



Imago

**COURSE 200:
BASIC CLINICAL TRAINING
IN IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY**

Training Manual
Module 1-B: Days 3 & 4
FACT B
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A new way to love

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MODULE 1-B COURSE OUTLINE	
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FROM ORIGINAL WHOLENESS TO THE ADAPTED SELF AND THE IMAGO

Imago Relationship Therapy looks at two journeys that connect experiences of relationship in childhood with experiences in adult love relationships.

We call the first journey the **Psychological Journey**. It relates to the psychological impulses of each developmental stage, our experiences of how our parents respond to these impulses, how we cope when the impulses are not supported and the impact of all this on our intimate relationships in adulthood.

The second journey is the **Journey of Socialization**, whereby our parents and other agents of socialization try to shape us to be acceptable to our societal context. This can lead to our energy being blocked in some functioning areas, and the loss of full functioning capacity in those areas.

The result of these two journeys is that we lose connection with our original wholeness and live limited by the adaptations we made to our less-than-perfect nurturing and socialization. We have encoded all these experiences into an internal Imago, which influences our adult love relationships.

ORIGINAL WHOLENESS

At the moment of conception we come into being with the potential to grow into our own fullness, whatever that may be, just as the acorn has the potential to become an oak tree. We also come with genetic predispositions towards developing in certain ways, given activation of those predispositions from outside. If the pregnancy was smooth, we are born with that wholeness relatively intact. We come into the world with our capacity for full aliveness present in each breath, with our energy pulsating in a balanced way. We come into the world connected and empathically attuned to others and aware of ourselves.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY

What are the survival impulses that emerge at each developmental stage and what kind of nurturing is required from parents to adequately support the impulse?
Why might we share this information with clients?
How might you share this information with your clientele?

Imago Relationship Therapy uses a developmental model that postulates that at each developmental stage of childhood and adolescence an impulse related to survival emerges in each of us. These impulses – to attach, explore, develop a sense of self and a sense of competence in the world, to care for others, and to be sexually and emotionally intimate – emerge independently of external circumstances. However, the external circumstances, specifically the interpersonal environment, impact the development of the neuronal structures of the brain as these impulses are manifested. According to neuro-psychologist, Daniel Siegal, certain types of interpersonal experiences at critical times are essential in activating certain genes and the development of certain neuronal interconnections. The healthy development of the brain is dependent on ‘good’ parenting.

Parents generally do their best but most of us, as parents, have our own limitations, which prevent us from responding to our children’s developmental impulses optimally at each stage. The impulses give rise to needs for certain types of experiences with our caregivers, e.g. the impulse to bond is linked with the need for our parents to be consistently available and attuned. When these needs are not met adequately, as children we experience emotional pain and inner tension and we develop defensive adaptations to cope, survive and diminish the pain. When used repeatedly over time, these adaptations or defences become our way of being in the world and we identify ourselves with them.

A brief summary of the first four stages of Hendrix’s developmental model follows. See also *Giving the Love that Heals* and Chapters 4-7 of *Keeping the Love You Find*.

This schema is an attempt to represent in a simplified way one aspect of the complexity of human growth. The stages are neither discrete nor linear, they overlap and we can cycle back into earlier stages. The stages tend to repeat in general sequence over the course of our lives.

The purpose of having an awareness of the developmental journey of the individual across childhood is not to blame parents but to

- deepen our compassionate understanding of our own and our clients’ wounding
- help clients develop a non-blaming, non-shaming way of understanding themselves, their partners, and even their parents
- help clients have an understanding of the unfulfilled childhood needs that they are bringing into their relationships for healing, so that therapists and partners can facilitate the mutual meeting of these needs and deal with issues of self-hatred associated with the unmet needs
- provide therapists with a framework for understanding, without judgment, the dynamics between partners and the ‘perfection’ of the ‘fit’.

THE SURVIVAL IMPULSES AND ASSOCIATED NURTURANCE NEEDS

The child develops in stages, impelled by impulses to connect for survival, linked to physical and intellectual development.

The role of the parents is to support the developmental impulses appropriately as they arise.

The first four stages of childhood have to do with the development of self and impact on the child’s ability to relate in intimate loving ways.

The role of the parents in the first four stages is to nurture the development of self.

The remaining stages focus on learning how to be relational with others.

The role of the parents in the latter stages is to socialize the self of the child in relation to others.

When parents are able to successfully nurture and support these impulses the child develops into an adult who is responsible for the self and to others.

Many parents are unable to adequately provide their children with the environment of physical and emotional safety needed to fully accomplish these tasks.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPULSES

Attachment Stage (0-15 months)

The developmental impulse is to bond and remain connected to the caretaker, primarily through the function of the senses.

The impulse is nurtured when the caretaker(s) is reliably available, warm on contact and empathically attuned to the infant's needs.

The message the child receives is 'It's okay to be', the world is safe, needs will be met.

The healthy outcome for the child is emotional security and coherence, a capacity to adapt flexibly to changing environmental demands.

Exploration Stage (15 months to 3 years)

The developmental impulse is to explore the world, which requires separating and reconnecting with the parent(s).

This impulse is nurtured when the parent supports the child in venturing out, while setting reasonable limits, and is reliably available and warm on their return.

The message the child receives is 'It's okay to explore, to separate and return'.

The healthy outcome is that the child experiences a budding sense of separateness and safety within the context of connection, and retains a sense of curiosity.

