

Goal Visualisation

Goals

Exercise

15 min.

Client or Group

No

Mental imagery of future events (also known as mental simulation, goal visualisation, and imagined future) is a technique that helps people “envision possibilities and develop plans for bringing those possibilities about” (Taylor et al., 1998, p. 429). Such an exercise has been shown to promote goal-directed behaviour by increasing the one’s expectation for success, enhancing motivation and emotional involvement, and initiating planning and problem-solving actions. Mental imagery can be outcome-focused, where images of the outcomes or goals are generated, or process-focused, where images of the steps leading to outcomes and goals are generated. Outcome-focused imagery can help one to envision the desired outcome and identify specific and concrete plans; process-focused imagery guides one to visualise the process through which a goal will be attained and in turn form action plans for goal pursuit.

Research has examined the beneficial effects of imagining future events. For instance, mental imagery of possible selves (i.e., where one generates images of what he or she could become) has been shown to enhance motivation by helping people to identify goals and develop goal-directed behaviour (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), and improved performance through imagining one’s future success (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Further to this, social cognition research has found that mental imagery of future events actually increases the likelihood that those events will occur (Johnson & Sherman, 1990). Furthermore, mental imagery has been shown to enhance athletic performance, improve impulsivity, reduce relapse rates among alcoholics, and reduce premature termination of therapy (Johnson & Sherman, 1990).

Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to promote goal-directed behaviour by increasing the client’s expectation for success, enhancing motivation and emotional involvement, and initiating planning and problem-solving actions.

Advice

- It is important to remember that not every wish or desire that the client has for him or herself will have motivational benefits. People who tend to be pessimistic may actually become less motivated when visualising their future success.

- Encourage the client to focus on positive mental images that include precisely how he or she will attain the desired outcome, rather than exclusively on the outcome itself.
- Encourage the client to cultivate a mental image that is based on positive expectation (i.e., the belief that the imagined future event is attainable) rather than positive fantasy (i.e., idealised images of desired events that are experienced regardless of their likelihood of occurrence), as positive expectation is more motivating.



Suggested Readings

Johnson, M. K., & Sherman, S. J. (1990). Constructing and reconstructing the past and the future in the present. In E. T. Higgins & R. M. Sorrentino (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behavior*, Vol. 2, pp. 482-526). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.

Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., & Terry, K. (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 91(1), 188.

Ruvolo, A. P., & Markus, H. R. (1992). Possible selves and performance: The power of self-relevant imagery. *Social cognition*, 10(1), 95-124.

Taylor, S. E., Pham, L. B., Rivkin, I. D., & Armor, D. A. (1998). Harnessing the imagination: Mental simulation, self-regulation, and coping. *American psychologist*, 53(4), 429.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Guide the client through the exercise using the following script

To begin, take a moment to get comfortable in your seat, and gently close your eyes. Take a few deep, slow breaths, and allow yourself to relax. I'm going to speak to you for the next little while, and all you need to do is listen, and imagine. Do your best to avoid falling to sleep. Simply relax, and imagine.

OK, I'd like you to think about a goal that you want to accomplish in the next year of your life. This might be a relationship goal, an educational goal, a personal goal, or a work-related goal. Take a moment to bring this goal forward and visualise it in your mind's eye.

(30 secs)

Now, with this personal goal in mind, I would like you to imagine yourself going forward in time, into the future... going forward one week... two weeks... three weeks....

And four weeks! it's now one month into the future, and you have started working towards achieving your goal - you are on the road to success. What decisions have you made? What actions have you taken? And how does it feel to be on this road to success?

(30 secs)

Now, using your imagination, continue going forward in time... until you are 6 months into the future. You are significantly closer to achieving your goal. You are starting to feel the benefits of all of your efforts. What is this like? How does it feel to be this much closer to your goal? Allow yourself to notice any feelings or emotions tied to this moment.

(30 secs)

Now, I would like you to continue going forward in time, until you reach one year from now. Here, you have fully accomplished your goal. You have achieved success! Visualise yourself in your mind. Where are you, and what are you doing? Who are you with, if anyone? What are people saying to you? And what are you saying to them.

(15 secs)

And how does reaching your goal feel? What emotions are tied to this achievement? Perhaps there are feelings of pride, joy, contentment, or satisfaction.

(30 secs)

Now, I would like you to look back on your journey. Look back on the process of achieving this goal. Look back on all of your hard work and effort, and consider how you reached your goal, step-by-step. What were the little things you did, day-by-day, to achieve success? What did you do at work? What did you do in your relationships?

(15 secs)

And what did you do internally to achieve success? How did you manage difficult thoughts, and emotional obstacles? What coping strategies did you use? Take a moment to consider all the things that helped you manage the personal challenges that appeared along the way.

(30 secs)

Good.

Now, as the exercise comes to an end, take a deep, slow breath. And when you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Step 2: Evaluate the exercise

How was it to do this visualisation?

Is there anything you learned from this exercise?

Are there any insights that you can use to move closer to your goals? If so, list them below: