

Imagery dealing with loss and grief

(Modified from Contextual Schema therapy (Roediger et al., 2018, New Harbingers)

Mary lost her daughter Sally who committed suicide. Ask Mary to close her eyes, sit with her side by side and put an empty chair in front of you for Sally. It helps dimming the light a bit.

Therapist: *Can you see Sally clearly? What is she wearing? She's sitting right in front of you. You can see and talk to her. How does she look? What can you see in her eyes? How do you feel? What do you want to say to her?*

Client connecting with her pain.....

Therapist: *Of course you felt abandoned when she decided to kill herself instead of trying to get in touch with you. Tell her how you feel. It's normal that you feel guilty. How did you feel then and how do you feel now? You are disappointed, and there are some kind of angry feelings, too. You can now convey those feelings to Sally. She can take it. She's on the other side!*

Give clients a few minutes to remove themselves from their cognitive state and get in touch with their emotions. Once they expressed the full range of their emotions, asked them to take "Sally's" position in the other chair. Move your chair beside "Sally's" chair in order to support her.

Therapist: *Hello, Sally. Thank you for coming here. You heard all that your mother said. How does that make you feel? What do you want to say to her from the place you're in now? What do you want her to do?*

Then Mary, sitting on Sally's chair, answers toward the empty chair that she had been sitting on. The outcome of this exercise naturally depends on the assumed reaction of the other person. Surprisingly, your client's reaction may be mild and not resentful. Assumingly based on our inborn need for attachment and harmony with other people. When the response comes to a natural end, ask your client to return to her original chair. Give her a moment to

arrive back. Usually, your client will accept messages from the other person. This may give some relief and peace.

Therapist: How does it make you feel, hearing these messages from Sally? Do you believe her? Does this change anything? Now that you've been in touch with Sally and you know that she's well and safe, is there something more you want to convey to her? You mentioned in an earlier session that you feel guilty about all the mistakes you made. Now we have the chance to tell this to Sally. Go ahead! How does Sally react? And you told me that you felt kicked out when she left without a word. Tell this to her face now. She can now face your feelings from her side!

Encouraging such underlying, and sometimes not socially acceptable, feelings requires some sensitivity from the therapist. Usually, we take the lead when the client becomes stuck. Sometimes it is safer to take a Socratic stance by asking more or less open questions. You can softly bring in your own feelings by saying something like "Sitting beside you now, I feel some disappointment that Sally didn't give you the chance to talk to her before she decided to leave." The word "disappointment" is helpful for getting in touch with the Angry Child mode because it combines sadness with some anger. Once you have reached a deeper and more complex (or honest) level of emotional activation, ask the client to move to the daughter's chair once more. Again, you change sides as well and sit beside the client.

Therapist: Sally, you heard what your mother said. I'm happy that she opened up to you even more. How does this make you feel? Do you understand her? What do you want to say to her? Knowing this, what's your message to her now? Can you forgive her?

These last questions are intended to break the chain of mutual disappointment and fatal enmeshment. We cannot change history, but when the underlying feelings have not been expressed they continue blocking and undermining everyday life. This is the toxic effect of the "forbidden" and thus unspoken messages. Once we set the stage by creating an

interpersonal encounter in imagery, we then encourage our client to speak out the blocked feelings. Only then can reconnection and social healing happen.

Therapist: You heard that Sally understands your feelings and can forgive you. What do you see in her eyes now? How does this make you feel? Can you accept what you did in the past? What do you want to say to her now? Can you forgive her, too? Do you want to follow her advice for you? Is there something else to say before we let Sally go?

Do not avoid using powerful words such as “forgiving.” They carry emotional weight. It is now time to bring your client back to the present by asking her to return to her accustomed chair. The effect of this exercise is often surprising. Repeating it a few times in sessions deepens the experience and makes it lasting. If you have an emotional connection with a client who is an offender, this exercise can also help them reconcile guilt. This makes imagery work even more valuable, because recovery from human-related trauma is more difficult than recovery after fatal events, such as accidents or natural disasters. You can put God or fate on the other chair, if you need to work through catastrophic events in nature in which loved ones were hurt or killed.