Identity Stage (3-4 years)

The developmental impulse is to express the many facets of the self evolving through internalizing the caretaker(s) and experimenting with a variety of character and affective identifications.

This impulse is nurtured when the parent(s) mirror the transient identifications and self expressions.

The message the child receives is 'It's okay to be you'.

The healthy outcome is that the child develops a secure and integrated sense of self.

Competence Stage (4 to 7 years)

The developmental impulse is to become competent, powerful and effective in the mastery of tasks.

The impulse is supported when parents set appropriate tasks and offer appropriate instruction and praise for achievements.

The message the child receives is 'Go for it, you can do it and I'm here to help if needed'.

The healthy outcome is that the child develops a sense of personal power, effectiveness and competence.

HOW TO USE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY WITH COUPLES

Imago therapy is based on a premise that couples who are attracted to each other are wounded at the same stage of development and to about the same degree. It is also based on the premise that we need to get from an Imago partner what we were not able to get from our parents, in order to heal, to complete the unfinished business from childhood, restart the developmental engine and grow into our fullest potential.

A therapist who understands the stages of development, the needs of each stage and the adaptations to inadequate parenting at the different stages, can maintain a neutral, non-judgmental position when sitting with a couple. The therapist understands that each partner is trying to get their needs met by a person who is currently unable to meet them, and is behaving in ways that are intended to protect them as best as possible from the pain of not getting those needs met.

An awareness of the developmental needs of the stage at which the current piece of work is being done allows the therapist to model behaviors that support the developmental impulse associated with that

stage, rather than getting in the way of that impulse. It also guides the therapist in helping the partners, within the context of the Dialogue, to stretch into being able to meet each other's developmental needs.

This awareness helps couples to understand that underneath all the hurt of the Power Struggle is a desire to complete the developmental task and grow up. It reframes their old story – that they are incompatible, with the wrong partner, their partner doesn't love them any more etc. – into a story that offers hope, and introduces a solid rationale and concrete steps. Imago Theory provides partners with a better story, a better projection onto their situation: they experience each other as a perfect partner, because they hold the opposite pole and by stretching to meet their partner's needs they grow into balance. Getting partners on the same team with common ideas and a sense of a common purpose is very important.

For couples struggling with attachment, the therapist must be very attuned and particularly sensitive to the quality of the connection. The focus will be on providing consistent availability and good feeling contact.

For couples struggling with exploration the therapist must be attuned to support both the exploration impulse and the connectional impulse

For couples at identity stage the therapist must use accurate and attuned mirroring and support the self of each person. The therapist must be the one who holds and coaches the structure and who invites the deeper expression of self within that structure.

For couples at the competence stage the therapist must support and empower couples in their efforts and achievements.

THE SOCIALIZATION JOURNEY

What kinds of messages support the child's aliveness whilst socializing them to be acceptable to their social context?

Why might we share this information with clients?

How might you share this information with your clientele?

The Purpose of having an understanding of the journey of socialization is, again, not to blame parents or society but to help

- increase our awareness of where our own energy is blocked so that we can take responsibility for rebalancing our energy flow rather than acting out our imbalances through rejecting and idealizing certain types of expression in others, including clients;
- our clients do the same so that they can see the perfection of the fit between them and that their partner is their best teacher in helping them reclaim lost energy rather than act it out in the dynamic between them.

We humans are energy systems – at our core we are pulsating life energy. We take in energy from various sources including food, air, water, sleep, people. We experience and express our life energy outward through various areas of functioning: being, sensing, feeling, doing and thinking. In the service of our survival within our social context, our families, peers and social institutions have to socialize us – to shape our expressions of energy so that they are acceptable to and accepted by the other members of our social environment.

In order to do this they give us messages about how we can and cannot express our energy in these areas of functioning to be acceptable. Ideally they give us messages that we are OK to express our energy through these areas of functioning, and guide us appropriately in how to do that. In response to such messages we remain intact and whole. Messages that support the balanced flow of energy to our different areas of functioning are:

Core energy	It's OK for you to exist, to be in this world
(Being)	It's OK to be fully alive and express that aliveness
Sensing:	It's OK to see, hear, taste, touch, smell
(Senses)	It's OK to enjoy all your sensory experiences
Feeling:	It's OK to feel all of your feelings
(Heart)	It's OK to express all of your feelings
Doing:	It's OK to move your muscles and be active
(Muscles)	It's OK to enjoy your physicality
Thinking	It's OK to think, have opinions and ideas
(Head)	It's OK to express your thoughts and opinions

Messages of healthy socialization ⇒ balanced energy, wholeness

THE INITIAL IMAGO SESSION

THE PURPOSE OF THE INITIAL IMAGO SESSION

While each clinical instructor may conduct their interview differently, there are some core clinical and theoretical concepts which underlie all our work and are reflected within the diversity. These are:

Safety and Connection!

A primary purpose of the initial session is to begin to build safety and good-feeling connection between the partners. It is the therapist's responsibility to provide an **environment free of all shaming, blaming, judgment, analyzing, attack or criticism** either by the partners towards each other or by the therapist. Undefined connection occurs where there is safety. **Normalizing** a couple's struggles as a step on the journey of healing and growth can soothe their feelings of shame and badness for needing help. The therapist's **neutrality**, their capacity to hold both client's adaptive styles and behaviors with compassion and understanding, is essential to establishing an environment of safety. Having a **structure** for the initial session can help provide therapist and clients with a sense of safety, just as the dialogue process provides a safe structure within which there is flexibility to take whatever direction is deemed important.

