

Mastering Your Mental Images Can Make Your Day

New psychological techniques aim to use your imagination—and all of your senses—to help overcome trauma and achieve goals



Many years ago, when my son—who is terribly allergic to horses—was 12 years old, we were watching a theatrical production of “War Horse” at Lincoln Center. There are no live horses in the production, only life-size horse puppets made of bicycle parts, wood, cables, and glue. But the way the puppets move, by some point in the middle of the first act, you start to believe they are real.

Around this point, my son had difficulty breathing and grabbed his throat,

pointing at the horse on stage. My son was thinking of the last time he was near a horse and the mental image triggered a physiological response; he anticipated an allergic reaction and then had one. After we spent a few minutes discussing how the horses on stage weren't real, his symptoms disappeared.

As a mother, this was a terrifying incident; as a cognitive therapist, it was fascinating. I understood, of course, the power of thoughts to shape behavior, but I had never witnessed so clearly the ability of the imagination to trigger such a dramatic physical response in the body.

Nearly 10 years after the "War Horse" incident, I became acquainted with a new psychological technique called Functional Imagery Training, developed by academic researchers at the University of Plymouth in the U.K, and I became the first U.S. therapist to be trained in the method. FIT was born from research on addiction, specifically what's called the "elaborated intrusion theory," which focuses on the role of intrusive thoughts in addictive behaviors. This theory suggests that cravings and intrusive thoughts about substance use or unhealthy behaviors can disrupt self-control and increase the likelihood of relapse. FIT works by helping individuals develop alternative mental images to counteract the intrusive thoughts, and build themselves a more positive narrative.

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The approach was unlike my previous training in cognitive behavioral change, which, as the name implies, focuses on cognitions—that is, thoughts and self-talk. For example, on a cold, rainy morning when you'd rather hit the snooze button, it means using self-talk ("This is the healthier choice, You'll feel much better if you get up and run, etc.")

to convince yourself to get out of bed and lace up your sneakers. FIT rests

on the same foundation but takes it a step further by simultaneously using multisensory imagery. That is, you focus not only on thoughts but on sensations as well.

It goes something like this: When your alarm goes off and you see the weather outside, imagine the patter of the rain, the cool breeze on your face, the sound of your footsteps hitting the pavement, your muscles working as you run, the taste of sweat on your lips, and how good it feels to have finished a morning run. Finally, imagine your warm shower afterward. That feeling of immersive accomplishment and reward makes it harder to hit snooze.

In studies where participants have had their brain scanned while playing a piano and again later when imagining playing, results have shown that mental imagery activates the same cortical areas of the brain as real-life experiences, creating a powerful mind-body connection.

Importantly, in order to harness the benefits of such a mind-body connection, the individual must use multisensory imagery, not just visualization. Visualizing only activates the brain's occipital lobe, spurring a mere fleeting thought. By immersing yourself in a multisensory way, a vast matrix of brain regions activate like fireworks, starting from the emotion-driven limbic lobe buried deep inside your brain, bouncing through the cingular network responsible for thoughts like anticipation, and then rising to the surface where critical thinking and decision-making occurs.

Recent studies in weight loss have demonstrated that when you combine such multisensory imagery with an important goal, participants are five times more likely to succeed—because they have already experienced the feeling of accomplishing their goal and discussed ways to overcome challenges using their imagination.

So, the question is: how can we train our imagery abilities?

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The technique is most effective when the imagery is connected somehow to your core values—your priorities in life. Many of us are not aligning ourselves with those on a day-to-day basis. For example, my therapy clients often rank “health” and “family” as their top two values, yet they’ll say things like “I just don’t have time for the gym,” or “I’ll

spend more quality time with my kids next week.” Once you’ve identified your core values, physical and mental cues can help you make imagery a daily habit.

Physical cues can be as simple as placing a picture or object related to your goal in a prominent place (for instance, putting your last race bib on the fridge to motivate you to push through marathon training). This visual reminder can activate your mind to focus on your goal and not your negative internal chatter.

Mental cues can involve setting aside a specific time of day, such as in the morning while your coffee is brewing. As the aroma fills your kitchen, think of the day ahead: What do I want my day to look like today? What do I want to accomplish? Eventually, the smell of your morning coffee can automatically send you into imagery mode.

Even so, there will likely be challenges; a crucial element of imagery training is the ability to anticipate them and mentally rehearse how you will react to them. You need to not only mentally rehearse what could go right, but also what could go wrong. Typically, as people get closer to achieving their goals, it’s common to have an increase in negative, self-sabotaging thoughts, and need to replace those with mental images of their desired outcome.

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Would you try functional imagery training?

German cliff diver Iris Schmidbauer went through all these steps. In 2016, diving

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from a height of more than 60 feet, she mistakenly entered the water back-first at about 46 miles an hour. She emerged bruised, coughing blood, and with severe whiplash. Naturally, the experience caused her both physiological and cognitive trauma. For the next few months, Iris spontaneously thought of that dive several times each day. She would vividly imagine it, replaying the whole fiasco in explicit detail in her head, and consequently could not dive from high platforms.

Schmidbauer noticed that her highest frequency of negative thoughts occurred when she looked at her phone, which had a background picture of her standing on top of a cliff. A glimpse of it triggered a sequence of stress, anxiety, and fear. Under FIT therapy, she started by changing her phone's screen saver to a neutral image. Then she got back in the water for 15-foot dives. Then she focused on a previous important diving event, her first, and specifically focused on it while packing her daily training bag. When a negative thought emerged, she learned to accept it and move on from it. Now, she's one of the top cliff divers in the world.

Mastering the art of mental imagery, you can unlock a wide range of benefits, including resilience, enhanced problem-solving abilities and improved focus, as well as less stress and anxiety. When you become aware of the images in your head and your ability to control the channel, you'll be more likely to stick to your goals and bigger life vision.

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