

STC Module 9: Reconnecting through conjoint imagery with a childhood scene (Jan. 2022)

The conjoint imagery exercise is a variation of the imagery rescripting exercises we usually use in individual therapy. We start working with one of the partners as we would do in individual therapy, having the second partner observe. During the exercise, we let the second partner step in for the reparenting part. Having the second partner comforting the vulnerable child instead of doing it oneself helps clients to **experience their partners as supportive**, caring, trustful and loving. This is the key to **emotional reconnection**. While doing imagery we also gain access to significant childhood experiences and **schema-inducing scenes**. This gives some depth to our work even if we don't take a comprehensive history of the partners in the beginning of therapy. It makes sense to do this exercise **with both partners**. You might begin with the withdrawn partner to involve him or her more into the therapy. To create a safe situation for the active partner (doing the imagery exercise) all three close eyes.

Therapist: *"Let's start with a recent clash you had. Can you please bring up a vivid image of the scene?"* Ask for all sensory channels until you have a vivid image of the scene yourself. *"How do you feel in this scene?.....How does that feel in your body?.....Please stay in touch with all these feelings and let the picture of the scene fade out.....Allow yourself to float back in time into your youth and your childhood.....staying on touch with your feeling, what scene comes up before your eyes.....how do you feel being in this scene.....what do you need now? Please stop the scene now and stay in touch with this need."*

Then the therapist addresses him- or herself to the listening partner: *"Are you in the image too?.....How do you feel seeing Tom (or Betty) in such a situation?.....How does this make you feel in your body?....what do you like to say or do to Tom (or Betty)?"* If the feelings and impulses are adaptive, you support the partner to sit close by the imaging partner and talk softly to them or hug them. If the listening partner remains detached you do the reparenting as the therapist yourself. However, this is a critical sign about the emotional resources of the couple.

Advice: The **key target** of this intervention is the **reparenting part**. If the observing partner confronts the caretakers in the image, this is ok, but not mandatory for a good outcome.

After the reparenting, ask for the effects: *"Betty, how does it make you feel if Tom acts to you that way?.....Tom, how does it make you feel caring for Betty this way?"* To **reconnect the imagery scene with the present situation**, you ask both partners to turn their seats towards each other in a close distance. If possible, let them hold hands and then let them open their eyes slowly: *"Now, after we understood more about your schema background, Betty, what do you need from Tom now?.....How does that make you feel in your body?"* If it feels ok: *"Ok, so look into Tom's eyes now and tell him to the face what you need?.....Tom, how does it make you feel listening to Betty's wish?.....What do you want to reply?"* Maybe Betty has to add an offer to her wish to make connecting with her more attractive for Tom.

Closing: Ask both partners to compare their feelings at the beginning and the end of the exercise (**discrimination**). *"You see, you have a choice! If you both manage connecting from your blue leg, you can get out of the mode cycles".*

Possible homework assignment: For *Betty*: When she gets soaked into a schema activation, get aware, that Tom has been helpful in this imagery (e.g. Tom is not like my father!). For *Tom*:

Whenever he feel pushed by Betty's dominant coping mode, add the vulnerable Child mode from this imagery behind the front stage coping mode.

It is important to wait with this exercise until the couple managed to stop clashes and reconnect in a functional way. Otherwise you risk that the imaging partner gets emotionally hurt and deprived again. Usually the exercise works very well, deepens the understanding for the partner's behavior patterns based on the childhood experiences, and creates a better emotional connection. Thus, whenever the therapies get stuck, it is worthwhile trying some imagery work.

The superior effect of imagery on a couple's felt connection compared to a cognitive intervention has been shown in this **paper**: Roediger, E., Zarbock, G., Frank-Noyon, E., Hinrichs, J., & Arntz, A. (2018). The Effectiveness of Imagery Work in Schema Therapy with Couples: A Clinical Experiment comparing the Effects of Imagery Rescripting and Cognitive Interventions in brief Schema Couples Therapy. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*. DOI: 10.1080/14681994.2018.1529411