



EUDAEMONIA

Visualisation, with Phyllis Kahaney & Rachel Epstein

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Kim Forrester 0:00

When you imagine a scenario, your body responds as it would in a real life situation. So this begs the question, can we imagine our way to the kind of well being we all dream of? I'm Kim Forrester, you're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast and today we're going to explore the value of visualisation.

Intro 0:24

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host, Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:43

Phyllis Kahaney and Rachel Epstein are both leaders in the field of mental imagery and visualisation therapy, and they are co-authors of the new book, *Reversing the Trauma of War*. After successfully overcoming the symptoms of PTSD using mental imagery, Phyllis retrained as a readjustment counsellor using visualisation to help heal and comfort military veterans and end of life patients. Rachel is the director of the American Institute for Mental Imagery in New York City, where she conducts classes and provides individual coaching. It's my delight to be connecting with Phyllis and Rachel today to discuss the healing power of mental imagery, and to explore how visualisation can set us free from the past and help us live a more present, more fulfilling life. Phyllis Kahaney, Rachel Epstein, it's a delight to have you with me here on the Eudaemonia podcast. How are you both today?

Rachel Epstein 1:41

I'm fine, and sitting in New York City. And it's a beautiful bright day in the afternoon. And I'm very happy to be here with you.

Phyllis Kahaney 1:49

This is Phyllis and I am also doing equally well. I'm in California; 75 degrees outside in the winter and it's just glorious. And it's wonderful to be here on this podcast.

Kim Forrester 2:03

Phyllis, I'm going to address this first question to you. In the dedication of your book you write, "We are more than our past. We each contain the possibility of overcoming the effects of anything and everything." Now I'm sure that many of my listeners understand this concept but can you perhaps explain a little bit more about how past events can influence our well-being in the present?

Phyllis Kahaney 2:31

Yes, thanks for the question. Our belief is that everything is taking place in the present moment. So each and every moment is an opportunity for change, for seeing things in different ways, for being different. So our focus is to live in the present moment and to understand that memories are malleable. I'd like to give an example from the work that I myself did to overcome a traumatic experience that I think can elucidate this. I spent two years in Israel, when it was a very violent time. There was a lot of violence all around. And I found myself during that two year period in many situations where I had to flee. For example, I was in the library studying - I was a student at that point - and there was a huge explosion, the library filled with smoke, and we all ran out. And as I ran out, I saw bodies all around me on the ground. Some of them were not alive, and some of them were injured. And it gave me as you can imagine, quite a shock. And thereafter, I had dreams; I had many intrusive memories. So I found Dr. Epstein, who was a proponent of this work of imaginal work, and I went to him and I asked him if he could help me because it was very hard for me to function in my everyday life. And what we did was a series of exercises over a period of about six months. I went off and on, and each time I went, I was able to go further toward the site where this happened - to look imaginarily over the balcony and look at the patio where the explosion took place. And finally, I actually took a trip over there and I stood there where it all happened, and I didn't have any reaction. And most of my problems that I had had until then had gone away. And so that really sold me on this work. At that point, I actually started training to do this work. And so what really happened during that period is I took the person that I was at that moment - which was 15 years after the incident, I was not living there, I was older, I had had more life experience, I had different beliefs - and I was able to work from a place of where I was now, and correct what had happened in the past. And that's part of the way that we function; that we understand that memories are malleable, and they're memories, they're in the past. And in the present, it's not exactly the way it used to be.

Kim Forrester 5:30

Before we move on, let me just expand on that a little bit more, because it's fascinating. Phyllis, do you mean that we use our imagination to create a fictitious past; like to completely wipe our memories and rewrite a history for us? Or is it that we simply reframe past events in a more constructive way?

Phyllis Kahaney 5:53

Yes, I think it's a second way. That we take what happened - it's not that it didn't happen, we don't wipe it out, it's there, it's real - but we are able to correct it. We are able to reverse it. And therefore it doesn't have the hold on us that it had, let's say at the time, and maybe directly after.

Kim Forrester 6:14

Rachel, you were very kind to email to me a list of ways that visualisation can be used for greater health, and well-being, and connection. You mentioned that hypnotherapy, shamanistic practices, Tibetan Buddhism, all use visualisation. But you two apply mental imagery in a very specific way. Rachel, can you tell me more about mental imagery in the capacity that you apply it, and how it helps us heal our past and our present?

