know if the observer exists, there must be a second observer, called Wigner's friend, who observes the first observer. But to observe the second observer there must be a third observer, etcetera. According to Wigner, there is a cosmic consciousness in us that observes and determines everything. Consciousness is the key to matter, consciousness is the primordial ground of all creation.

6. Choosing the appropriate imagery intervention

Therapeutic imagery is not only 'with closed eyes seeing images. It is much more. Imagery concerns all types of inner perception, seeing, feeling, touching, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, intuitive sensing. Engaging multiple 'inner senses' generally deepens the experience.

Imagery can be done with eyes closed or open. Movement, dance, voice and singing, acting and drama, and all kinds of creative or artistic means and materials can be involved.

Furthermore, the following types of imagery interventions can be distinguished:

- The beginning of an imagery: motivation, relaxation and concentration.
- Perceiving an image of the theme to be treated.
- Feeling contact with an image; going closer in the imagination, feeling the atmosphere, approaching the image, touching, etc.
- Dialogue with an image; an 'intuitive' conversation with an image; the image really speaks just as it can happen in fairytales.
- Identification with an image; becoming one with the image.
- Creative expression (writing, drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, poetry, singing, music, dramatic expression, dance, etc.). An artistic goal is not pursued; the simpler and more direct the expression, the more the quality of what the image essentially contains can be experienced.
- Integration of the energetic experience of the image in the body.
- Insight; discovering the symbolic meaning in an image; thereafter recognizing aspects of this in daily life.
- The application of the image and its essential quality in the concrete, day-to-day reality, i.e. putting the image into practice in an acceptable, feasible way (SMART), by translating it into concrete actions (behavior) in the context of everyday life (private, work, etc.).

Imagination does not require a special level of intelligence, but it does require the person to be open to his inner world of images. If contact with the internal world of images succeeds, it turns out that it is often a meaningful experience, with, in the long run, consequences in the emotional life, in thinking and in concrete behavior.

The role of the therapist is to help the client find his way and above all to find his own solutions in the inner imaginary domain

and then apply what has been gained in practical, concrete behavior. Sometimes the therapist follows the client, sometimes he directs as needed.

Which imagery intervention to use depends on what is needed and what the client is capable of.

Fred (48 years old) feels unappreciated all his life, as a child at home and in his present adult life at his work as well as in his social contacts.

Fred tells me it feels like a stone in his torso. When I ask him what image he has of the stone, he says he has no image, he feels uneasy with it.

But after a while Fred says he is thinking about a song he liked very much. It's a song about moving a stone in a river. We look up the song and listen to it. I ask Fred if he can imagine moving the stone that's inside him and if he can feel some of the river inside himself. Fred likes the idea and I give him the assignment to listen to the song and imagine he is moving the stone and feel the river for a week. This exercise helps him a lot and a subtle change starts to begin in his life.

For Caroline, who participates in a workshop with the Imagery Toolbox, the starting point is different than for Fred. She is a therapist herself and already somewhat familiar with imagery. The inner world is not foreign to her and during the workshop a meaningful imagery process swiftly develops.

I was in an identity crisis. I had been working as a therapist for many years and felt that I wanted to take a different path, but did not dare to take it. Paralyzed with fear, I stood at the edge of a pool.

From the series of symbol cards, I took the card with the crocodile, as an image for daring.



16. Symbol card (from the Imagery Toolbox)

From the series of symbol cards, I took the card with the crocodile, as an image for daring. I focused on the picture and closed my eyes. In my imagination the crocodile plunged directly into the water. Afterwards I made a drawing of it.

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17.

De trainer suggested me to try to feel, to imagine to be the crocodile. I did and immediately I felt how nice it is to be this crocodile in the water, how natural this water is and how much I missed the water. I had stood beside the water for such a long time, it left me almost dehydrated. It was then that I realized: if I take the path of writing and imagery as a therapist, I will feel at home like a crocodile in water.

