Doing ACT With Folks Who Find Visualisation Difficult Or Impossible

At least 10% of the population struggle with visualisation, the deliberate creation of mental images, (I'm in that 10% myself) and about 1-2% experience 'aphantasia' (no ability to visualise).

When clients have difficulties with visualisation or imagery... It's not a problem at all. How so? Well, here's a page from ACT Made Simple, 2nd edition, which gives **a summary of common defusion techniques.** A quick scan will show you that the majority of defusion techniques do not involve visualisation.

The best known defusion technique that DOES require visualisation is 'leaves on a stream' (or variants, such as 'clouds in the sky', 'trains pulling in and out of the station'). So here's an audio recording of a simple non-visual alternative to such exercises; instead of 'watching' your thoughts, you 'listen in' to them – and notice their auditory properties: volume, pitch, timbre, speed, pacing, pauses, tone, emotionality etc, as if listening to a voice on a radio: **Hearing Your Thoughts.**



Other visual defusion techniques involve imagining your thoughts on a screen and playing around with font, colour, formatting etc. These techniques aren't essential – they're just one method amongst many. But if you want to use them, you can; instead of imagining a screen, use a real one. Use a laptop or iPad or PC, open up a PowerPoint presentation, and type in the words; then play with them, altering fonts, colours, adding images, animating the text, etc. Many apps allow you to do similar things with text on your smart phone – e.g. numerous doodle and draw apps.

And last but not least, here are the **'Big Three' methods for use with the trickiest, stickiest fusion** - again, no visualisation needed.

Be Clear In Your Instructions When Asking People To 'Imagine'

When asking people to imagine, or to do any sort of imagery, be explicit in your instructions; say something like: 'People imagine in different ways. Some people "see" clear pictures in their head, a bit like watching TV. Others get very vague pictures - poorly defined, hard to see clearly - with little or no detail or colour. And others don't see any pictures at all; they just get an idea or sense of it, or they just think about it, or feel it. So however you imagine it is just fine. There's no need to see pictures.'

What About Acceptance Techniques?

Again, if people struggle to visualise, it's just not a problem. Here's a summary of common acceptance techniques (also from ACT Made Simple, 2nd edition), and again, a quick scan reveals the majority do not involve visualisation.

Again, if people struggle to visualise, it's just not a problem. Here's a **summary of common acceptance techniques** (also from ACT Made Simple, 2nd edition), and again, a quick scan reveals the majority do not involve visualisation. The best known acceptance technique that typically includes visualisation is 'physicalising' – where you imagine a feeling/sensation as if it were a physical object. Again, this isn't an essential exercise, but if you want to use it, you can simply drop the purely visual elements – the colour of it, whether it's transparent or opaque etc – and focus on the non-visual sensory elements: where it's located in your body, its temperature (and hot-spots and cold-spots), any sense of pressure, weight, pulsation, movement, vibration. You don't need to 'see ' it or 'picture' it; you can just 'feel it', 'sense it'. To get a sense of shape and size, instead of trying to visualise it, you can tune in to where you feel it most in your body, and take a finger, and trace the outline of it against your skin.

What About 'Kind Hands' Exercises?

No visualisation is necessary for kind hands exercises. You simply place your hand gently over your heart or a painful feeling and you 'get a sense of' or 'feel' the warmth and kindness flowing in. You don't have to 'see it' or 'picture it' or 'visualise it'.



What About ‘Inner Child’ Imagery?

Various forms of **‘inner child imagery and rescripting’** are often used in ACT – most commonly for developing self-acceptance and self-compassion, but also for defusion, acceptance, and exposure. So, with inner child imagery, we need to clear with our imagery instructions, as outlined on page 1. Basically, clients can just think about it, get a sense of it - they don’t have to ‘see it’.

Or they can write it out as a story or a script.

Or you can do it with chair work - they hop into one chair and take the role of the child, and then into another chair, and take the role of the adult today, and they talk back and forth, jumping between chairs to stay ‘in role’.

Or they can write a kind letter to their inner child, or buy (or draw) a card for them and write kind things inside it.

Or they can just pretend the young child is sitting across the room (again no need to actually ‘see’ the child) and speak aloud to it.

Also remember, no tool or technique is essential. There are many other ways to get to self-compassion.