

Like a phoenix from the ashes

Methods to disengage from negative memories and beliefs



Like a phoenix from the ashes: The phoenix is a mystical bird (lat.: ‘The reborn/the reborn son’) that obtains new life by arising from his own ashes after death.

Foreword

This manual is designed for people with emotional problems who suffer from fearful memories and/or thoughts. The self-help techniques described below cannot replace psychotherapy with a therapist; however, the manual offers you an opportunity to start addressing your anxiety and can help to reduce it.

The following paragraphs introduce the core characteristics of anxiety and depression. To better understand the techniques’ mechanisms of actions, we have also included a section about human memory processes, and particularly how human memory is prone to errors. The techniques draw upon these processes in a helpful and therapeutic way. The methods intend to reduce negative memories and fearful inner images, as well as self-deprecating thoughts.

Even if you do not have significant symptoms, you can benefit from this self-help approach. If you suffer from distressing memories (e.g., of an accident, a shameful experience, a serious mistake you’ve made or a traumatic event), frightening thoughts (e.g., that you might fail at giving a presentation, harm someone accidentally or be “victimized” again) and/or a negative self-image, then you are in the right place and should give our method a try.

Anxiety disorders and depression

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health illnesses. About 20% of all people suffer at least once in their life from an anxiety disorder that requires treatment. About the same amount of people suffer from depression, which is characterized by low mood and lack of interest in activities one normally enjoys. Anxiety can present in many forms including **specific phobias** (e.g. fear of dogs, heights, small rooms, places), **generalized anxieties** (omnipresent anxiety and worries in various areas of life, which is characteristic of generalized anxiety disorder), recurrent unexpected panic episodes that appear without any

obvious reason (i.e., panic disorder), and posttraumatic stress disorder (related to a distressing event that is repeatedly experienced in ones'). Another common form of anxiety is **social phobia** (i.e., the fear of social situations, groups, public performances and social appraisal, e.g. to give a speech). Although **obsessive-compulsive disorder** (OCD; e.g., excessive washing and checking in order to ward off bad thoughts and fears) is no longer considered a pure anxiety disorder, and has been classified separately according to a recent psychiatric classification (DSM-5), we would like to add OCD to the list as a form of anxiety.

A common denominator of all anxiety disorders is the intensity and subjective distress of the fears, which leads to avoidance of situations that could possibly trigger anxiety (e.g. avoiding parks due to dog phobia, the underground due to claustrophobia, dark corners due to PTSD after experiencing a robbery, dirt due to compulsions, etc.). Many studies come to the conclusion that in the long run avoidance not only reinforces the fears (thus making them worse), but also and results in major secondary problems (e.g., loss of social network or one's job). It seems understandable and almost logical to avoid fear-evoking situations as it relieves the anxiety for a short time. Yet, in the long term, a dangerous and vicious cycle is established - the sufferer does not learn alternative ways to cope with their fears, and the anxiety further increases, deteriorating one's quality of life and self-esteem.

Caution: For people who suffer from severe posttraumatic symptoms (e.g., after sexual abuse in childhood) and/or who tend to dissociate (e.g., to perceive the environment as unreal or to have a temporary blackout accompanied by the feeling of being disconnected from reality), practicing the technique on your own is not recommended. Rather, we advise you to practice the techniques as part of a concurrent psychotherapy under the supervision of a psychotherapist.

The three fronts of your anxiety

Intense anxiety determines how the **past** is remembered and paints the **future** with gloomy colors (e.g., fear of being bitten by a dog again, becoming a victim of violent acts, doing something embarrassing, or to cause harm to others due to inattention). Moreover, anxiety influences the view of the **present** through negative verbal self-attributions ('loser', 'victim', 'milquetoast') and self-talk ('Get a grip'), as well as negative images. This "three front war" seems a hopeless endeavor for the person affected.

Traumatic and other very negative events, such as being bullied in school or having to suddenly stop an oral presentation due to dizziness or fear, cannot, unfortunately, be simply erased. Such emotional memories fade away more slowly than neutral memories as they are preserved by various triggers (i.e., reminders), as well as by rumination. Trying to suppress these cognitions voluntarily is tempting and seems obvious... but is unfortunately not possible. Active suppression of a memory or an idea simply increases the intensity of the memory if it returns to one's mind. You don't believe it? Give it a try.

For the next minute, do not think about a blue elephant.

Do not think about a blue elephant

Were you successful? No? There you go!