Rachel Epstein 6:47

Let me just give you a definition of imagery. So in our system ... and any imagery is the mind thinking in pictures; thinking visually. And there are many ways that we think. We think logically, in words, and non logically through image and intuition. And we think in images all the time. And so therefore, it's understandable why many, many diverse cultures use imagery in their religious practices; in their healing practices. The way that this imagery works is that we use it to both heal physical and emotional difficulties, and to correct things that have happened in our past that are not helpful to us anymore; that are inhibiting us. And it's also a way of rooting out belief systems, and planting new belief systems. So we're both weeding out belief systems in ourselves in the form of images, and we are also seeding new images and new possibilities in ourselves through the use of imagination.

Kim Forrester 7:52

You mentioned there that you use this practice, this modality, to heal physical ailments or physical trauma, as well. And in your work that mind-body connection is very important to understand. What would you say, Rachel, is the biggest misconception about how our brains and our bodies interact, and how this affects our ongoing well-being?

Rachel Epstein 8:17

Well, first, I want to differentiate between mind and brain. Mind, to me, is consciousness. And brain is the physical receptacle of consciousness in time and space. And regarding the mind-body split, they're not really split. You know, when Descartes came in, in the 17th century, division came into Western thought that rational thought was the only type of thinking that was real and true. And there was a split between mind and body. But in fact, mind and body are intimately connected. And what happens in one happens in the other. So we'd like to think of things in time and space, is it being causative - that something physical is giving rise to a mental issue, and vice versa - but they're really reflecting each other. So when we feel anxious, for example, we're not just feeling anxious. Like, we have a thought connected to the anxiety, something usually about the future. And then we also have, concurrently reflecting with each other, you know, intimately connected, our heart is pounding, our palms are sweating, our breath is constrained. So we are embodied creatures. There is no mind without body and vice versa in this time-space continuum that we call life now.

Kim Forrester 9:37

Wow. Phyllis, your personal story is incredibly impactful. And you do work now with military veterans and PTSD sufferers, whose symptoms are equally, perhaps, as obvious as yours were. But you are both very careful to note that this practice is a powerful tool for us all to use. Phyllis, what are the more subtle signs that we can each look for that tell us that we are being triggered by, or that we are responding to events in our past?

Phyllis Kahaney 10:12

Yes. I'm glad that Rachel talked about it and now you're bringing up the reality that there is a very strong connection between our physical and our emotional. And what I like to do with clients, and with myself as well, is do a check-in. So I'll take a little time in the morning and I'll say, "You know, I'm feeling out of sorts", or, "I had a bad dream last night, what's going on? And what can I find in my mind and in my body?" So first, I look at feelings. What am I feeling? Am I feeling angry?

Scared? Hurt? What is the feeling that's most on top? The second thing is, I look at dreams. What did I dream? What's going on in the dream; try to remember it, write it down. I try to keep a pencil and paper next to the bed, and write down dreams. Because they reflect so well what's going on internally. Then I pay attention to breath. Am I holding my breath? Am I breathing quickly? Do I feel faint, dehydrated, and my breath isn't working properly? And in that moment, I try to do some slow breaths, and kind of get myself back to balance in my body. And that takes me to moods. What kind of mood am I in? I can do this throughout the day. What kind of what is my mood right now? And what could be affecting it? Maybe I'm too warm. Maybe I've just eaten something that disagrees with me. Maybe something happened at work that was difficult. And finally, I do kind of a physical check in. Am I having any pain? Am I feeling strong? Do I need to move? Have I've been sitting too long? So those are some practical things that I do. And it made me think of an exchange I had with a family member. So we had a little tiff one day, and then I noticed that the next day I was hunching my shoulders, I was starting to get a headache, and I was holding my breath. And I sat down and I worked on correcting these physical things; getting into a kind of zero-state where I was calm, rational, very together, and myself as best as I could be. And I waited till I did that, and then I called the family member and tried to work things out. And I was in a much better place to do that.

Kim Forrester 12:56

It really is about self-awareness, then; mindfulness; presence in one's own body. And being more aware of how we are reacting to the present moment.