Attachment

It is helpful to think of the initial session in terms of attachment stage issues. What do the clients need to attach to the therapeutic process and through the therapeutic process to re-experience their attachment to each other in a positive, nurturing way that heals the split in their object relationship? Imago theory suggests they need consistent availability, warmth and empathic attunement so that they can develop security and trust. It is incumbent on the therapist to embody the quality of being fully present, to hold the space, the relationship and both partners with the kind of focused attention and attunement that we think of when we think of good parenting at the attachment stage. Through our way of being with them and through coaching them in Imago Dialogue we invite them into a healing attachment experience. Giving them the tool of Imago Dialogue to take home with them starts to make the therapeutic process consistently available to them independent of the presence of the therapist. It gives them a structure for expressing attachment behaviors with each other. The focus is on attachment to the partner and to the process, not to the therapist, although this is an important first step towards experiencing safety. As they see that their needs to exist, to be seen, heard and understood, to have a place to explore, to express themselves, etc., begin to be met within the sacred space of Imago Dialogue, they can begin to develop some basic trust in the process. The therapist as facilitator and guide provides the safe holding space until they can take over the responsibility for this themselves. It is incumbent on the therapist to work through their own competence issues so that they can provide the kind of availability and holding needed by the clients. A therapist who is worried about their own competence will have difficulty being fully present to the clients. One challenge for the therapist is to provide equal and neutral warm and positive attention to both partners so that neither feels left out. In the first session the therapist may experience a sort of "rocking" feeling in their own body as they flow back and forth between the two partners, perhaps somewhat like the parent of twins.

A Different Experience

Right from the start we want the clients to have a new experience of their relationship than they have had previously. In the first session something new, different and unexpected happens. Research on infant attention suggests that novelty is inherently attractive to the infant, drawing his focus and engaging him. The first session is also an opportunity to help couples to think differently about their relationship – to see it as a vehicle for their growth and healing and their conflicts as opportunities. Many clients come to therapy with the hope, conscious or unconscious, that the therapist will solve their problems and/or the firm belief that no-one else can help them solve their problems. So the first session is also a opportunity for the clients to shift their thinking to a different therapeutic model of the therapist as facilitator of process rather than counsellor, arbiter of content or referee. This different experience then sets the tone for the work that is to follow.

Sharing some gems of Imago theory helps couples shift the way they see their relationship. Some aspects of theory that can be easily and briefly shared in the first session are

- basic theory of relationship dynamics, the role of childhood in selection and of the adult intimate relationship as the vehicle for healing and growth
- what to expect from therapy and the importance of engagement and skills
- brain functioning – aspects regarding reactivity and intentionality.

A Relational Focus

The focus in Imago Therapy is on the relationship rather than on either individual. Questions about the strengths of the relationship, what works in the relationship and what are some of the issues that challenge the relationship guide the couple to think about their relationship and what it needs from them. This is balanced with a focus on the two individuals-in-relationship. Each partner is invited to look at their own contribution to the relationship and changes in the relationship require that each partner change their own individual character structure.

From Symbiosis to Differentiation

Part of the journey of healing through relationship requires the partners to move from Emotional Symbiosis to Differentiation, from Fusion/Detachment to Connection. From the first moment the therapist is modeling differentiated connection, and gently inviting each partner into the terror of seeing the other as other, as a separate human being with their own perspective, their own needs, ideas, feelings. This is related to the following two aspects of the first session.

Self-Reflectiveness and Curiosity

From the first session each partner is invited to be self-reflective rather than focus on complaints about the partner. This contributes to safety for the partner and to greater connection to the self as a base from which to connect to the other. Along with this goes the concept of Curiosity about the other which underlies the possibility for a new experience. Curiosity is antithetical to judgment, criticism, etc.

Sender Responsibility

Connected to the concept of Self-reflectiveness is the concept of Sender Responsibility. The Imago Therapist is guiding and coaching the couple not only in being consistently available, warm and empathically attuned when the other is speaking but in speaking about the self when they are Sending, helping them to shape their sends to keep them about the self and “clean” of wounding comments about the other.

Hope

Many couples come to therapy when the pain is so great they have almost given up hope, others still have a great deal. Hope is an important factor in couples' motivation to engage in the work of change. Without hope of improvement why bother? Providing the couple with some ideas and some tools helps re-ignite the flame of hope. They can start to see their struggles as normal and even essential to the path of growth and healing and see that they can start to create a world where it is safe to be and to exist, where their needs will be met and their pain has a purpose and will come to an end. The therapist carries the realistic Hope based on the knowledge and experience that if they change their behaviors their relationship will change, but that if they keep doing what they have always done they will end up in the same place or worse.

The Contract

The therapist is working towards developing a clear working contract with the clients that responds to their needs and is based on realistic expectations of what can and cannot be done.

One Format of an Initial Imago Session

THE OPENING:

Introductions, welcome and greetings, getting seated, session plan

For example, 'I would like to start by taking some information, then I would like to hear from each of you why you are here and what you would like to get out of coming, then we will do some work together'.

Basic information gathering for the file

A series of standard questions including names, addresses, phone numbers, dates of birth, relationship status (dating, engaged, married, co-habiting, etc.), how long together, children with genders, ages and whether residing with them, whether they have had previous therapy, whether they are on any medications and what, who is the prescribing doctor if they are on psychiatric meds. This gives them some relatively easy questions that they know the answers to without too much difficulty and gives them a few minutes to settle down, look around the office, etc.

