

***Cognitive  
Behavior  
Management  
#15***

***Changing Core Beliefs  
with  
Visualization***

*Compiled by Jerome R. Gardner  
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***The enclosed techniques and procedures were developed with materials from a workbook of cognitive behavior techniques titled "Thoughts & Feelings" and written by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. The workbook was published by New Harbinger Publications, Inc in 1997.***

## ***Technique #15      Changing Core Beliefs with Visualization***

### ***Clinical Prompt***

- Step 1.            Explain the concept
- Step 2.            Give the appropriate written or recorded  
Visualization Procedure
- Step 3.            Relax
- Step 4.            Visualize
- Step 5.            Repeat/add
- Step 5.            Talking back

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Infant Visualization Procedure                 | CBM#15-001 |
| Toddler Visualization Procedure                | CBM#15-002 |
| Pre-schooler Visualization Procedure (2 pages) | CBM#15-003 |
| School-Age Child Visualization Procedure       | CBM#15-004 |
| Adolescent Visualization Procedure (2 pages)   | CBM#15-005 |
| Young Adult Visualization Procedure            | CBM#15-006 |

## ***Technique #15      Changing Core Beliefs with Visualization***

### ***Introduction***

After working through technique, 'Perceiving Automatic Thoughts', the child has probably identified the way distressing thoughts reflect deeply held core beliefs. Core beliefs have their roots in childhood. You can probably remember thinking the way you do since you were four or seven or twelve years old. This technique teaches powerful procedures for changing those core beliefs by visualizing the inner child. It is taken in large part from the book, *Prisoners of Belief* (1991).

Psychologically speaking, it is not true that you can't change the past. Although you can't alter what happened to you or what the you did, you can use visualization to restructure memories so that they cause less pain and interfere less in present life.

### ***Symptom Effectiveness***

Inner-child visualizations can alter negative core beliefs, reduce depression, raise low self appraisal, and relieve pervasive feelings of shame and guilt. However, while there are abundant case reports of effectiveness, no major study has been undertaken to date on the effectiveness of inner-child visualizations.

### ***Time for Mastery***

For maximum effectiveness, have the client practice visualization exercises two or three times a day for ten to twenty minutes a day. If s/he concentrates on one age level a day, it will take him/her about a week to tape-record guided imagery tailored to

his/her core beliefs and memories. The client will start to experience a shift in awareness from the very start. Significant results will take several weeks, as s/he listens to his/her tapes, refine their imagery, and explore different core beliefs.

## **Instructions**

This technique may not be applicable to the child you are working with, and any use should be directed by the Clinical Supervisor. The technique works because the unconscious mind doesn't believe in time. To the unconscious mind, things that happened when you were six months old can be just as important and immediate as things that happened yesterday. If this technique is to be used with a child, it will be important that s/he understand the context of the visualization.

## **Explanation**

Deep inside, your entire infant personality survives in every detail. This inner infant has no knowledge of any older versions of you. It remains an infant, with an infant's needs, abilities, and understanding of the world.

Likewise, you have a two-year-old toddler inside of you, with a two-year-old's self-centered and contrary feelings. There are countless versions of you, of all ages from birth to your present age.

The inner child is more than an interesting metaphor. It explains why people act "childishly" or "immaturely" Some stressful event reminds them of a childhood trauma and awakens a younger version of themselves. They react as if they were still two or five or ten years old.

Painful feelings that you experienced as a child can return to haunt you in the form of negative thoughts about yourself. Unmet needs

from early times may still drive you to this day.

In the past few years, techniques have been developed for "reparenting" your inner child in order to resolve old painful feelings and meet old needs symbolically. This work is often done in twelve-step recovery programs by adult children of alcoholics or by victims of childhood sexual or physical abuse. These powerful techniques also work very well for those who struggle with longstanding negative core beliefs about themselves and the world.

When you visualize your inner child, you imagine that you, a wise, experienced adult, are visiting yourself as a child during a particularly hard time - a specific scene that you have already identified as contributing to one of your negative beliefs about yourself. You impart to your younger self the wisdom you have acquired and the skills you've developed to deal with hard times. Specifically, you counter the negative belief that is being formed in that early-childhood scene with a more positive, more accurate belief. You actually become, in your imagination, the perfect parent and friend that you needed at the time but may not have had.

