

Exercises in Imagery

Ad van der Ven*

Orthopedagogics: Learning and Development, Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

***Corresponding Author:** Ad van der Ven, Orthopedagogics: Learning and Development, Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

Received: June 22, 2022; **Published:** July 29, 2022

During psychotherapy, it is common for people to experience image perception, also known as imagery. Image perception during therapy is mentioned by several authors: Freud himself, but also other psychologists and psychiatrists wrote about it. Image perception can also occur during hypnosis, especially during regression. It seems sensible for a future psychologist, certainly for a psychotherapist, to experience for themselves what that actually is: image perception. This last argument is also mentioned in the literature: As for the work of the analyst, this would be quite impossible if he could not know and experience his own images. Clearly, his skill and efficacy must in part depend on how extensive and how differentiated is his range of imagery. Where his capacity to image is limited, there he fails to comprehend with ease the experience of his patient; in fact, he may be tempted to disregard, disbelieve or dismiss those experiences of his patient which his own imaginal disposition does not allow him to share (Gordon, p. 73 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

The term 'imagery' has several connotations in English. One can distinguish between the use of images during image perception, hallucinations and fantasies. What is understood by image perception or imagery here comes closest to what McKellar describes as 'dream-like' images: Some people in the drowsy state before sleep report an anticipatory invasion of consciousness by visual or other dreamlike imagery. (McKellar, p. 40 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

When one speaks of 'images' in English literature, one means all kinds of things such as hallucinations, images, fantasies as they occur during daydreaming, illusions, dream images, etc. But when it comes to the precise meaning of image perception or imagery then what Sheehan says about this is worth noting: With imagery there is no object present to the senses as in perception; it is somewhat an introspective *façon de parler* to speak of 'seeing', 'picturing', or 'visualizing' something (Sheehan, p.385 in Fromm en Shor, 1979 [2]).

This article describes a series of image perception exercises performed as part of a 'Suggestion and Autosuggestion' course for third-year psychology students. A book by Bowers [3] was used for the discussion lectures. Each exercise took place as part of a two-part session: a discussion hour and an image perception exercise. During the discussion, a predefined text was discussed. The aim of the exercise was to create a situation where image perception could take place. The sessions took place on Mondays from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm, from April 27, 1981 to June 1, 1981. There were a total of six sessions, the first five of which are discussed below. At the end of the course, an optional film on hypnosis was shown [4] followed by a discussion. Verbatim reports of interviews are available from seven students who took part in the course, about how they experienced the exercises. As mentioned above, the exercises were specifically aimed at allowing the students to gain experience with image perception (read: 'dream-like images' or also 'hypnagogic experience'). The chance of image perception is greater when one is in a state of relaxation and openness; not when one thinks of something. All exercises had about the same structure. That of the first exercise will be described in more detail (as an example for the others).

Each exercise consisted of three parts. The first part consisted of a preface explaining the purpose of the exercise. The second part included a period of relaxation. The talking into the relaxation, which preceded the actual relaxation period, is reported in more detail in the section describing the first exercise. During the actual relaxation period, there was absolute silence for 15 to 20 minutes. Afterwards, the students were briefly talked out of relaxation and everyone was asked to sit on the mat. They waited for the last student to sit. During

the third part of the exercise there was a group discussion about what had been experienced. It was made clear to the students that they did not have to talk about things they would rather keep to themselves, such as intimate or personal experiences. The report of each student was mainly about the level of experience. Once images were experienced and reported, no interpretation was given to them. Questions were allowed to each other, but the sole purpose of these questions was to clarify the experience of those involved.

First exercise: General relaxation

During the initial phase (first part) of the exercise, the following was said: Now we are going to do a relaxation exercise. I'll talk you into it in a certain way. Everything is happening inside you. Everything is good. Any experience you have is good. Shortly after the exercise we will talk about what we experienced.

Then (during the second part) the actual relaxation exercise took place. This starts with the relaxation instruction (first phase of the second part): You may lie down in the position you want to lie down. You take the position that you find most comfortable, for example the same position you take when you go to bed at night. You can change your position as much as you want, you can make any sound you want. For example, the sound you make when you change position or when you cough. You can take any position you want and you can do that throughout the session. It's best to close your eyes, but if you want to keep them open, that's fine too. If you want to end the exercise earlier, you can quietly leave the room and join the exercise again the next time. In the beginning all kinds of thoughts come to your mind, they can be the craziest things like: "It's really crazy that I'm lying here". You may start to think about certain things that happened to you today, but everything is fine. Think what you want, let it all come to you. Nothing is forbidden. You just let go. All you are trying to do is pay attention to what is happening inside you. After fifteen or twenty minutes I give you a sign that the exercise is over and then you sit back and wait for everyone to sit down. Then we will talk about our experiences during this session.