What brings you here and what would you like to get out of coming? Who would like to begin?

The therapist mirrors the responses and by gentle shaping encourages one person to complete their send before the other begins. It allows the therapist to gauge their capacity to stay present and listen while the other is talking and their curiosity and interest in what the partner is saying. It is helpful not to spend too much time on one person's 'island' before inviting the other to express why they are there. You can do some light shaping of the Sender through the mirroring e.g. by mirroring back 'my partner is ...' as 'I'm hearing that you experience your partner as...' or 'perceive your partner as...'. Use sentence stems to invite them to bring it back to themselves, e.g. if they have been talking about their partner, feed them 'and so given all of that the reason that I am here is...'. If they have focused primarily on why they are there in terms of past conflicts, after hearing from both, ask them again what they would like to get out of coming to focus them on what they want rather than what they don't want.

THE CORE:

Moving them into connection

A primary goal is to get them into safe connection with each other as quickly as possible. There are several tools the therapist can use to start to introduce them to Imago Dialogue and get them into connection with each other, depending on what they present with and the sense of what they feel is essential to address immediately. This gives the therapist a sense of their current capacity to be in connection with each other. If there is too much reactivity you may need to step back in and take the role of the receiver, or you may move in and do some coaching with the sender or the receiver.

Tools

Appreciations

Focus also on the positive energy that brought them here. To introduce some of the basic concepts of Imago Dialogue have them turn to each other and ask them to express to what they value about the partner or the relationship that brings them into therapy. Have them decide who will be the first to speak and the first to listen and have the first speaker check if the other is available to listen. A little coaching can be done here about the Receiver bringing all their attention to what the other is saying, putting themselves aside and mirroring without distortion – see Appreciations protocol.

Frustrations List

If they are bringing in a lot of dissatisfaction or frustration and need it to be addressed immediately, which is usually the situation, ask them to write a list of things they do which they believe trigger hurt or frustration in their partner – see Frustrations protocol below. Adapt the language to match theirs e.g. 'I believe I contribute to the deadness in our relationship when I...'

Relationship Vision

Occasionally couples come in wanting to look at where they are going in their relationship, or something else in their initial presentation suggests that this would be a good place to begin – see vision protocol.

Other

If the couple comes in with a specific agenda, e.g. they are separating and want to talk about how to tell the children, or one partner has had an affair, then in order for them to feel that the therapy is empathically attuned to them and their needs address that specific issue, again with the intention of moving them into Imago Dialogue and empathic connection with each other. If there is a lot of emotional energy, this can be balanced by some didactic pieces that start to give them a different way to frame their issue and some hope they will get through.

THE CLOSING:

Give them an opportunity to share their experience of the session and/or of the exercise, what was the 'pearl' that they are taking away from the session. Mirror their responses. If they express that they would like to make another appointment do that. Alternatively the therapist can suggest they share their experience of the session and call if they would like to make some appointments to continue. Suggest they read 'Getting...' if they haven't already (have copies available for purchase). Give them any appropriate handouts about Imago Relationship Therapy and Imago Dialogue. You can also end by inviting a quick appreciation, e.g. 'Something I appreciated about you during our time here together today was...'

Payment, etc.

Inform them of terms of therapy, including any cancellation fees for missed sessions, in writing.

JOURNALING – DAY 3

Suggestions: What I'm experiencing
What I'm learning or re-learning about myself is...
What I'm learning or re-learning about deepening in the Imago Dialogue is...
A question that I am sitting with is...

Module 1B Day 4

ENHANCING THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

The structure of the dialogue helps couples connect across the ocean of their differences. As with many things, it requires discipline and practice. Practice will be most effective when the dialogue is used with positive intentions. Following are some simple suggestions that can help couples stay in a space of positive intentionality, even when they do not feel like it.

Suggestions to Help Couples Stay in Dialogue

Soften your start-up

If you want your partner to hear you, approach respectfully. Learn what helps make him/her feel safe. Be aware of the impact of your behavior. When you want to discuss something, check if it is a good time before you begin. Continue to create greater safety throughout by using 'I' statements or begin with the phrase: 'What I make up about you is...' if you want to talk about him/her. Remember to take responsibility for your part.

Learn to make and receive repair attempts

When there is a rupture between you, take the initiative, reach out and repair. If your partner approaches you, accept their initiative, be open to dialogue and repair.

Soothe yourself and each other

Find out ways to calm yourself when you are reactive. Discover ways to soothe your partner when you are working together.

Compromise

Find areas of common ground and be open to giving when there is an opportunity. Let your partner know when and where negotiation is difficult for you. Remember, staying engaged increases your chances of achieving a win/win situation.

Be tolerant of each other's short comings

We are all humans. No one is perfect. We are all doing the best we can with what we know. The things that bother you about your partner are the un-integrated parts of yourself. When you find yourself getting critical, shift to a place of curiosity.

Send short, listen long

To help your partner hear you, don't overwhelm him/her. Send in short sends. As Receiver, remember to stay in a place of curiosity and to temporarily 'park' your reactivity, judgments and interpretations. This will help both you and your partner not be reactive.

The 5 to 1 ratio

Try to remember to say at least 5 positive, caring things about your partner to every negative interpretation you have of him/her, especially when discussing conflictual topics.