Your unconscious mind doesn't believe in reality any more than it believes in time. That is, it doesn't distinguish between actual experience and dreams or fantasies. The good advice and support that you give your inner child in your imagination, years after the fact, can be processed and stored and used by your unconscious just as if you had received it at the time of the trauma in question. The fact that you have two contradictory versions of the same memory doesn't bother your unconscious because it doesn't insist that things make the kind of logical sense that your conscious mind requires.

## **Visualization Procedure**

Different core beliefs are formed at different times. The procedures are divided into developmental stages recommended by John Bradshaw (1990). But no two people's experiences are

identical, and this child's experience may not match the stages presented here. If you find this to be the case, simply have the child adjust the visualization to match the ages that correspond to his/her early traumas.

It might work best to provide the child with a tape of the visualization instructions, altering them to fit his/her history and distressing thoughts. Make sure that the you speak slowly and clearly, with frequent pauses.

These visualization exercises can be a very powerful emotional experience. If the child begins to feel overwhelmed by feelings at any time during the exercise, you should tell him/her to open his/her eyes and stop at once. Don't let the child continue until you have talked it over. If the child has a history of serious psychological problems, and especially if physically, sexually, or emotionally abused, you should consult with the clinical supervisor before doing inner-child work.

Don't try to do the entire visualization in one session. Have the client cover one age level at a time, then take a break or wait until the next day to go on. The ***Visualization Procedures*** [See ***CBM#15-001*** to ***CBM#15-006***] are presented as you will present them to the child.

## **Talking Back**

If the child's trauma includes parents or other caretakers who s/he perceive as having abused or neglected him/her, you can help the child talk back to them as part of his/her inner-child visualizations. This is a visualized version of a two-chair role-playing exercise developed by Jeffrey Young (1990).

The child can talk back in two ways. First, s/he can visualize

him/herself as a younger child, talking back to adults who mistreated him/her:

You're not treating me right.  
You have no right to do this.  
This is your problem, not mine.  
It's not my fault.  
You're asking too much from me.

The second way to talk back is to have the child visualize his/her adult self stepping into a scene to address the abuser or neglecter:

You're mistreating your child.  
This is wrong.  
It's your fault, not the child's.  
Back off.

S/he can create an alternative scenario in which the adult self rescues the inner child from the scene, stops the abuse, hits or chases the abuser away, or in some other way intervenes directly in the situation. The Mentor will need to take specific precautions that this visualization is about an incident and a person or persons who are far enough away from the present that future interaction does not create additional difficulties.

## **Special Considerations**

### *Visualization Difficulties*

If your client has difficulty visualizing, have him/her try the following simple exercise:

Close your eyes and recall something (your bedroom, a pleasant

recent or childhood experience, or what you had for breakfast this morning) in as much detail as possible. Pay attention to shapes, colors, and lighting as well as smells, tastes, textures, temperature, sounds, physical sensations, and feelings. If you can't 'feel' these sense impressions in your mind, just describe them verbally to yourself. By practicing the mental description of something very familiar to you, you will gradually improve your powers of imagery.

If the client has trouble creating strong visual images, s/he probably has a well-developed memory which favors another sense, such as smell, touch, or hearing. If this is true for your client, have him/her recall an experience by tuning into whatever sense is easiest. Impressions of the other senses will gradually arise if s/he keeps practicing with the favored sense.

### Age & Development

It should be obvious through review of the visualization technique, that not all parts will be applicable to all children. If you are using the technique with the child, you should view it from the perspective of training an appropriate adult. The transactional analysis concept that all people over the age of four have a 'child', a 'parent' and an 'adult' perspective gives the context for this viewpoint. In the visualization as used with an older person, all three perspectives may be included. For the young child, however, the parent and adult roles are probably not well formed. You may need to help the child model an appropriate parent and/or adult role.

Since this is a special use of the technique, it should only be done in close contact with the Clinical Supervisor.

## **Infant Visualization**

Lie down on your back with your legs and arms uncrossed. Close your eyes and relax, using your favorite relaxation method.

