Guided Imagery in Couple and Family Therapy

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Synonyms
Mental imagery; Mental representation; Visualization

Introduction

Guided imagery is a cognitive behavioral technique in which the therapist guides a client through a series of positive images or positive outcomes. This process, sometimes known as positive suggestion, involves the therapist directing the client to imagine a positive outcome of some type, usually relating to mental or physical health (Sherman and Fredman 1986, p. 58). This technique serves a number of different uses in therapy. Numerous studies provide evidence of guided imagery’s effectiveness for such issues as coping with stress, reframing painful memories, opening up emotionally, discovering one’s values, connecting spiritually, finding comfort in one’s interpersonal relationships, and increasing the quality of those relationships (Kayser et al. 2010; Wadsworth et al. 2011; Roland 2002; Scuka 2012; Wheeler 1982; Leedes 1999; Sell et al. 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Guided Imagery originates from a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) theoretical orientation. Guided imagery is a specific coping skill taught within CBT to alleviate stress and increase relaxation. The technique of guided imagery is not a new approach and has been used by Native Americans and other indigenous traditions for centuries (Utay and Miller 2006). In modern day therapy, guided imagery is most commonly known as a CBT coping skills strategy taught to clients in order to reduce stress and increase coping skills.

Rationale for the Strategy or Intervention

There are three main reasons for using guided imagery in psychotherapy: reduction of stress (increased coping), mental rehearsal of skills, visualizing positive outcomes, and a problem-solving strategy. The most well-researched use of guided imagery is the use of guided imagery as a coping strategy for chronic pain and diseases (e.g., heart failure, cancer, etc.; Gruzelier 2002; Roffe et al. 2005). Within the couples and family therapy field, Guided imagery is a relatively
underutilized therapeutic technique. The rationale for using GI within couples’ therapy is to disrupt negative escalation cycles or reduce emotion dysregulation in both partners (Piercy and Tubbs 1996; Scuka 2012).

Description of Strategy or Intervention

The technique of guided imagery within individual psychotherapy begins with the therapist inducing a state of relaxation through any number of techniques such as: hypnosis, meditation, concentration on breathing, imagination of a relaxing scene, or the imagination of each muscle relaxing from head to toe (Sherman and Fredman 1986, p. 59). After the client is in a relaxed state, the therapist guides the client through an imagined scene. Typically, the therapist uses one of two methods for the guided imagery: positive guided imagery (i.e., imagine yourself on a beach, feel the sand beneath your feet, etc.) or guided positive image to solve a specific problem. In couples therapy, the couple is asked to participate in guided imagery in the same manner as described above (i.e., both are given the same instructions by the therapist).

Case Example

A case study highlights the use of guided imagery in couples’ therapy. In this example, a couple is in therapy due to conflict around boundaries between the couple and the wife’s mother (e.g., the wife’s mother becomes involved in the couple’s conflicts). The therapist’s goal is to target the couple’s problem-solving difficulty around this specific problem. The therapist starts the guided imagery intervention by asking that the couple both close their eyes and notice their breathing for a few minutes. The therapist instructs the couple to breathe in and breathe out, and to let any thoughts that pop into their head pass by like clouds in the sky. After a few minutes of this relaxation technique, the therapist directs the couple, with their eyes still closed, to imagine a room where wife’s mother and father are waiting for them. The couple takes turns describing aloud what they see, each adding onto the other’s image. The therapist then prompts the couple to discuss a plan for how to communicate about their problem with the wife’s parents. The therapist then directs the couple to enter back into the room where wife’s parents wait. The therapist then asks the couple to take turns describing their reactions to the situation. The exercise continues until each member of the couple is capable of describing an effective strategy for the problematic situation. After the guided imagery exercise, the therapist directs the couple to each open their eyes, and they spend the rest of the session discussing the exercise.

References