The relaxation instruction was given approximately in this atmosphere. Then the actual relaxation session started. At the end of the session it was said: You can now stretch and come to yourself. Just wait until everyone is seated.

Then the group discussion took place. The students sat in an oval circle and the students took turns telling about the things they experienced during their relaxation. When discussing their experiences, it was clear to the students that they didn't have to talk about what they didn't want to say. They didn't have to talk about personal matters if they didn't want to. Every experience communicated was good, no evaluation took place. If there had been image perception then that was good, if no images had been seen then that was a good thing too. During the relaxation instruction, it was also said, If you fall asleep, that's okay too.

It is interesting to note that this never happened during an exercise. During the group discussion, the students told what they had experienced. No interpretation was given in any way of what was being said. After the group discussion, the session was considered closed. Usually at the end of the session there appeared to be one or two people who wanted a chat over a cup of coffee afterwards. In order to meet this need, the author has always stayed in the canteen for a long time to be able to have a chat with these people. The conversation was usually not related to the session itself, but had an everyday character. The author often felt that tension had somehow built up in these individuals during the session and that they wanted to release it through the chat. I ended these conversations when the students themselves pointed it out with comments like, "I have to go now because I still have errands for dinner" and things. This chatter afterward was frequent. There were always two or three people who wanted this.

The sketch just given gives an impression of the structure of the exercises. In summary, each exercise consisted of three parts:

- A short introductory talk about the purpose of the relaxation period,
- The actual relaxation period and

- The group discussion.

The relaxation period itself again consisted of three phases:

- At the first exercise this was the talking in into the relaxation,
- The actual relaxation period and
- Coming back from relaxation.

In later exercises, instead of the talking in into the relaxation, a certain context was created, for example, a guided fantasy was given during the third session. During the group discussion during the second session, it appeared that there was no need for an extensive talking in into the relaxation. It was indicated that it was enough when it was said: Just lie down, we will now start the relaxation period.

It was even experienced as disturbing when the talking into the relaxation was done extensively.

Second exercise: Image perception

During the pre-talk during the first part of the second session, the students were told that it might be possible that they would experience something like image perception. It was immediately said that if one would perceive certain images, that would be nice, but if that didn't happen, that was just as good. To make it somewhat clear to the students what is meant by image perception, the following was said: We know something like perception and we know something like thinking. Between perception and thinking you have something like what we call representations. But between the imagining of things by one self and pure perception, there is something else and we call that image perception or imagery. So there is a kind of scale from very concrete to purely abstract: you have perception, you have thinking, and in between you have representations and between representations and pure perception you have something else: that is image perception.

Nothing further was said about image perception, except for the vague determination of its position between perception and imagination. After this talk beforehand, the relaxation was started, which now started again with the talking in into the relaxation.

During the group discussion it turned out that a number of people had had image perception. In discussing what was perceived in images, the main features of image perception were listed. These are as follows:

- Basically you perceive the given image with your eyes closed. It is not something that you really perceive in the sense that there is a physical object outside of yourself. Image perception can also take place with your eyes open, then you are not paying attention to what is being given physically in front of your eyes. You only pay attention to the given image. McKellar says in this regard: Others included being able to open the eyes, close them, and continue with the visual imagery. It may be noted that hypnagogic or dreamlike imagery may occur open-eyed in a darkened room, as well as close eyed (McKellar, p. 43 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).
- The quality of the images is exactly the same as that of the images during dreaming: the dream images. See also McKellar: In this the imagery resembles the more typical kinds of dreams and hallucinations (McKellar, p. 43 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).
- On the one hand, the perceptual character of the images is important for image perception, while at the same time it must be emphasized that the images are not evoked via external stimulation. They come to you from within. For example, one student said: The images appear from within yourself as if they came out of nowhere. With 'images' there is no external stimulation. 'Perception' does mean that a physical object is present.