Imagine that within you is a parklike landscape, with paths, woods, meadows, buildings, streams, and fountains. Within this park you can find all the times of life, all the selves that you have been at all ages and in all places. This inner world contains all that has ever happened to you and all that you have ever thought or dreamed about.

Imagine walking down a path in this park. This path cuts through time. You can visit any time of the past just by strolling along this path. As you saunter along, notice a structure off in the distance. When you approach, you will realize that it is the house, apartment, or trailer that you lived in when you were born. If you have never actually seen the home of your birth, just make it up to look any way that seems right.

Visualize entering the home and go to the room where you slept as an infant. If you don't know what it really looked like, that's OK. Go into the room and find a crib or bed. Go to it and see a sleeping baby. This is you as an infant. Study the tiny fingers, the little mouth, and the wispy baby hair. Notice the color and texture of the blanket. What kind of diaper or sleeper does the baby have on? The more details s/he adds, the more real this moment will become for him/her.

Imagine that the baby wakes up and starts crying. See your mother, father, or whoever took care of you coming into the room. They can't see the adult you - you're invisible. Watch your mother or other caretaker coping with your needs - being cross and angry, being rough or not cuddling your infant self, trying to feed you when you really need to be changed, trying to change you when you just want company, and so on. See and hear your infant self fretting and fussing.

Now have your caretaker leave the room. Your infant self starts crying again. This time, pick your infant self up. Cuddle and hug your infant self. Offer some milk from a bottle. Talk to your infant self as the crying stops and is replaced by calm and contentment. Say to your infant self:

Welcome to the world.  
I'm glad you're here.

I'm glad you are a girl (or boy)  
You're special and unique.  
I love you.  
I'll never leave you.  
You're doing the best you can to survive.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Your own alternative thoughts)

Next, change point of view and experience the whole bedroom scene again, this time imagining that you are your infant self. Imagine you are sleeping, you wake up crying, your caretaker comes in and fails to help; then feel more calm as your adult self comforts you.

Take just as much time and lavish an equal amount of detail on this second scene. When you are finished and you're ready, open your eyes and take a break. This is a good visualization to do when you are feeling overwhelmed, helpless, or insecure.

CBM#15-001

## Toddler Visualization

Find yourself once again on the path that leads to your inner child. This time, spend a few moments fixing details in your mind: the smells, sights, sounds, and tactile feelings of your inner world. Notice what kind of trees there are and what kind of soil is underfoot.

Now you are going to visualize one of the earliest scenes you can remember. Pick a time when you were one to three years old. If you have no memories from that time, you can make up a scene from stories family members have told you or from snapshots you may have. Imagine a time when you were unhappy, when something happened that hurt you.

See yourself in that situation. How are you dressed? What color is your hair? How long is it? Notice the expression on the face of your inner toddler child.

Watch the painful scene begin - when you broke something, when someone abandoned or lost you, when something was taken away, when you were spanked or scolded. See how upset your inner child becomes, noticing all the details.

When the scene is over, take your toddler self aside, into another room or some other safe place. Introduce yourself and comfort your inner child:

I am you. I'm from the future, when you're all grown up.  
I've come to help you, to be with you whenever you need me.  
I love you.  
There's never been another kid like you.  
I like you just the way you are.  
I'll never leave you.  
You're acting normally for a child your age.  
It's not your fault, You have no choice in the matter.  
It's perfectly all right to explore.  
I'll protect you while you learn about the world.  
You have a right to say no.  
It's OK to be angry or scared or sad.  
\_\_\_\_\_ (Your own alternative thoughts)

Hug your younger self and say goodbye. Promise to return whenever needed. Turn and leave the room.

Now switch your point of view. Relive the scene, pretending to be yourself at age two or three. Include all the actions, sights, sounds, and smells. Listen to your older, wiser self and be comforted.

End the session when you are ready and take a break. This is a good visualization to do whenever you are feeling confused, abandoned, put down, or shamed.

## Preschooler Visualization

Get relaxed in a quiet place and once again sink into your inner world. Explore the path back through time until you come to your home, the place you lived when you were four, five, or six, before *you* entered the first grade.