Common countermeasures are to critically reflect on the event's meaning (“Well, it did not go well, but honestly, it just happened one time...”; “Luckily nothing worse happened...”) or to change one's appraisals of an event (“you are not a loser simply because...”; “It wasn't your fault, you were just a child...”). Patients find these common verbal manoeuvres are to be helpful sometimes. But, with especially vivid and intense experiences, which are relived vividly, these methods typically fail. Even if the mind knows that the images are not real or do not reflect the whole truth or reality, it is not simply possible to escape these cognitions - you may feel that you are at their mercy.

The aim of this guide is to reduce negative memories and fearful images, and to transform them into something positive. Before we do this, we need to go back a bit further. Please, be patient. Do not skip the next sections.

Let's go: The treachery of images

In 1929, the Belgian artist Rene Magritte painted ‘The treachery of images’, which carries the subtitle ‘Ceci n'est pas une pipe’ (This is not a pipe). The picture can be seen below. You may think that this painting is stupid or nit-picky, and you are probably not alone. This is definitely a pipe! Magritte simply wanted to express that even a detailed representation or memory of an object or a situation is not identical with the object or the situation itself. In truth, you only see the image of a pipe, but not the real pipe.



Figure 1: René Margritte: The treachery of images

Before we continue: Look at the below picture for 10-15 seconds. We will come back to this later. Try to memorize as many details as possible.

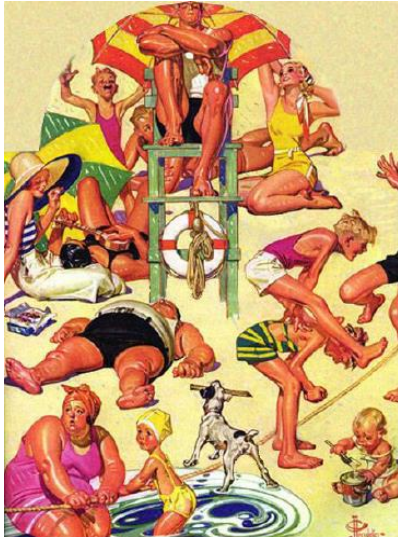


Figure 2: Beach scene

Memory ≠ Reality

Most people think their memory works like a DVD recorder. That is, they believe that in order to remember an experience, they simply need to “call up” the correct film in their head, which was recorded during the event. They believe that this film will then faithfully and correctly reproduce this event. However, our experiences and memories are not an exact copy of events, but are easily distorted by new experiences, information and feelings. Generally, this happens very subtly so that we do not consciously realize this process. Thus, our memory is not a precise representation of an event, but can have gaps and can even contain false information. Consequently, what we remember and how we remember is often very different from what we really have experienced. The following table contains a series of examples of some *collective false memories*.

Table 1 Collective false memories

	<p>Contrary to popular belief, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) <u>never</u> said the phrase “Beam me up, Scotty” in <i>Star Trek</i>.</p>
	<p>Some eye witnesses of the bombing in Dresden (Germany) remembered that after the bombardment low-flying planes were chasing fleeing people. Historians increasingly doubt this (e.g. dust and spreading fires would have made such acts impossible).</p>
	<p>The famous psychologist Jean Piaget remembered being kidnapped as a two-year old, which turned out to be a story his nanny had made up when he was a child.</p>
	<p>In an experiment, participants were shown advertisements for <i>Disney World</i>, on which Bugs Bunny was shown. 30% of the participants remembered meeting the rabbit when visiting <i>Disney World</i> as a child, although Bugs Bunny is a <i>Warner Brothers</i> and not a <i>Disney</i> character.</p>

But what about memories like September 11, 2001, the day when Kennedy was shot or when Princess Diana was killed in an accident? Most witnesses later claim to remember these events almost photographically. Studies show that these memories are indeed more vivid and better preserved than ‘normal’ memories. For example, hardly anyone will remember what they did on September 9 or 10. On the other hand, such vivid memories (e.g., 9/11) also contain many mistakes or do not coincide with what other people who were in the same situation report. False memories can have many facets. Often times, the sequence of events is incorrect (for example, who said what when during an argument) or events are distorted. In an experiment, when witnesses who saw a vehicle collide against a wall were asked with which speed the vehicle either *drove* or *raced* into the wall, the estimated speed was much higher if the word “*raced*” was used. The participants’ memory, therefore, got “written over” by a verbal cue and, as a result, the speed is overestimated.