- Another characteristic of the images is that they appear at an unexpected moment; the image arises at a moment that you do not expect it.
- The moment you perceive the image, there is no such thing as 'self-consciousness'. At the moment of perception, the reflection on perception is absent. You are completely absorbed in the image. You do not realize that you are perceiving the image. During image perception you are usually not aware of your own physicality.
- Another characteristic is that the images are usually short-lived, and the moment you realize you're perceiving the image, it's gone. There is, as it were, a kind of interference between the intellectual activity or reflexive activity and the perception of the image itself. As soon as the reflection occurs, the image disappears.
- A characteristic that often occurs, but does not always have to be present, is that the content of the image, the concrete representation, is incomprehensible to the observer. The person himself does not understand the image given to him/her. He/she describes the images and also describes his/her surprise that he/she does not understand their meaning.
- Another characteristic is the fragmentary nature of the images that is sometimes present. In image perception, often only a part of a particular object is observed; the environment is invisible. At least not specified or clear. Often the image is not completely finished. For example, one of the subjects only saw a blue soldier's uniform that, according to her, dates from the nineteenth century. She could describe the jacket more precisely, for example she saw the braid which was a different color from the jacket itself, but she only saw the jacket and not even that in its entirety.
- Another important feature that distinguishes the images from dream images is that the person is not in a state of sleep during the perception. In this regard, it is important to quote McKellar: In one study Lorna Simpson and I investigated how our subjects knew they were awake and not asleep when having the images. The commonest response was of being able to have other perceptions, e.g., take part in a conversation, while imaging (McKellar, p. 43 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).
- Another feature of image perception that has not yet been mentioned is that the image is often static. One sees, as it were, a three-dimensional slide recording in color. This is not always the case, however. Sometimes there is a sequence of events as also occurs in a dream, but then a dream that one has while one is not sleeping.

Some of the above features are also mentioned by McKellar: A defining feature of hypnagogic or dreamlike imagery is its marked autonomy in the sense in which this term is used by Gordon [5,6]. It comes

- To its own accord,
- Can be original and surprising in content and,
- Neither its appearance nor its content is subject to volitional control.

In this the imagery resembles the more typical kinds of dreams and hallucinations (McKellar, p. 43 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

Quite a few people indicated during the group discussion that they had experienced image perception. The author had been able to demonstrate the above features very nicely from the description given by them.

Already during the first exercise it appeared that the participants had had all kinds of experiences, such as hallucinations. One of the students believed that the author was walking across the room, which was not the case; in other students there was a change in body

perception; for example, someone had the feeling that he had sunk half into the ground. Others suddenly got very cold. Or there were experiences like, I can't move my body anymore.

It is interesting to note that these experiences, such as the feeling of immobility, occur spontaneously during relaxation. This could explain why these experiences can be recalled so easily during hypnosis. Of course there were also fantasies, daydreams and all kinds of thoughts. These experiences took place during all relaxation sessions. In the later sessions, however, the emphasis was mainly on visual image perception. Color perception was also very common.

How can we distinguish image perception from fantasies? A first criterion is that the person himself is often surprised about the content of the image. With fantasies you are not amazed by the images you get; you summoned them yourself. A second characteristic arises when the person does not understand the content of his own images; then one knows for sure that there is no fantasy involved, because with fantasy one knows what one is doing. A third characteristic has to do with the way the person describes his image; he describes the image as if he were actually seeing it, speaking about it in the same language used in describing an actual sighting, he can describe the localization and color of parts of the image.

The whole conversation during the group discussion was about 'seeing'. The author constantly asked: "What did you see?". The author often asked about things not mentioned before, such as, "What were you wearing?". This was about a girl who saw herself on a raft in the sea. The author's question was: "What were you wearing and what color were those clothes?". She then described wearing a shirt that was grayish in color. To the surprise of the author, it often happened that image perception took place. About half of the subjects (about 15 in total) who participated in the exercises had image perception. The other half, however, did not. Not even during the other exercises. One gets the impression that this is an all-or-nothing situation. You either have it or you don't. It's not a matter of more or less.

Third exercise: Guided fantasy

During the third exercise, guided fantasy was used. The images one has during the image perception arise spontaneously. This was not affected during the second exercise. It is now possible to put the person in a certain situation, to stage the situation for him. Is it true that the images you get actually have something to do with that scene? In other words, has the scene which is evoked an suggestive effect on the person, in the sense that the images that come to his/her mind are somehow related to the guided fantasy.

During the pre-talk at the beginning of the relaxation period the students were informed that they would be given a guided fantasy. This one was related to a beach scene. The guided fantasy went something like this: You are lying on the beach, you have taken a long walk, you are tired; you are relaxing in the warm sand, you feel very comfortable, you are resting, you have close your eyes, you hear the wind rustle through the marram grass on top of the dunes, you know the sky, fresh and clear, is above you, blue, while white clouds pass by, you also hear the rustle of the surf, the constant return of the surf wave, you know that the sea is in front of you, the clear cool sea in which fish swim, while you lie there you know that everything is familiar, you are safe, also with other people.