The trainer also helped me concretize: is there an action that would make you jump into the water? I immediately knew such an action. He let me choose a specific moment in the week where I would make that action a reality.

He also advised me to keep in touch with the drawing. I put it in sight at home.

The next day I dreamed of the crocodile. How wonderful it was to swim in the water and see all the fish.



18.

The day after, in an unguarded moment, this image came to my mind (illustration 19). I felt my crocodile making love to another crocodile. And how much fun they had on the waterbed. It was the first time that



19.

I felt so earthy. I felt how the crocodile lives very close to the ground, it drags its whole body over it. For me, making love was a symbol of connecting myself with the male decisiveness. In one way or another it was an incentive to put myself in the world, to 'materialize' myself.

In the coming days I worked out my action in concrete terms. I was going to write an invitation to a workshop and it just flowed from my pen with a primal force.

A few days later, a new image appeared on my retina. I needed a connection, I wanted to visit other crocodiles. Walking across the desert, that dry plain was not an option. Then the crocodile would dry out. In my imagination I built subterranean passages to the other crocodiles. I had been on my island for far too long.



20.

After the drawing I decided to contact some of the people I feel connected to. I then saw a whole network of colleague-crocodiles connected to each other via underground passages before my eyes.

A few weeks later I dream of the crocodile, that I unite with it (illustration 21). I feel good, secure, strong. I am in an egg shape, protected by a rainbow.

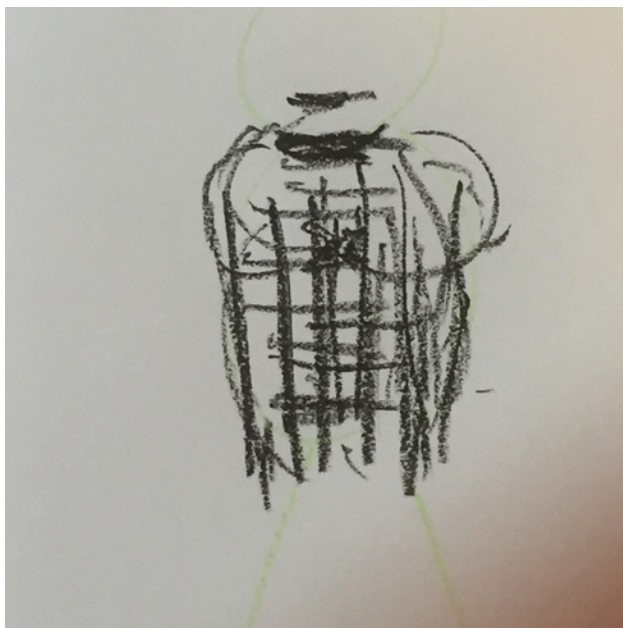


21.

It feels like I am connecting with my primal power. It's extraordinarily how that crocodile lives its own life in my imagination and how she stands next to me as a companion in my development. I feel much more peaceful and happier now, more of a whole. It is an image that has emerged somewhere deep from my subconscious and gives me all kinds of things.

7. From fear to freedom

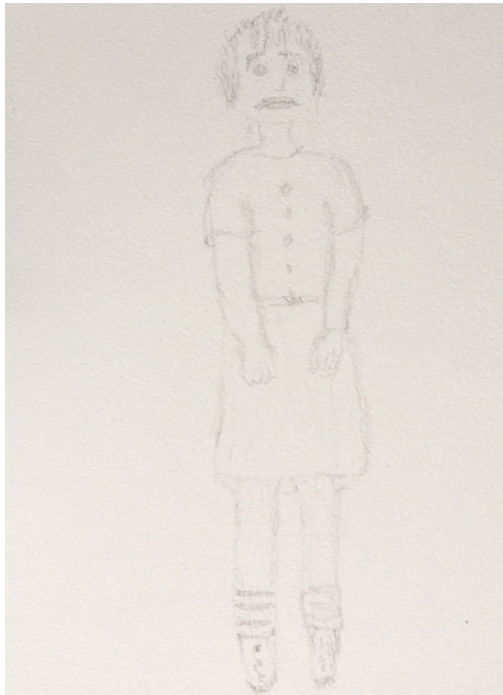
Aafke has so much fear, she does not dare to undertake new things outside her house, Aafke often feels panic arising. She feels trapped in an armor (illustration 4).



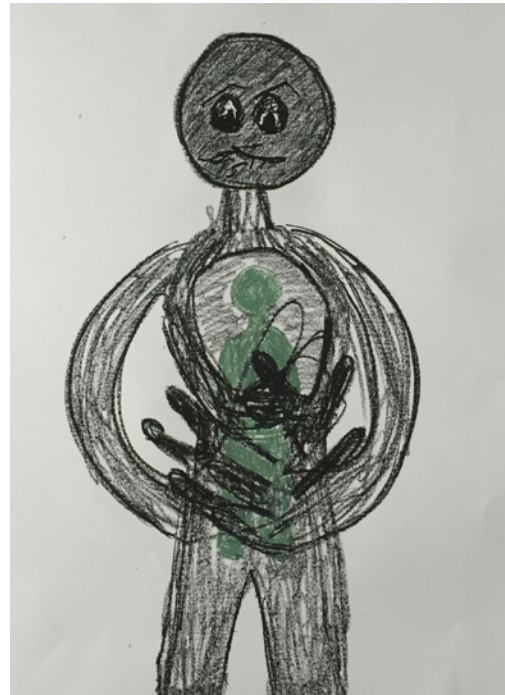
4. Aafke in an armor

We look at the drawing of the armor together. I, the therapist, ask her to close her eyes and take a look inside the armor. Is there something in it, maybe something is being protected? 'Yes,' she says, 'it protects me, my little fearful self.'

Aafke starts to talk about her childhood, about abuse by a friend of the family, and how she was always bullied and ridiculed at home in the large family, even by her father. They called her 'Tutje Hola', a Dutch nickname for a clumsy, stupid person, and would often stand around her, she says, taking pleasure in scaring and ridiculing her (Illustration 22).



22. 'Tutje Hola'

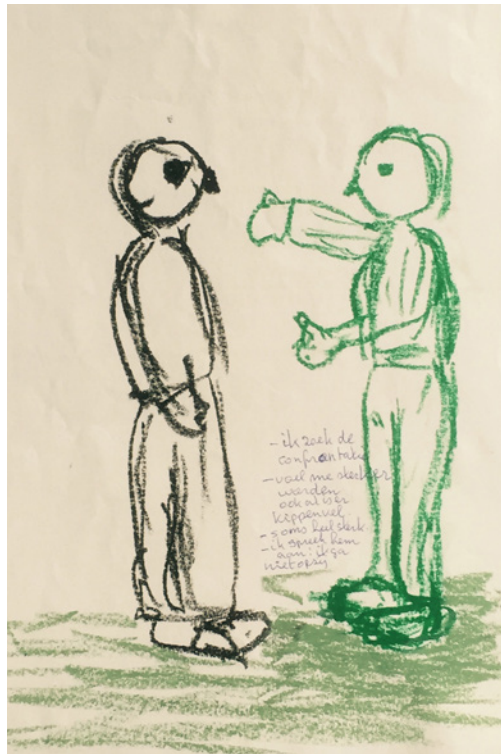


23. Fear that crushes me

Aafke discovers a black figure that she calls 'Fear'. (Illustration 23). She made the drawing at home, which is in itself a hopeful action from a therapeutic point of view. It shows her motivation and apparently, she can handle it independently, outside of the therapy consultation. After all, everything a client does independently in his process is worth its weight in gold, it makes Aafke autonomous and skilled with the content of what has to be processed and developed.