Back to the beach image, which you were just asked to look at – please do not turn back the pages. What do you still remember what was depicted in the image? Were the following objects shown?

Ball
Water
People taking a sun bath
Lifejacket
Towel
...

If you recall seeing a ball or a towel, then you respond like 80% of all people. However, in reality, those objects were not displayed! Our memory plays tricks on us. In this case, by overwriting the actual scene with a prototype of a beach, where one would see a ball or a towel, or could logically expect one (most people lay on towels while sunbathing).

“Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.” (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, 2002)

The fact that our memory is not an exact representation of the past and is also modifiable is important for this manual for two reasons. First of all, it should be clear to us that our memory does not function like an archive, in which events are sorted in strict chronological order and stored to represent an exact place and time. Rather, we tend to retain memories, which have had a formative impact, or which we tend to think about often. Such memories can be from a relatively short episode in our lives. For example, if you had been bullied and harassed at school for two years leaving a lasting impact, it is possible that when you look back at your childhood at the age of 40, you perceive your childhood as being completely (100%) negative rather than only 11.11% negative (2 out of 18 years). Additionally, you may have the thought “My childhood was horrible. I was teased by everyone.” In comparison to the dominant memory of being put into the garbage bin or the deadly terror one had from being locked in a locker in the changing room of the swimming pool, other neutral or positive memories fade away. Those memories may be fairly accurate or may even be depicted in part as photographic memories, but because of the strong emotions that accompanied (or still

accompany) these experiences¹, they become too dominant. Therefore, these specific negative childhood memories are overrepresented, although they by no means reflect the entire childhood experience.

On the other hand, the fact that our memory and also our imagination are modifiable, is useful for a new psychotherapeutic technique aimed at the modification of negative memories and imaginations, which will be further explained later. To reduce possible misunderstanding, we need to emphasize the following: We don't want to twist the facts - what has happened has happened. We cannot travel back in time like in the Hollywood classics "Terminator II" or "Back to the Future" to change the course of our lives. But, we can reduce the impact of these images, which have been tormenting us. The goal is not to deny what has happened, but to teach you how deal and cope with these memories. Two horrible years of teasing remain two horrible years, but they should not come to represent your *entire* childhood in retrospect. To refer again to Magritte, we have to end "The treachery of images" (tormenting memories and images), which are preventing us from living fearlessly in the here and now.

"It's never too late for a happy childhood!"¹ This phrase nicely summarizes this point. Bring back your beautiful, positive memories, and do not let them be overshadowed by horrible memories. That does not mean you need to gloss over negative memories, but the goal is to also not perceive everything in the past with doom and gloom. We simply recommend not to solely focus on the dark side of the past as it compromises your well-being in the present and future. In order to do this, it is important to recognize negative experiences as being in the past and to actively work at reducing the power and seemingly validity of the images and imaginations.

As we said before, we have to distinguish between memory and reality. We do not want you to question memories that actually took place. At the same time, memories are frequently modified and, importantly, may contain an unrepresentative piece of the past. Such negative memories must be contained and their negative impact attenuated. Illustrating the treachery of images, these images of the past only enhance our discomfort!

Because negative memories and images can rarely be defeated with words, psychologists have increasingly come to fight fire with fire. This means, using images against images (think of something beautiful when negative images come up), or modifying memories (past) and imaginations (future), and attenuating negative attributions (presence).

Let's go! Changing the script of inner images and motifs

Now, let's get started with the techniques you should apply over the next few weeks. These techniques are supposed to help you to reduce negative memories and catastrophic ideas. We would like to explain briefly why we did not start by describing the techniques, but instead addressed issues related to memory. We discussed the difference between reality versus memory/imagination for a relatively long time because the technique is not about questioning or denying the past - it is all about reducing the power of the images triggered by a negative past event or by fear of a future event happening. It was important to demonstrate that inner

¹ Unfortunately, there are individuals who have truly had a horrible childhood. Therefore, we do not mean for this example to sound cynical or patronizing.

images are fragile and changeable. In addition, the effect of a psychotherapeutic techniques is increased if one understands its rationale and purpose. Psychological procedures do not act as passively as medications.