DEEPENING THE DIALOGUE: MOVING FROM CONTENT TO AFFECT

The Imago Dialogue can be used at many levels. When clients learn to go beneath the content into their feelings it can deepen the connection significantly. The skilled Imago therapist helps couples move beyond the content into affect using Sentence Stems, Doubling, Focusing and Directives. Affective sharing within the structure of the dialogue moves the couple from a conversation that can become a ping-pong match leading nowhere or to more frustration, into heart to heart connection.

Connection occurs when vulnerable language is used.

Connection occurs when partners understand each other's thinking.

Understanding cannot occur at the place where the misunderstanding occurred. When couples come in, they are usually too frightened to go into their depths so we gently help them through the use of deepening techniques. Huge outpourings of affect are not necessary for connection to occur. What will cause a shift is to help the clients go underneath the frustrating event or frustration and say what they are experiencing.

Sentence Stems

Sentence Stems are a powerful way to move the Sender from blame to 'I' statements or from content to affect. Nathaniel Brandon wrote extensively about the use of sentence stems to by-pass cognitive resistance and move into deeper experiencing. It is a respectful tool, because it allows the clients to decide where they want to take the stem. It also sends the message that they know best about their own internal experience. Unlike questions, which move people into their cognition, stems invite people into their inner knowing. Feed the stem in a quiet voice and encourage the client to repeat the stem and then finish it. The specific sentence stems offered to the Sender flow from the therapist's attunement to what the client is saying.

There are some stems that are frequently useful:

- The way I interpret that is... The story I make up about your behavior is...
- I feel...
- What I am afraid of...
- What hurts...
- When I get scared, how I try to protect myself is...
- Underneath my anger, what I am experiencing is...
- When you do that I feel...

To practice creating sentence stems, make a list of questions you can imagine you might want to ask a particular client, and turn your questions into stems, i.e. 'What do you want to accomplish when you say that?' to 'What I am trying to accomplish by saying that is...'. Some clients get confused by the therapist using the sentence stem 'I ...' and repeatedly need the lead in of 'Say to your partner: What I am afraid of is... and finish the sentence'. Others will very quickly take the stem and complete it.

Doubling

Doubling is a psychodrama technique to help people who are having difficulty finding the words to express themselves. Effective doubling, used sparingly, can tip the client to the next level of self-awareness. The therapist makes a guess at what the client might be experiencing based on their attunement to the client. The therapist then offers a sentence or two to the Sender as if they were the client speaking, letting the client know that they are just guessing and that they need to say what is true for them. For example 'If this fits for you, put it in your own words and tell your partner'. When people are struggling to find words, even if something you say is totally off, if it is offered lightly as a possibility it gives them something to bounce off. Overly frequent doubling can leave the client dependent on the therapist to know where to go and what to say.

Focusing

Focusing, developed by Eugene Gendlin, is based on his belief that people have their own answers about things, but they often don't know how to use all their inner resources to access them. What he calls a client's 'Experiencing' is the composite of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. A focusing technique is to invite the clients to close their eyes and go inside and see/notice what they are experiencing. When they open their eyes offer the stem 'At this time what I am experiencing is...'. When a client is stuck you might say, 'Close your eyes, go inside and see what is there', followed by the stem, 'what's inside me right now is...'. Focusing can also be used when someone says there is no more but the therapist senses there might be. Invite them to go inside and check if there is reminding them that it is fine if they are finished, but to make sure. Focusing helps people to speak in 'here and now' language, the language that promotes intimacy.

Directives

Directives are occasionally used by the Imago therapist to deepen the clients affective connection to the material or to the partner. For example: 'Say that again', 'Say that again with the energy that belongs to it', 'Tell him/her that'.

All of the above deepening processes should be used sparingly. Use them with attunement and follow the couple's energy. Trust them first to know where they need to go.

“Shallowing” – From Affect to Cognition

There are times when Imago Educators and Therapists wish to move clients out of deep affect or a regressive state and into a more cognitive state of functioning. Examples are:

- when an Educator is working with a client who spontaneously regresses or is flooded by emotion,
- the session is drawing to an end

“Shallowing” techniques include one or more of the following:

Breathing - Coaching the client to focus on their breathing and helping them to regulate it.

Grounding – Have clients place their feet on the floor, notice the chair they are sitting on, focus on an object in the room

Questions – to engage the cognitive functioning, such as “What do you think you need right now to....?”, “What do you think is going on for you right now/?”, “Notice what is happening in your body. What are you noticing?”

Actions – to encourage the client to move from regression to progression, ground the work that they have been doing in an action plan, e.g. “One action I could take right now is...”, “What is one thing that you think you could do today to experience this differently?”

All of these techniques encourage the client to take some distance from the emotion and move the energy away from affect to other areas of functioning.

SETTING UP AN IMAGO PRACTICE

The client in Relationship Therapy is the relationship. We encourage you, as an Imago Relationship Therapist, to always see partners together when seeing clients who are in a committed relationship. This is because we believe that it is in the intimate relationship that the deepest healing can happen and that any issue that comes up for one individual has an impact on the other, and can be an opportunity for empathy, deeper connection, healing and growth. This means waiting until both partners are present before they enter your office to start a session. This communicates that you are treating the relationship and are not willing to be triangulated with them. If one partner needs to leave the room to go to the washroom during the session, invite the other to use the time to do some deep breathing, be aware of their own body and re-centre him/herself. Then sit in silence until the other partner returns. Harville has said that he will not speak to clients by phone without the other present.