Rachel Epstein 13:08

I want to just add one little vignette about how our physical ailments or our physical condition is really reflecting what's going on with us emotionally. So if someone has a headache, chronic headache, you know, when they come to me, I might ask them, "Who is the headache about?" Not, "What's the headache about?" Not what the physical symptoms about the headache, but "To whom do you have a headache in life? Who is the pain in your back?" Because everything that's happening in our physical life and in our emotional life is happening within a social context of relationships. So we want to make that connection between our inside life and our outside social relationships, to see where there is disharmony, and where we're getting out of balance.

Phyllis Kahaney 13:56

And I just wanted to add, I think what Rachel said is so important, is that ultimately, one goal we have is to get to a place where we can welcome everything. We can welcome headaches, we can welcome upset, because it gives us an opportunity to do the inner work, to grow, and become all that we can be and not live in suffering and upset.

Kim Forrester 14:21

As you describe it there, there is this intrinsic interaction then between mind and body. And so our minds are incredibly powerful. Rachel, that leads me to understand that visualisation is obviously a wonderful healing tool. But if our minds are that powerful, if our experiences are that powerful, can the opposite not also be true? If we actually allow our minds to focus on trauma, or pain, or if we've visualised disturbing imagery, does this have a detrimental effect on our well-being and on our daily choices, and our behaviours?

Rachel Epstein 15:01

You know, our minds are very powerful and what we dwell on we do become. And therefore, you know, our beliefs manifest our co-created reality. And in our daily life, we are exposed to visual stimuli that is quite disturbing to us. You know, when we watch a distressing or violent movie, and we often resonate with it; getting flashbacks while we're trying to go and get into a restful sleep, for example. Another example was, people who watched a lot of TV regarding the 911 destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001, they actually had PTSD symptoms. And there's no question that in our daily lives, we're often creating imagery that we're not quite aware of, around our social situation - someone we don't like - and we envision, you know, getting back at them or have imaginary conversations. So we're reinforcing those types of negative patterning and conditioning in ourselves. And therefore, the really important thing is, again, to become watchers of our thoughts and our images as they come up in consciousness so that we can clear them out. And, in healing, the two most important principles are to cleanse and to calm. So for example, visualisations and mindfulness training do both of those. They clean out what we don't need anymore in our negative conditioning, and they also calm down our mind-bodies. They calm down our sympathetic nervous system.

Kim Forrester 16:40

Phyllis, back to you, because in your book you share that mental imagery can be used to facilitate forgiveness of ourselves or of others. It helps us release guilt and process anger. It made me wonder though, could virtualization be considered to be a bit of a cop out sometimes? For instance, if we're using visualisation as avoidance of a real world need to take responsibility, or the real world need to extend an apology or make amends. If we are just reframing our past experiences, can we not reframe them in a way that kind of justifies our own bad behaviour?

Phyllis Kahaney 17:22

I think that a person could do that. But that certainly isn't the direction that we're heading in. What we're doing is we're going into past events, and seeing them with fresh eyes. And we're not trying to change the objective events. But we're different in every moment and so we're revisiting these events with a new perspective. So imagery, in general, helps us to override judgments that we tend to make. And we also are trying to, I think, loosen up some of the strong belief systems that we might have, and ultimately create change. An example of this would be, there's, let's say, a grown man of 40 years old, and he has a lot of anger with his mother. He's still angry about the way that she treated him when he was a child, and was very controlling, and was sometimes not very kind. When they were in a department store, he was misbehaving and she pulled him by the ear. And he hasn't been able to get past that. It's so bad now, he's not talking to her. So what we would do in imagery is, look at where he is now, where she is now - she's an old woman now; he's in midlife - and try to go back and correct that image. To feel different in himself, to be able to see the things are not what they were, and be able to come back to the present moment and, as an adult, be with his mother in a different way. Let go of the past, let go of the way that he's been processing his relationship to her. So that would be one example. I'd say that we aren't saying this didn't happen. But we're saying that it's no longer viable and it's no longer necessary to live in this way. So we have choice.

Rachel Epstein 19:42

So if I can just jump in a little bit with that same example. So this 40 year old man, when we asked him, "What encapsulates your relationship to your mother?", he spontaneously came up with this imagery; this event. When he was a young boy and was pulled out of a department store, by his ear, you know. Being held by ... his mother was holding on to his ear and pulling him out of the department store. And it was a terribly embarrassing situation for him. So when we went back into that image, he went and he corrected the image. And he saw himself, taking his mother's hand off of his ear, and taking her big hand in his small hand and, together, they went out of the department store quietly. And after that, he was able to go and resume a relationship with his mother whom he hadn't spoken to in 10 years. So we're not changing the past. But as Phyllis said, we are remodelling it based on on his adult self.