There are three techniques that we would like to teach you which involve:

1. Transformation of negative memories (past)
2. Transformation of frightening imaginations (future)
3. Transformation of negative attitudes and self-attributions (present)

1. Transformation of negative memories (past)

To begin with, first reflect upon which negative memories arise the most often in your mind's eye and which memories worry or plague you the most. If there are many, select the one you want to work on first before applying the technique to other inner events. It may be best to start with a negative memory, but not the worst negative memory you have. Even if it is agonizing, recall the memory and experience it consciously once more (you have done this anyway already many times, just usually not voluntarily). Try not to avoid thinking of the details of the memory or think about it only superficially. Rather, try to be as curious as possible about the image or scene, and try to perceive it in as much detail as possible. Ideally, write down a description what is going on.

Now, without entering the scene again, think about how you can change it to have a happy ending. There are several possible ways this can be accomplished:

You can change your appraisal of situations from the past by entering the scene as a present-day adult and intervening in the scene. In this way, you can help support the person (i.e., your younger self), who then was in an unpleasant, embarrassing and/or dangerous situation. Alternatively, another person or being in your imaginal exercise could intervene so that the situation has a more positive end. It is often helpful to first think of a person or figure, with whom you attribute only positive virtues, such as strength, trust and support. It can be a real person, a movie hero or a fictive person.

Once you have determined how you would like to change the course and outcome of the situation so that there is a happy ending, you should begin to write a script for it like for a movie. In psychology, this is called *imagery rescripting*. Afterwards, you should go through this new scene again and again incorporating as many details as possible, including sounds, colors, odors and voices. The livelier the new scene becomes, the more likely it is to transform the disturbing images and reduce the influence of the past on your present functioning. Try to find out which of the following suggested variants of the technique works for you best.

Exercises for negative memories

Variant 1: "Back to the future."

Your present self (the person you are today) intervenes in the scene, which you change to have a happy ending in which your younger self is protected. Examples: You chase a dog away who bit you once as a child; you steer a car back onto the road, which would have driven against a tree; you complete a presentation that you previously had to end due to crying- you tell your younger self you have done a great job and that things will also work out like this in the future.

Variant 2: Superman intervenes

Here you proceed similarly as in variant 1, but you do not enter the scene as your older self. Instead, you imagine another savior, who protects you, such as a loving companion (e.g., Superman, Batman, an avatar from a computer game, etc). You can also imagine a real person with whom you associate loving support and strength (e.g., mother, best friend). Absurd scenes can also be helpful in pushing negative past scenes aside; turning memories into a sort of cartoon can lead to a reduction in anxiety. For example, when you think of a car crash, you can imagine Harry Potter and his friends getting into the car and before the car goes into the guardrail, it gets faster and faster, and then becomes a flying vehicle like in the movie.



Variant 3: Transformation, like phoenix from the ashes

Your "victim-self" is transformed into a different person or fantasy character (e.g., a knight or elf), or develops special powers in order to change the course of things to create a good outcome.






Feel free to add as many details as possible to the scene. It is important that the starting point of the script is the old scene so that both scenes are in competition with one another. In this way, whenever old images arise, the “new edition” will come with it. A completely new scene will not be able to overcome the old images because both are kept separate in memory. To put it metaphorically, cover up and transform the old ugly tattoo by putting a new one over it – not next to it.

2. Transforming frightening memories (future)

Similar to use of the technique focused on negative memories, you can apply the exercises for feelings of “angst”, that is, worries directed at the future, particularly if you tend to become distressed over the “worst-case-scenario”. Again, you should first identify the fears that frighten you the most. If there are several situations, select the one you want to work on first. Imagine the feared situation as accurately as possible and imagine how it could play out up until the expected bad outcome. Try to imagine the image or scene and describe it in as much detail as possible. Ideally, write out the details of the scene, like a movie screenplay.

Now think about how you may change the situation so that there is a happy ending. Unlike in the exercise for negative memories, it may be easier to imagine a more positive outcome because the event has not happened yet (and for most worries, it will likely never happen), but is only a figment of your imagination. In the imagination exercise for future events, you may change the course of events yourself or imagine others assisting you, and thus experience a feeling of strength and competence. Again, there are several possibilities. For example, you will not fail as expected but solve the problem successfully, or you will not be unable to help yourself. Instead, you will be competent, so nothing bad happens. For this, you should also write a new script. This means writing down the changed sequence with as many details as possible, including a positive ending. Then, you should go through the new situation again with all the details. Imagine your worries and new ending as a movie that involves as many of your senses as possible (sound, vision, smell, etc.). The livelier the new scene becomes, the more potent it is to transforming and challenging fear-inducing images. Check which version works best for you!