Pick a time when you were frightened and unhappy - the fight with your cousin, the scary time daddy came home drunk, the time your mom just lost it and got hysterical, the time you got lost at the county fair, the time the bully at day care threatened or attacked you.

See your preschool self in that scene. Watch without being seen. How tall are you? Skinny or plump? What are you wearing? Are there any favorite toys around? What color are your eyes? How is your skin tone? Are you fresh and rosy from a bath or hot and dusty from playing outdoors?

As the traumatic scene unfolds, notice how scared or confused your preschool self is. Notice how your inner child tries to understand and make things right, even though the skills and knowledge aren't yet available.

When the painful scene is over, take your inner child to a safe place and sit down together. Tell your younger self that you are visiting from the future, that you can be the kind, attentive parent that is missing, and that your younger self can count on you. Put your arm around your inner child and say:

I love you.  
I'm glad you're a boy (or a girl).  
You're the only one like you in the world, and I like you just the way you are.  
You're doing your very best.  
You just don't have much power to change what's going on.  
It's not your fault.  
I'll help you figure out how to protect yourself.  
It's OK to cry.  
You're good at thinking for yourself.  
You're good at imagining things.  
I'll help you separate what's real from what's imaginary.  
You can ask for what you want.

It's OK to ask me any questions.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Your own alternative thoughts)

Try to sense how your inner child is interpreting the event that just happened. What does the child believe is going on? What does it mean to the child about his or her worth, lovability, safety, belonging, and so on? The child is confused and trying to make sense of things. Offer an explanation to your inner child that leaves him or her innocent and blameless for what happened. If there is a positive way to interpret the child's behavior, offer that now. Hug your inner child; say you will see him or her again soon, and leave.

Now change your point of view and relive the painful scene as if you were four, five, or six years old. Really experience the shame, the anger, the confusion, or the fear. Without experiencing the feeling you won't get the full benefit of the visualization. Listen carefully to your older self and know that you were not to blame; you were doing your best.

This next part is a new step that you haven't done before. Relive the painful scene once again from your child's point of view. This time, experience it as if you know your future self and already understand the positive messages your future self has given. You will know this time what you didn't know before: that it's all going to turn out OK; that you will survive; that it's not your fault, and so on.

This time, feel less pain in the scene. If it feels right, you can change the memory and react differently than you did in real life. For example, if you were lost at the fair, instead of sitting down and crying, you might find an adult and ask for help. Or if you were scared and alone in your room listening to your parents fight, you might imagine yourself singing songs to drown out their words.

Whatever you do, don't blame yourself for not reacting differently at the time. You really were doing the best you could. Also, don't change the actions of others in your scene. Even in imagination it's important to remember that you can't change other people's behavior, only your own.

When you are ready, end the scene and take a break. You can repeat this visualization several times, covering all the difficult memories you have from this time in your life. This is also a good exercise to do

whenever you are feeling dependent, ashamed, or guilty.

CBM#15-0003

## School-Age Child Visualization

This visualization follows the same pattern as the previous one. Get relaxed and imagine a scene from ages seven through ten: the time when you were humiliated in front of the whole second grade, the time your father didn't show up for the soccer championship, the time you were made to feel stupid or clumsy or inadequate. Relive the painful memory, first from the point of view of your future self.

At the end of the scene, take your school-age self aside. Tell yourself the following statements in your own words. Add any alternative thought statements that you have found particularly useful.

The way you are at school is OK.  
I'll stand up for you.  
It's fine to try out new ideas and ways of doing things.  
You can make your own decisions.  
It's OK to disagree.  
You can trust your feelings.  
It's OK to be afraid.  
We can talk about anything.  
You can choose your own friends.  
How you dress is your business.  
You're acting normally for your age.  
You have no real choice in this matter - there's nothing else you could do.  
You are doing the best you can to survive.  
\_\_\_\_\_ (Your own alternative thoughts)

As you did during the last visit, try to sense how your inner child is interpreting the event. Understand what it means to your child in terms of his or her lovability; control, safety, and so on. Again, offer an explanation that leaves your inner child innocent and blameless for the event. And if there is a positive way to interpret the child's behavior, offer that now.