Fourth exercise: Aura perception

The aim of the fourth exercise was to have something like aura perception take place in the participants. The author used a technique or staging that Rens Hendriks used (personal communication). The participants are first brought into a state of relaxation, after which they face each other in pairs. The actual exercise consists in this, that each participant, with eyes closed, slowly runs his hands along the body of the other. In doing so, he keeps his hands about a decimeter from the body and simultaneously moves them back and forth from the crown to about knee height. This is done several times and then the partner does the same.

Prior to the actual relaxation exercise, the students were told that there would be an 'exercise' in aura perception. Very little was said about what aura perception actually is. It was only said that psychics can perceive a certain kind of radiation or radiance from the body. This radiation is then called an 'aura'. Auras were no longer described further to prevent the students from getting all kinds of ideas that would later be expressed in images during the exercise and thus had nothing to do with aura perception, but more with portraying a suggestion received beforehand. The actual exercise was as follows. First, the students went into relaxation for about 10 minutes. They were then asked to stand up and to stand face towards their partner with their eyes closed. For the relaxation exercise, it was determined who belonged to whom. While everyone was thus facing each other, first the instruction was given that one partner should make the above described hand movements in relation to the other partner. This happened for 1 to 2 minutes. Then the other partner got the chance to do the same. After this guided exercise, all couples were given the opportunity to continue the exercise at their own pace. When one partner wanted to switch roles, he indicated this by tapping the other's shoulder with his hand. After a few minutes everyone had to lie back relaxed. This second relaxation period lasted about five minutes, after which the relaxation portion of the exercise was over. Everyone sat down again and the group was told what they had experienced.

How do you know that there is true aura perception when people describe certain images as auras? An important criterion is that one gives answers that one would not expect from someone who has a very mundane idea of what aura perception is. The aura is represented as a kind of radiation, a radiation that emanates from the body, as can be seen in paintings of saints; often a halo is depicted around the heads of the saints. In fact, however, auras are described very differently and manifest themselves in non-obvious ways for both localization, color and movement. The author himself once experienced aura perception during an exercise held as part of a lecture on aura perception using the same exercise just described. He saw with his eyes closed what appears to be a gray-blue haze or outline around the person in front of him.

Fifth exercise: Problem solving

The fifth exercise was a problem solving exercise. In fact, the author would not have wanted to do anything special during any exercise. In retrospect that would have been possible, as the conversations with the students showed, but he thought that the participants always wanted to experience something different, if only for a change. There is a certain development in the actual exercises: first general relaxation, then image perception (but not within a certain structure or setting), then the guided beach fantasy, then a specific form of image perception: aura perception. This last exercise already suggests that you can do something with image perception such as, for example, problem solving. The problem-solving exercise was structured by analogy with an experience the author once had, which he would describe as follows: One afternoon I was at rest, with no prior planning. My mind was at that moment with a very important problem. When I was in deep rest, I suddenly had certain images, then I sat up a bit more - initially I lay down - and I looked at those images. Then I got all kinds of spontaneous associations with those images that put the whole problem in a different light.

Later the idea came to the author to do something similar with the students. At the relaxation session the author explained exactly what the intention was in advance and it went like this: Soon you will just lie back and relax, and then imagine very concretely a problem that concerns you, and that is perhaps the worst. problem you are currently experiencing. Feel free to let them feel all the emotions that come with it. You may not like it at all, but that's one way to let the problem sink in. Then you go into the actual relaxation, so you're not trying to be focused, directive, or reflexive in any way.

If that doesn't work, and you find that the problem is constantly pushing itself on you, you can use a mantra-like phrase, say something along the lines of I don't want to think. I don't want to think. I don't want to think. And you'll keep doing this repeat over and over; you

could also use, for example, It doesn't think in me. It doesn't think in me. It doesn't think in me. If you do, you can hope that eventually all awareness of the problem within you disappears completely and that you enter a deep state of relaxation.

After a while I give a signal and then you have to sit down. Then I give another sign and everyone has to turn and look at the wall.

Normally everyone would sit opposite each other.

You look at the images or other experiences that you have experienced during the relaxation period. You do this in a calm, relaxed way and you see if certain feelings or thoughts arise.

The last part of the exercise again consisted of everyone sharing their experiences according to their own insight.

The problems that people have chosen for themselves are of all kinds. The author's suspicion was that there would be mainly relationship problems. They were mentioned, but much less than the author expected. Some people felt that they needed to change themselves, that they were not functioning optimally in their relationships with others. They felt they should do something about it. Others went back to images they had had in previous exercises that they didn't understand. The problem for them was to figure out the meaning of these images. What was a problem was different for everyone. It also happened that during the relaxation period one got completely different images than one would expect given the problem with which one had started. It also turned out that there were people who had no problem at all. Often problems were also mentioned that could easily be dismissed as trivial, such as exam anxiety. For example, there was someone who was very nervous about a certain exam and saw it as a serious problem.