Seating

For the clients: Two chairs face-to-face about two feet apart – just far enough apart that the knees do not touch. Have a couch or cushions and easy access to a wall space that is suitable for the Holding Exercise.

For the therapist: a swivel chair with wheels, placed to form an equilateral triangle with the other chairs. Seating like this supports the therapy by keeping the energy and focus between the partners, rather than between each partner and the therapist, and facilitates the connection between the partners. The therapist can move closer to one or the other partner to facilitate a piece of work, or stay centered between the two.

Length of Sessions

The minimum length of a session with a couple is one hour and a half. This allows time for some deep work, including regressive work, to be done during the session, to bring that work to closure and assign homework for the couple to do between sessions. This increases the cost of the session and may seem prohibitive to some couples. It may be necessary, for financial or other reasons, to see the couple every two weeks for an hour and a half rather than weekly for one hour. This actually works out cheaper for the client.

Between session homework assignments:

- supplement the in-session work
- encourage the clients to integrate new learning at home
- empower them to take charge of their own healing
- help them build their relationship skills

There are lots of activities you can set as homework, and the assignment should always flow from the session. Clients and therapist write down the between session assignment and the therapist can then ask how the assignment went at the next session. This provides continuity and accountability. Make sure that the assignment is doable and appropriate for the level of reactivity, containment, commitment, etc. of the particular couple.

Taping and Permission

Videotape all your sessions (tapes can be made for the clients to review as a between-session assignment to reinforce and deepen the learning and understanding from the session). It can be introduced in the first session or at the beginning of the second. Have clients sign a Taping Consent Form. The therapist supplies the first tape, which the clients take home and bring back the following session, whether or not they have reviewed it, to be used again. Taping equipment that provides good quality sound is essential so that it is easy to listen to, not an irritation. The microphone is the most important

aspect in this regard an external microphone is often necessary. Built-in microphones are rarely adequate on either audio or video equipment to pick up the sound with the desired quality. It is also important that audio recording equipment has an auto reverse recording capability so that you do not have to turn the tape over in the middle of the session. The following guidelines are given to clients regarding their use of the tapes. They may use the tapes:

- to learn more about themselves and their relationship and to deepen their understanding of and empathy for their partner
- to look at themselves to better understand their own contribution to the connection or disconnection in the relationship.

They may not use the tapes:

- to prove a point, become self-righteous, shame, blame or otherwise make the partner wrong or bad
- to share with anyone else.

Supervision/consultation is strongly recommended. To maintain your certification you will need to engage in ongoing consultation of your work. The following table has some options:

Self	Videotape each session. Watch it and give yourself feedback according to the Imago supervision process – what I experienced in my body, what I liked, a technical suggestion, a growth gift. Observe yourself rather than the clients. Follow the guidelines given to clients. Keep a journal of your challenges and learning. Video recordings are a very powerful way of observing oneself.
Group & Individual	With an Imago faculty member or certified Imago consultant
Peer group	Use the ‘Group as expert’ format to address clinical and theoretical questions and supervision process as in the training to grow in your clinical work

Call on your colleagues or other Imago Therapists if you get stuck! We all need help. Asking for help is a sign of strength. Attend, as support staff, as many workshops as you can. This will not count toward your certification until you have completed Module 3, but it will help anchor the Imago ideas and skills in your bones.

INTEGRATING THE POSITIVE IN IMAGO THERAPY

There are two branches of the Imago Therapy Tree, the one that addresses the pain and the one that increases the pleasure. It is important to keep the tree in balance.