Later on Aafke is strong enough to confront Fear, even though she feels goosebumps. 'I am not stepping aside for him.' In the therapy session she tells Fear that she has had enough of him, that she wants to live and become free. She goes into an imaginary fight with him with her eyes closed.

Then we play this out and we fence with a few sticks. I take the role of Fear first and then we switch roles. It is getting tough, but of course I make sure that it remains a safe game.



24. Meeting Fear

Making ‘what’s going on inside” physical is an important imagery intervention that aims to give the client the opportunity to experiment with it in a playful way.

‘I want to dance in life,’ Aafke finally calls out to Fear. I immediately propose to her to put that into practice. Aafke agrees, and together we dance in the therapy room for a few minutes. Apparently, she feels safe enough here and she is motivated to dare to do so.

I suggest that it might be a very good idea to practice ‘dancing’. Go and see if there is a safe place (course or something similar) where you can dance. As a suggestion I give her a few addresses where she might be able to find it. A month later she says she has found a small course where you can dance freely to music. Aafke radiates when she talks about her first experience there.

Aafke is doing well in her dance course, she speaks enthusiastically about her experiences with it. But she wants more and still feels very hampered in her social life. Helping others is no problem for her, but going out herself, like going into a cafe, this Aafke still shrinks from. She then feels a cramp in her throat and chest. In her imagination she sees a heavy stone pulling her down despite wanting to be as radiant as the sun. It’s like a brick around my neck and on my soul, says Aafke. (Illustration 25).



25.



26.



27.

The heavy stone turns out to lead to a 'poisonous swamp' (Illustration 26). It depicts the atmosphere of her family, where she was abused. It still crushes life out of Aafke (Illustration 27).

In various ways we discuss what Aafke needs with regard to this trauma and we do all kinds of imagery exercises with Fear to make her stronger. In illustration 28 she speaks with him. Aafke discovers he is the traumatised child within her.

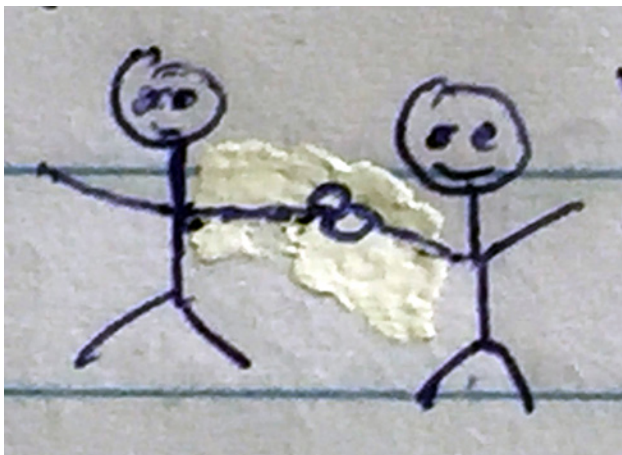


28.

She is increasingly taking care of 'the child within herself', on the one hand imaginary care (Illustration 29), and on the other hand in the practice of daily life by doing fun things for and with the child, a kind of joyful catch-up.

Such concretizations in daily life are of great importance for the integration of what is needed to develop. The therapy session is like a laboratory where things can be sorted out and then developed, but the actual positive changes in a client take place in daily life, in the application.

She is increasingly taking care of 'the child within herself', on the one hand imaginary care (Illustration 29), and on the other hand in the practice of daily life by doing fun things for and with the child, a kind of joyful catch-up.



29. Taking care of her 'child within'.

In the process Aafke became more and more active, she dances, she paints, she tries to enter a café, she joins a singing choir.

In three paintings she expresses her process, she calls it 'from fear to flowering' (Illustration 30) and she paints her tree of life, her sapling full of colors (Illustration 31).