Some comments afterwards

There is a kind of fluid transition along the dimension of clarity: from a very concrete image that seems almost a perception, to a pure thought in which there is no image at all except representations attached to words. What actually happens during the relaxation sessions of the exercises? The author creates a setting where in principle anything can happen; the focus of attention is on something like real image perception, where the emphasis is placed on certain aspects (see above). Of course much more happens, the person gets all kinds of experiences, but because the whole setting revolves around image perception, the chance of image perception is increased. There is, of course, a risk that a student will classify something as image perception when it is only imagination. In this regard, it seems worth quoting Sheehan: Only detailed questioning of a subject can decide whether he is reporting fantasy, imagery, or merely nonimaginal thoughts. The problem of classifying the nature of the subject's cognition is considerably aggravated by the fact that an experimenter can give cues to the subject about the expected response which the subject may respond to in a way which leads the experimenter to classify the subject's behavior mistakenly (Sheehan, p. 383 and 384 in Fromm en Shor, 1979 [1,2]).

For the chance of image perception it is important that the person enters a kind of state, which the author would like to describe as a reduction of self-awareness' [7]. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning McKellar: Some people in the drowsy state before sleep report an anticipatory invasion of consciousness by visual or other dreamlike imagery" (McKellar, p. 40 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

During relaxation you become more receptive: the reflexive thinking disappears completely into the background. The idea is that there are things that happen in the person that normally happen, but that the person is not so attentive to. The quality of the images you have when you are fantasizing, daydreaming and visualizing yourself differs from that in image perception (see characteristics above). The special focus here on image perception is based on the assumption that images may have therapeutic significance, as Gordon also confirms: Not only the psychologist, but also the psychotherapist has thought much and proposed much concerning the character of images, their function, their possible roots, and their development. Ensnared in the silence of his consulting room, patiently listening, pondering and responding to another person who gropes to discover and make sense of his own inner world, the therapist has the opportunity to encounter and to observe, as if under a microscope, the world of imagery, both his own and that of his patient (Gordon, p. 71 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

The following can be said about the reasons why the content of the images is often incomprehensible to the person. The factual information conveyed through the images may be closely related to anxiety so that the real meaning underlying the image remains hidden from the person. See also Horowitz: Image formation also serves the adaptive function of permitting disguises and shifts of meaning which, if represented in words, might be too difficult to disguise and might evoke anxiety (Horowitz, p 300 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

From this point of view, the image is a kind of veiled information transfer. Such images are psychotherapeutically interesting because the anxiety-related content that is suppressed causes a dissociation in the person. This is based on the basic axiom that it is better that a person is not dissociated, but integrated, meaning that unconscious content for a person is no longer unconscious, but processed into a whole. The fact that unconscious content is present in a person is a sign of dissociation and thus of psychological dysfunction. The line of thought outlined here is typical of psychoanalytic thinking. Incidentally, in our opinion, it does not have to be just that the content behind the images is terrifying. The person may also not be able to express in language what is expressed in the image. He cannot translate the content because there is no language for him, but he can 'imagine' it. In this regard, it is interesting to quote Horowitz: . . . image-formation processes have a transactional relationship with emotions. The immediate emotional state influences image formation, is reflected in image forms and contents . . . (Horowitz, p. 294 in Sheehan, 1972 [1]).

Finally, the author believes that the unconscious process of image-making also arises from a certain amount of emotional energy. In this connection, remember the Homeric similes.

Bibliography

1. Sheehan PW. "The function and nature of imagery". New York: Academic Press (1972).
2. Fromm E and Shor RE. "Hypnosis: developments in research and new perspectives". New York: Aldine Publishing Company (2nd edition) (1979).
3. Bowers KS. "Hypnosis for the seriously curious". New York: Jason Aronson (1977).
4. Erickson MH and Lustig HS. "The artistry of Milton H. Erickson, M.D. (Part One)". Haverford (Pennsylvania): Lustig (1975).
5. Gordon R. "An investigation into some of the factors that favour the formation of stereotyped images". *British Journal of Psychology* 39.3 (1949): 156-167.

6. Gordon R. "Stereotypy of imagery and believe as an ego defense". *British Journal of Psychology* 34 (1962): 1-96.
7. Schafer R. "Aspects of internalization". New York: International University Press (1968).

Volume 11 Issue 8 August 2022

© All rights reserved by Ad van der Ven.