Exercises for frightening images/fears in the future	
Variant 1: Face your enemy	Imagine your future self as a strong, competent, and fearless person who reacts differently in fear-inducing situations than you currently do. Perhaps you are bigger, stronger, and larger than in reality. Maybe you go directly to what scares you and behave like others who have successfully handled similar situations. For example, you can talk in front of a group and everyone listens to you, or you can go to a dog and pet him, or you see a spider in your home and can remove it yourself. Another example might be that you enter an elevator and realize that it is so fun to be able to use it that you ride it up and down several times. Again, if you drastically exaggerate the

	<p>scene, you can see if the technique will work even better.</p> 
<p>Variant 2: Superman in your ear</p>	<p>Imagine again a loving, competent and strong companion who supports you in the feared situation and helps you to master it. It is important that the supporter whispers (as if you had headphones on) helpful and competent instructions before you take any next step. Importantly, he or she should not solve the problem for you! You should follow their instructions yourself, but know that the powerful helper is close to you. This can be very effective because most anxious people know what they want to do in a frightening situation, but they simply are not able to actually do it themselves. It is often helpful when these instructions come from a competent other person.</p> 
<p>Variant 3: Transformation, like phoenix from the ashes</p>	<p>This method corresponds to the one already explained above for memory. You can use it in the exact same way for fears about future events. Your “victim”-self transforms into another person (e.g., your fearless “future” self) or into a fantasy figure (e.g. a knight, an elf, see also the example in Figure 3) or develops special powers and turns the tables on the “aggressor” (e.g. during an assault as the example in figure 4).</p> 

If you would like, you can make the scene very detailed. It's important that the old, frightening imagination is the starting point so that both scenes compete with each other. Whenever old fears intrude, the positive image will automatically start. "Rain" on your brain's "parade" of negative images.

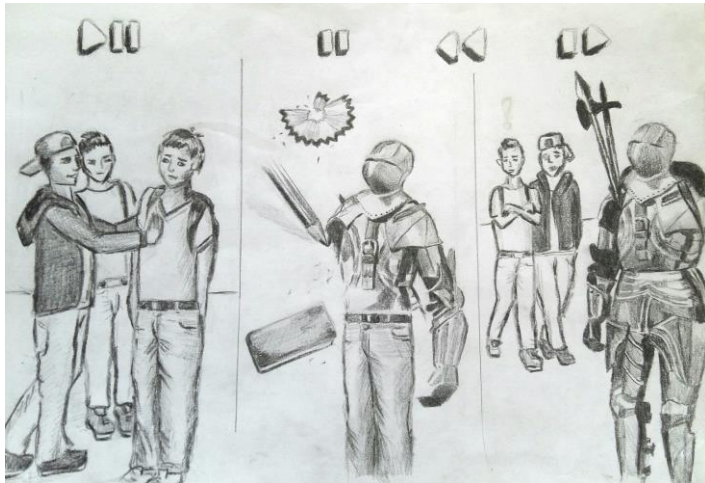


Figure 3: If you are afraid of being teased, bullied or attacked (or if this actually happened to you in the past), just imagine transforming into a well-protected knight with armor of steel or that another savior is rushing to your side to help.

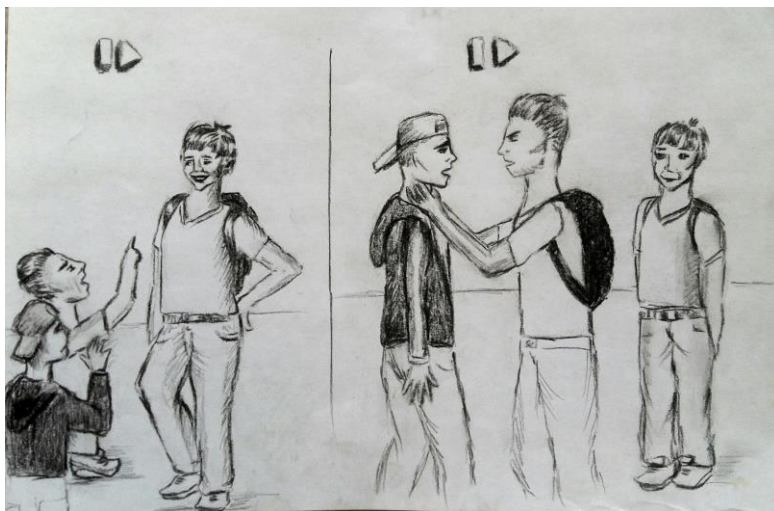


Figure 4: Other alternative happy endings could be that you imagine yourself getting larger and stronger yourself so that others are unable to harm you (example on the left). Or you imagine how you fight back and then both bullies starting fighting one another rather than going after you.