30. From fear to flowering.



31. Aafke's tree of life



32. I am valuable.

Aafke says: 'I came out of my coffin, I am valuable' (illustration 32). She feels that her life has started again, a true process of resurrection. In her daily life, progress has been slow, but steady, she carefully takes the steps she always wanted to take in life.

8. Imagery Toolbox

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 cancer patients and others in the medical field. 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.

In the attempt to make imagery tools easily accessible for those who are confronted with cancer, chronic diseases and crisis, we developed the Imagery Toolbox at the Amsterdam School for Imagery, based on the principles of Psychosynthesis.

The Imagery Toolbox started with a vision 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. And 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 help increase their resilience. In many cases it also brought very meaningful changes regarding the 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'.

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

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 comprises: 54 symbol cards (photos with a wide variety of symbolism), 8 audio imagery exercises (CDs and mp3s), drawing, writing and modelling material, a documentary on the choir ‘Singing for Your Life’, 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 on 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.⁸

In this chapter two examples of working with tools from the Imagery Toolbox were presented above, from Fabian and Maria. In other publications there has been extensively written about the toolbox (Lombard, 2020; Taal, 2019). The Course Book (Taal, 2017) contains many case studies with 68 artistic illustrations by clients.

Imagery, as all therapeutic interventions, requires a non-judgmental, open mind from the therapist. To guide someone in imagery obviously one needs to master the different techniques, but above all a therapist needs to be able to navigate with a certain degree of mastery in his own internal world. Because any image that a client deals with evokes images in the therapist’s inner realm and tends to influence his guidance. That’s why the therapist, counsellor or coach is in a continuous process with himself while guiding the client, a true dual imagery process.

This chapter would not be complete without a remark regarding the pitfalls of the superficial or forced use of imagery, through for instance overly prescribed visualizations. If one wants to imagine something positive, but one does not really make these images his own, it can have negative effects. A ‘positive image’ may briefly evoke positive emotions, but then one may be content with this short-lived emotional experience and neglect to take further action to integrate the imagery experience and to give it more tangible substance in one’s daily life. Particularly in the case of serious illness a dangerous pitfall is to pursue imposed, prescribed images, without sufficiently considering the person’s psychological condition. If images are forced upon a person and the person experiences his own images to be different or a feeling of tension arises, the person can get into great emotional and mental trouble. The spontaneous images a client possesses, should be the starting point, the ground to work from. Because spontaneous images always represent true qualities of the soul, even if we initially

8. To see the video, go to:
<https://imagerytoolbox.com/video-en/>

resist them or are not able to appreciate them. The difficulties we and our clients encounter in this regard, are perhaps but the last uneasy stirrings of our essential qualities trying to come free from their shells.

9. Discussion

Imagery, as all therapeutic interventions, requires a non-judgmental, open mind from the therapist. To guide someone in imagery obviously one needs to master the different techniques, but above all a therapist needs to be able to navigate with a certain degree of mastery in his own internal world. Because any image that a client deals with evokes images in the therapist's inner realm and tends to influence his guidance. That's why the therapist, counsellor or coach is in a continuous process with himself while guiding the client, a true dual imagery process.

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9. Oetingen, G. & Mayer,D. (2002).

10. Paraphrasing Evelyn Underhill, quoted in Metzner, 2010, p. 272

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Jan Taal (1949) is a practicing healthcare psychologist since 1980 and trainer at the Amsterdam School for Imagery since 1985.

Prior to clinical psychology and training in psychosynthesis Jan studied cultural anthropology and wandered for years in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. It led him to study spiritual traditions, transpersonal psychology and in the last decades rituals of native plant healers in the Amazon.

In collaboration with the Dutch Cancer Society Jan organized groundbreaking events of art by persons coping with cancer in 1998 and 2003. In 2009 Jan started the Imagery Toolbox Project. To gain a permanent place in the 'mainstream' of healthcare is the long-term goal of this project. In 2021 he developed the online imagery-tool 'Strengthen yourself in times of uncertainty or fear'.