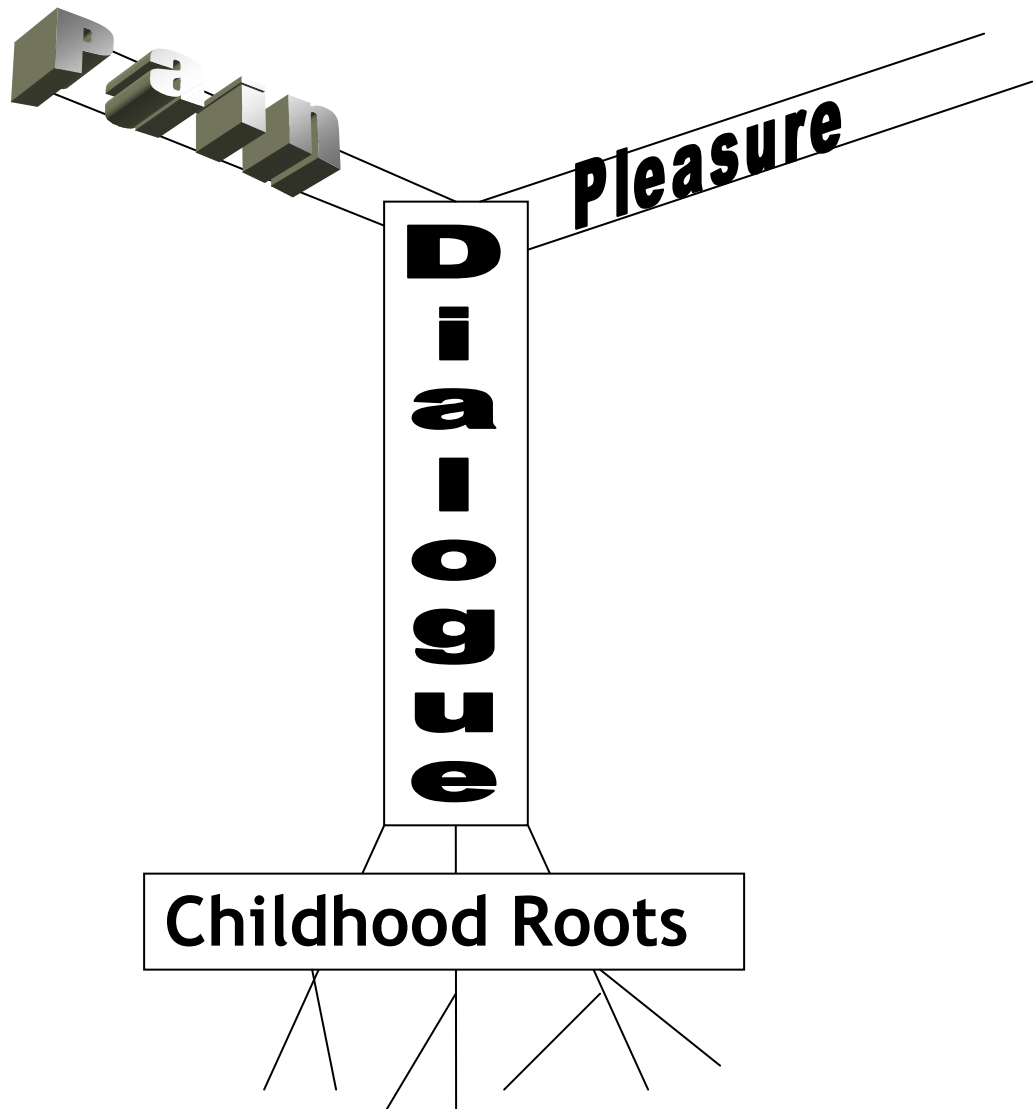
The pleasure branch consists of all the positive things that already exist in their relationship, and positive things they can add to make their relationship even better.

As therapists, use what you already know from the workshop and help your couples practice high energy fun. You can give these assignments every week: surprises, caring behavior lists, flooding and the vision.

Remember the five to one rule: for every one difficult interaction, we need five positive interactions to counterbalance it.

When there is lots of money in the positive emotional bank, it is easier to weather what is difficult.

DIAGRAM OF THE IMAGO TREE



THE ARTISTRY AND STRUCTURE OF IMAGO THERAPY

An Imago Therapist always uses the Imago Dialogue in working with couples. How this dialogue is used depends on the couple. The artistry of this work is being able to use this wonderful structure in the service of the needs of each couple. Some ideas that an Imago Therapist sits with when they are with a couple are:

- What is in front of you is the microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe moving toward wholeness and completion.
- All conflict is both a sign that growth is trying to happen and a protest against losing a sense of connectedness.
- All content is simply a cover-up for this protest. Whether the couple is fighting about the messy house or whether they should have children or not, if there is an impasse, it is because they feel out of connection with each other.
- The upset in a relationship is never one person's doing, but a result of the deal both people have made to protect them from the fear of being vulnerable, dependent, and truly intimate.
- Both people are equally wounded and equally healthy.
- No matter how badly the behaviors look, underneath is a deep longing for connection and a terror of death.
- The couple has everything they need between them to grow into their wholeness; they have no idea how to do it.
- The victim-perpetrator dynamic is a co-created system.
- Each person is doing the best they can with the adaptations, awareness and resources they have available at present.
- In couples who make it to therapy, about 80% of their relationship is probably working, but because our brains are more tuned into pain than pleasure, the 20% that is not working has highjacked the 80%.
- Intimacy requires vulnerability. The therapist must invite vulnerability but also be clear about how counterintuitive it feels to get vulnerable when you feel unsafe.
- The therapist must convey a deep understanding from her/his own experience about how we have to act in a loving, manner even when we do not feel like it.
- Learning to love is one of the scariest things we ever have to do because it means softening defences that have kept us alive in the past.

Adhering to the above philosophy, the Imago therapist:

- models good connective behavior: clear boundaries, good eye contact, attuned mirroring and connecting language in the way she/he speaks to the couple, and by using stems and doubling to mould the send;
- is attuned to the different energy styles of the couple so that her/his coaching, modelling, etc. allows the person to feel seen and held;
- takes a neutral stance, helping the couple to explore how they co-create the dance of the power struggle;
- helps the sender to move out of criticism and content into the deeper feelings underneath by using sentence stems, doubling, and focusing;
- sometimes uses word for word mirroring and goes back and forth quite quickly, but sometimes takes more time with each sender. This depends on what helps the couple stay in connection and move under the reactivity;

- teaches mirroring and summary first and stays with this step until the couple can make the mirroring have words and music (there is validation and empathy in the mirroring). This takes as long as it takes. Then validation and empathy are taught. The timing here depends on the couple's capacity;
- deepens the Dialogue to gauge a couple's capacity to hold vulnerability before using regressive techniques (Parent/child dialogue, holding, BCR dialogue);
- understands the importance of both regression and progression to help couples grow up, rather than stay stuck in childhood;
- focuses on helping couple's see how they each contribute to the nightmare, so they can have choice about contributing to the dream and move out of the helpless and powerlessness of feeling victimized;
- focuses on the health that exists in the relationship and early on encourages caring behaviors, fun, surprises, appreciations and the vision;
- holds for the couple the vision of their goodness and their positive intent, even when they can't. That doesn't mean the therapist allows acting out.;
- sets clear boundaries and does not allow criticism, shame, or blame in the office.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE THERAPIST IN AN IMAGO SESSION