3. Changing negative attitudes and self-attributions (present)

As previously shown, strong negative memories and fears about future events usually shape our self-image. This happens in two ways: 1) directly by making us view ourselves as inferior and weaker than others, and 2) indirectly by leading us to devalue ourselves verbally. Here, a technique may help, which is similar to variant 3 of the exercises above. Choose an image, symbol or metaphor that best depicts you when you feel anxious or depressed. Take, for example, a scared rabbit that is afraid of their own shadow, or a blob fish deep down at the aquarium's bottom looking up at everyone, and condemning itself because of its ugliness. Then, transform this image before your mind's eye into something of beauty and pride (also

see figure 5 and 6) – your “ideal-self” so to speak. The images below are just examples; feel free to make up your own. Let your imagination run wild and think about strong and powerful images that fit for you. While you imagine, assume the appropriate posture. Push your shoulders away from your ears, and stretch as if someone is pulling you up with a puppet-thread at the top of your head. Make yourself bigger while you rise up like “a phoenix from the ashes”.

Here it is also important to begin with the negative scene or images and to transform them. Unfortunately, it is not possible to completely erase such images or scenes from our memories or to suppress them. You can; however, transform the scene like an ugly tattoo that is transformed into something pretty. Make sure you imagine one full transformation sequence.



Figure 5. The ugly blobfish that is despised by everyone, is transformed into a strong and fast cheetah that is admired.



Figure 6. The ugly, vulnerable chick is transformed into a proud eagle, which no one is able to harm.

Do this in an analogous way with the derogatory terms by which you refer to yourself. The tattoo is not transformed, but can be imagined as negative graffiti on a wall, which is made more positive. Play with the words! Instead of “*Loser*“, say “Lose your fear”. Build a chain of associations, which leads to a positive end that lifts your self-esteem. Another example: “I idiot” becomes “I did it and I will always be able to do it”. Sometimes nonsense words or deliberate over exaggerations or irony are particularly good because the otherwise prevailing feelings of fear and helplessness are kept in check by humor. This exercise requires your creativity and it may take some time for you to find the correct new words. Make rhymes or word strings or swap letters in one word, so that a new word is created. “I am a coward” turns into “I am a cowboy”. There is nothing wrong with silly associations if they work. Do not say „Loser-I am not a loser“, this will not help because the negative word remains and you engage in a helpless attempt to suppress an idea, which is doomed to fail (see the elephant example above). Another example would be that you can turn “You are good for nothing” into “you are good for at least something”. Paint over the graffiti, do not create a new saying next to it! Of course, you can also assure yourself you are not a loser or you can contemplate the things you did do well, but those would be other cognitive techniques.

In closing – Golden Rules

1. No mental suppression. Do not fight negative images or words, but transform them instead. Suppression of negative thoughts will simply intensify these negative thoughts in most cases.
2. Do not create a complete new scene that has nothing to do with the current one, but change the “crime scene” and create a happy end. Embellish and transform the old ugly tattoo (image/scenery) or graffiti (negative self-statement) directly. The impact of the scenes, images and statements will be most effectively decreased if they are changed directly so that interference occurs.
3. Play around with the technique. This manual is short and it is not a “recipe for success” that should be followed completely. We simply offer suggestions and guidance for your practice. You have to go down this path of transforming your thoughts, fears and memories alone; however, you can and should follow your **own** path as well. Trust yourself, but give yourself the necessary time.
Rule of thumb: If you feel better after trying one method and are not suppressing or avoiding, keep going!
4. This technique doesn't help? Try taking a break for 1-2 days. Read through the instructions again carefully. Are you possibly doing something wrong (e.g., not thinking of the scene in enough detail or fully immersing yourself in them), or have you overlooked something? There are many more psychotherapeutic techniques for negative emotions and memories. If this technique isn't something for you or you do not benefit from it, there is no reason to lose hope. Simply try out other approaches or perhaps seek out the help of a therapist who can try this technique with you.

We wish you all the best! May the power of imagination be with you!