Kim Forrester 20:54

Rachel, I love that you bring up the idea of a spontaneous image - he spontaneously went back to that particular event in his past - because you write in the book of how our inner wisdom plays an important role in mental imagery. And I wondered if it was wise for us to pay attention to spontaneous images and symbols when we are practising visualisation? So I'm sitting here and I'm doing a visualisation practice. And I'm imagining myself at a beach and, all of a sudden, a dog appears next to me in my imagery. Or I'm looking myself in the mirror, and I suddenly have a crown on my head. These sorts of invited spontaneous images. Are they intuitive and creative prompts, or are they just unhelpful distractions?

Rachel Epstein 21:46

Well, generally want to pay attention to the imagery that's arising in us, when we're doing imagery. If we start to get into thoughts, then we know we've sort of gone back into the everyday world in our senses, or turned outward, and we've lost our mindfulness in the imagery itself. But if you see spontaneous images, they are giving us messages. And in fact, that's what we're looking for. Because you don't want to just be scripted; to be at a beach. You want to see what your inner life is telling you about yourself. Now, in this moment, about being at the beach, and if you're seeing yourself with a crown on your head ... And we're learning, as we do imagery, to read these inner symbols of our inner life, which we call the hieroglyphs, or the glyphs of our life. So for example, if you see a crown, then we'd have to say, "Okay, am I feeling royal?" If I see a dog, it might mean that there's a faithfulness or fidelity, because dogs are a stand in for fidelity. They represent the quality of fidelity, or they can also represent something like have a dogged life. So if we know the context of the crown and the dog and how they're appearing in the imagery, we can read it pretty easily. And that's the same way that you read dream imagery. Because dreams, of course, are when we turn our inner language of how we talk to ourselves at night; we see it in images. Dreams are generally in image form. They're not in verbal form, though there's sometimes you can have a word or two in your dream life.

Phyllis Kahaney 23:24

I'd like to add that when we work with people, that we also pay attention to things like numbers. What do the numbers mean? And we understand that certain colours mean certain things. So we can go very deeply into these issues and kind of create a whole landscape of what's going on with any given person at any given time.

Kim Forrester 23:49

Phyllis, mental imagery is quite literally thinking in pictures and using this to heal. But I have very vivid dreams, I have a lot of visions in my dreams, but if you ask me to close my eyes and visualise something, I'm terrible at it. Not everybody finds it easy to actually conjure up really vivid or really distinct pictures. Is it important that we visualise precisely and vividly to get the benefits of visualisation or mental imagery as a healing tool? And if so, is visualisation something that we can improve at?

Phyllis Kahaney 24:32

Well, we can say here practice makes perfect. But to answer your first question, there's so many ways to visualise. It's not just the pictures. Sometimes people will tune into sounds. I've had clients who, when they're visualising, they're hearing bells ringing or they're hearing a tune, or they even say they're hearing the sounds of the Earth when they're on a mountaintop. So it can be sound, it can be smell, it can be even a feeling. So there's a wide range of what people experience when they're working on imagery. And the second thing is, some people have an easier time than others, but most people can visualise. One thing you want to do is not try to do your visualisation work right after eating, it seems to bog the body down. So wait maybe half an hour after a meal to do this work. And sometimes it helps for somebody to look at a picture, close their eyes, and then in their mind's eye, see the picture, and do things like that until visualisation becomes a little more natural. But in my experience, it does happen very occasionally that someone can't visualise, but it's very rare. It just sometimes takes people a little time to get into the swing of it.

Rachel Epstein 26:01

So I just want to add in another comment about that, which is imagery has a form but no substance. So it doesn't take place in time and space. We almost think of imagery as taking place in the no-time, no-space zone. So images come and go very, very quickly. So it's not necessary to hold on to this idea that I'm supposed to see a very, very vivid image. In fact, whatever you get is fine.

