

What is Imagery Rescripting

Imagery Rescripting is a technique that is often used in therapy to deal with upsetting or significant images that occupy our mind and play a part in keeping our mental health problems going. The problematic images that people often struggle with can be memories of the past, nightmares or future imaginings.

Upsetting Memories

If we have experienced an upsetting or traumatic event in the past, the memory of this event will often stay with us, intruding into our present life, colouring and tainting what we expect to happen now. Sometimes we refer to these images as “ghosts” or “echoes” from the past, and we can get very stuck in these memories. When something upsetting has happened to us, our mind can have a lot of trouble making sense of what has happened, and therefore keeps bringing up the memory as a way of trying to understand the event.

In this way, the memory never gets laid to rest, as a bad thing that is firmly behind us. Because the memory is so upsetting, understandably we try to push it away whenever our mind brings it up. Our mind might also keep bringing up the memory as a way of keeping us on high alert, trying to protect us from the bad event ever happening again.

Upsetting Nightmares

Many people will experience recurring nightmares or upsetting dreams. These can be the same dream over and over again, or different dreams that have the same upsetting theme. Understandably, people will often wake in high distress from such a dream and try to push it out of their mind. They will often find it very difficult to go back to sleep or may start to avoid going to sleep for fear of having the dream again. **Upsetting Imaginings of the Future** If we are fearful or dread something upcoming in the future, we might imagine in a lot of detail what we think will happen. We may see ourselves not coping, things going very badly, people responding to us in a very negative way, something awful happening to ourselves or a loved one, or other terrible catastrophes. Again, when we realise that such an awful picture is playing out in our mind, we will do what we can to turn the picture off.

Using Imagery Rescripting

You will notice that with all the different upsetting images that people might be dealing with, the common response is to try to avoid the image, to push it away, to rid of it from our minds. Whilst this is a very understandable reaction, unfortunately avoiding these images usually makes things worse, making us very fearful of the image itself, giving the image power over us, so the image becomes much more than “just an image”. By working on these images using imagery rescripting, we are no longer avoiding them. Instead, we are actively approaching them. That is, we close our eyes and run through the image in our mind, and then rewind the image and rewrite it – rewrite the story, in whatever way we choose. In essence, we are taking charge of the image on our own terms.

Now, some rewrites might be somewhat realistic in nature, and others will be pure fantasy. There are no limits to how you can change the image when it comes to Imagery Rescripting. In this way it can be quite an empowering and creative process. You might rewrite the image one way, and decide you aren't satisfied with that, and so you can just rewind the image and try something else on for size. Some rescripting will involve simply considering how you would like the image to be different, what you would like to do to the image to make it less threatening or for you to feel safer, or what you are needing in the image and finding ways to rewrite the story to meet that need.

Some rescripting, particularly if it is a past memory of something that happened in your younger years, might involve you entering the image as your now older and compassionate-self, and intervening in whatever way you want to help and support your younger-self. If that is too difficult initially, then your therapist may take the lead with this, and come in to support your younger-self in whatever way is needed to feel safe.