- To show up for appointments on time and be clear about ending on time.
- To be clear about the fee and give a three month warning if raising the fee.
- To keep all information confidential
- To be neutral and not take sides.
- To only talk to the couple when they are together.
- To find an equal balance between understanding/ compassion and limit setting.
- To recognize that the couple has all they need to move into connection together and wholeness inside themselves and that the therapist's job is to keep them in process using the structure of the dialogue so they can find their way to each other.
- To be 100% present, able to put aside whatever is going on for you that is not related to the therapy.
- To interact in a respectful, non-shaming matter, modelling healthy differentiation.
- To respond to upset about your behavior by mirroring, validating, and being empathic and taking responsibility for your impact without defensiveness.
- To explain the Imago concepts clearly and to have a good balance between process and educating.
- To give clear homework assignment.
- To remember what happens in sessions so things can have continuity.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COUPLE IN AN IMAGO SESSION

- To keep appointments by showing up on time and paying the fee
- To be as honest about your feelings and thought as you know them
- To follow the directive of the therapist to stay in the process of the dialogue
- To be willing to be open and curious about your partner's reality
- To be willing to take responsibility for your part of the nightmare
- To be respectful to your partner in and out of the session
- To express upset and complaints to either your partner, or to the therapist rather than friends or family members
- To NEVER, NEVER use material from the sessions against your partner
- To express appreciations and gratitude for your partner
- To take the risk to be vulnerable at whatever level stretches you but does not break you
- To give and receive repairs as soon as possible
- To become your partner's advocate

JOURNALING – DAY 4

Suggestions: What I'm experiencing is ...
Something I'm learning or re-learning about myself is...
Something I'm learning or re-learning about Initial Sessions is...
Something I am curious about...
My growth challenge is...

Assignments for Module Two

The between module assignments may very well trigger anxiety and avoidance. Notice any resistance you may have to doing the assignments, explore it, and use it to develop empathy for client's resistance to doing the work in the office and out. Then just do the assignment anyway. The best way to find out you won't die from doing something is to do it and not die. The Imago Supervision process is designed to help you feel safe so you can overcome your own resistance to giving up your defensive character structure and grow into your fullest potential.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENT FOR MODULE 2

Bring to the next Module two 15 minute, cued DVD's each illustrating a piece of work where you feel you are doing a good job facilitating the Imago Dialogue process. For some of you that will mean just mirroring and summary mirror, for others who may have couples who are ready to do the full process it means a clip of the full process. The clip will show you helping the couple learn and align with the structure of the Imago Dialogue. The camera will show a frontal view of you and side views of your clients. You will be given feedback on this tape to help move you a step further toward certification and your growth as an Imago therapist or educator.

The tapes should show you holding a couple in Dialogue and facilitating Dialogue.

Holding	Creating a safe environment for the couple to do their work, helping the Sender and the Receiver to co-create safety in the Dialogue.
Facilitating	Supporting, coaching, teaching, doubling, and being present.
In Dialogue	Partners are talking to each other; partners are mirroring each other; when appropriate partners are validating and empathizing with each other.

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH ASSIGNMENTS

Videotape all your work. This will increase your comfort at taping and observing yourself for supervision. It will also give you practice at getting a tape we can hear and where we can see all three people!! It is great to give the taped session for the couple to watch. Remember the purpose is to watch yourself not the couple and to think about what you could do differently where there is impasse or breakdown. The camera should be angled so that we have a frontal view of you and side view of the clients.

Clinical track

1. Watch a tape of one couple's session each week, using the following process:
 - Listen to yourself as a therapist and in a journal or three ring binder
 - Write down your sensations in your body as you are listening
 - Write down what you liked about yourself as a therapist
 - Write down some technical suggestions for yourself that would make your wonderful work even better.
 - Write down a growth message you could give yourself and what you would look like if you believed it.
 -
2. Ask yourself the following questions based on the tape.
 - Which partner is expanding energy and which partner constricting energy?
 - What are the lost parts of each partner that the other expresses? (This may be clearer after Modules 2 and 3)
 - What is each person's growth stretch? (This may be clearer after Modules 2 and 3)

Educational track

Practice facilitating dialogue at the level of content and affect that is appropriate to your training and, if possible, in the context in which you plan to use your Imago training. If you have questions about this discuss them with your clinical instructor.

Tape your work facilitating dialogue. Use the Imago Supervision Process (see form in Toolbox, page 18).

PERSONAL GROWTH ASSIGNMENT

1. Practice the Imago Dialogue with significant others.
2. What it is that you do that contributes to the nightmare?
3. Map out the relationship between you and your partner/ex-partner/friend
 - Our developmental task is...
 - Our relationship dynamic is...
 - My defences against pain and frustration are...
 - My positive contributions to our relationship are...
 - I tend to minimize/maximize my energy.
 - My growth stretch/path is...

SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS

Bring two DVDs of full sessions (one to show and a back-up) cued to a 15 minute segment where you feel you are doing a good job facilitating Imago dialogue. This tape must be visible and audible.

Write out the professional and personal growth assignments and bring them with you.