Repeat the scene two more times, first from the point of view of your school-age self, feeling all the old painful feelings but having the help and support of your future self at the end of the scene. Finally, relive the scene as your school-age self but with your future skills and knowledge. The last time through, you can change how you reacted in the scene if

you wish.

Congratulate yourself for bringing your inner child to life - for renewing yourself. End the exercise as you have done before and take a break. Repeat this visualization for all the school-age memories that you have identified as contributing to your present negative beliefs and distressing thoughts. This is a good exercise to use whenever you are feeling discouraged about your own competence.

CBT#15-0004

## Adolescent Visualization

This visualization follows the previous one, step for step. This time, have the client get relaxed, enter the past, and visit a painful event from his/her adolescence - roughly ages eleven through fifteen. For most people, this is an era with plenty of turmoil - rebellion against parents, conflicts at school, intense and stormy peer relationships, new and powerful sexual feelings and related painful events to choose from.

First observe, from your adult point of view, the memory you have chosen. Then take your adolescent self into a safe place and relate the following statements in your own words. Afterwards, share your adult, reasonable beliefs with your adolescent inner child.

You can find the right person to love.  
You can find something meaningful to do in life.  
It's OK to disagree with your parents.  
You are becoming an independent person.  
You can safely experiment with sex.  
It's OK to feel confused and lonely.  
You have lots of new and exciting ideas about life.  
It's OK to be wrapped up in yourself now.  
It's normal to be ambivalent.  
It's all right to feel embarrassed and awkward.  
It's fine to masturbate  
No matter how far out you go, I'll be here for you.  
You're acting normally for your age.  
Often you have no real choice in the matter.  
You're doing the best you can to survive.  
\_\_\_\_\_ (Your own alternative thoughts)

Again, offer an explanation that leaves the child blameless for the events. Look for a positive way to interpret the adolescent's behavior.

As before, relive the scene from your adolescent point of view twice: once to feel the original pain with your future self there; and once as an adolescent with your future skills and knowledge, perhaps changing your behavior from what actually happened.

Take a break when you are done. You can repeat this exercise to heal all

the painful memories you have earmarked from your adolescent years. You can return to your adolescent inner child any time, especially if you are feeling confused about sex or in conflict with authority.

### **Talking Back**

If your childhood trauma includes parents or other caretakers who you perceive as having abused or neglected you, you can talk back to them as part of your inner-child visualizations. This is a visualized version of a two-chair role-playing procedure developed by Jeffrey Young (1990).

The client can talk back in two ways. First, s/he can visualize him/herself as a child, talking back to adults who mistreated him/her:

You're not treating me right.  
You have no right to do this.  
This is your problem, not mine.  
It's not my fault.  
You're asking too much from me.

The second way to talk back is to visualize the adult self stepping into a scene to address the abuser or neglecter:

You're mistreating your child.  
This is wrong.  
It's your fault, not the child's.  
Back off.

You can have the client create an alternative scenario in which the adult self rescues the inner child from the scene, stops the abuse, hits or chases the abuser away, or in some other way intervenes directly in the situation.

CBT#15-005

## Young-Adult Visualization

Following the same steps as in the last exercise, visit a painful scene from your young adulthood. After viewing the scene, confer with your young-adult self and convey the following:

You will learn how to love and be loved.

I know you will make a difference in the world.

You can be a success on your own terms.

You're acting normally for your age.

You're doing the best you can to survive.

Often you have no choice in the matter.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Your own alternative thoughts)

Again, offer an explanation for the events that takes a compassionate view of your young-adult self. Look for a positive way to interpret your young-adult behavior.

Then experience the hard time from your young-adult point of view, with all the frustrations and pain you can remember, but with your future self there to help. Finish by reliving the scene again as your young-adult self, but with your future skills and knowledge. Let yourself act differently if you wish.

Come back to the present knowing that you can handle adult life on your own terms. Revisit scenes from your young-adult life until you have healed all the memories that have contributed to your current hot thoughts. This is a good visualization to repeat any time you have those familiar feelings of confusion over work, money, or love.