Phyllis Kahaney 26:30

I've had experiences, just to add to what Rachel saying, I've had experiences where I've done an exercise, say for three weeks. Every single day, it's different. Sometimes it might be for 45 seconds, sometimes only 10 seconds. I can't say that I've ever had the same picture twice. It's always fresh, it's always different. And it's wonderful to see how each and every day, each and every moment, we ourselves are different. And I think we probably don't give enough play to that in our lives. So as long as we do this work, we kind of can get reflected back to us almost like a mirror, that we ourselves are changing every moment, and how freeing that can be. So it's very exciting this kind of work.

Kim Forrester 27:25

Phyllis, you mentioned there the three-week time period, and I found that really interesting throughout your book. You're very clear that we ought to stop any one particular visualisation practice after 21 days. Why is this timeframe important?

Phyllis Kahaney 27:43

Well, I do believe it began because it was understood that it takes 21 days to change a habit or break a habit. And so it seems that, for the most part, it's very helpful for people to do this for 21 days. And as I said, over that period, there's a lot of growth in general. Then we ask people to take seven days and rest; take seven days and don't do the exercise. And then they can decide if they want to go back and do another round. Or, if they feel that what they were trying for in that particular exercise has been achieved, they can either move on to another exercise or take a break. Also the seven day break, it gives us time to assess if the imagery has actually worked. It also comes about, this timeframe, because there seems to be a natural physiological cycle. So for example, the New Moon happens every 28 days. Women have a 28 day menstrual cycle. So it seems that in nature, this 28 day cycle is pervasive, and we're trying to piggyback onto that.

Kim Forrester 29:03

That sounds beautiful. Rachel, I'll direct my final question to you. This is a question that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. Obviously visualisation can be just us lying on our back and daydreaming, or letting images flow through our mind. But can you share a morning reminder - so can you share a more specific mental imagery exercise - that can help my listeners understand the power of visualisation for healing, and for well being?

Rachel Epstein 29:36

Sure. I'd like to share an imagery that's called Unfolding the Day and it's an imagery that helps us to direct our will to benefit ourselves. So what we want to do is to sit up and close our eyes and take three relaxing breaths. Long, slow exhalations through the mouth; normal inhalations through the nose. And after we've done these three relaxing breaths, imagine your day quickly unfolding from the morning until bedtime. See yourself flowing from one activity to the next. See yourself at ease; mastering each task. Focused, calm and relaxed. And when you've finished unfolding your day, breath out and open your eyes.

Kim Forrester 30:36

That's beautiful, Rachel.

Rachel Epstein 30:37

I just have one caveat. If you're a regular meditator, do this as soon as you wake up in the morning before you do meditation. Because meditation and visualisations ... well, meditation in its purest form - there are many forms of meditation - is generally about emptying your mind of images. And here, in imagination, we are turning our senses inward to make new discoveries through the imagination. So they are two different processes. And you want to first do the imagery and then follow up with a meditative practice, if you have one.

Kim Forrester 31:25

I love that. And perhaps even include the image of you meditating as you start your day in your mind's eye.

Rachel Epstein 31:32

Yes, you can do that. Absolutely.

Kim Forrester 31:36

Phyllis Kahaney, Rachel Epstein, it has just been such a delight to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. If people want to learn more about you - you have a beautiful book about healing those who are suffering from the trauma of war, and from conflict. But I believe that there's a lot of information there for people who are simply struggling to overcome anxiety, or insomnia, depression, all sorts of other challenges. How can people find out where to get their hands on the book and learn more about the work you do?

Rachel Epstein 32:09

So they can go to our website, which is www.reversingwartrauma.com. And there are links there to buy the book on Amazon. And as I understand, we have a distributor around the world where you can also go to your bookstore and ask them if they have it. And they should be able to order it on print on demand.

Phyllis Kahaney 32:30

And the name of the book is Reversing the Trauma of War.

Kim Forrester 32:34

Well, thank you both very much. It's such a fascinating subject, a topic where we can take our minds and use them, and funnel that power in really healthy and constructive ways. So thank you both for choosing to be here on the Eudaemonia podcast today.

Rachel Epstein 32:50

Thank you very much.

Phyllis Kahaney 32:51

It's a pleasure. Thank you. It's been really a great experience.

Kim Forrester 32:56

As the 20th century author Robert Collier once said, "Visualise this thing that you want, see it, feel it, believe in it. Make your mental blueprint and begin to build." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe and check out www.eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself, and imagine the life of your dreams.