Imago Relationship Therapy

Turning conflict into a way of understanding each other

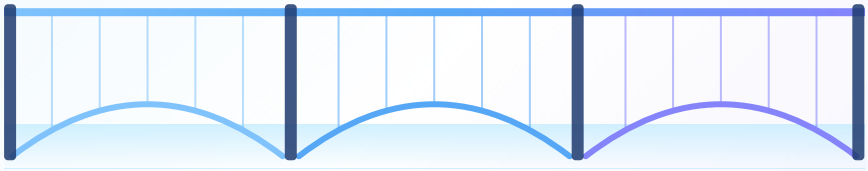
Imago Relationship Therapy is an approach to couples therapy developed by Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, and introduced in *Getting the Love You Want* (Hendrix, 1988). It suggests that many recurring conflicts echo hurts from earlier in life, and that partners can help each other heal by learning to listen with safety and empathy. Its best-known tool is a structured conversation called the *Imago Dialogue*.

THE IMAGO DIALOGUE · CROSSING THE BRIDGE

the listener visits the speaker's world, one step at a time

THE LISTENER
My world
sets aside my reply, for now

1 Mirroring — 2 Validation — 3 Empathy



THE SPEAKER
My partner's world
shares one concern, using "I" statements

REPEAT BACK
"What I hear you saying is... Did I get that? Is there more?"
Reflects the speaker's words accurately, without adding, judging or interpreting.

MAKE SENSE OF IT
"That makes sense to me, because..."
Recognises the logic of the speaker's view. Validating is not the same as agreeing.

FEEL WITH THEM
"I imagine you might be feeling..."
Names the feelings that may lie underneath, and checks whether that fits.

Then the roles swap, so that both partners have the experience of being fully heard.

01 What "imago" means

imago is Latin for "image"

EARLY EXPERIENCE
How we were cared for
Childhood relationships shape our sense of love, including what felt good and what hurt.

›

THE IMAGE
An inner picture of love
Hendrix proposed that this forms an unconscious "imago" of what feels familiar in a close bond.

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ATTRACTION
A partner who feels familiar
We may be drawn to partners who echo aspects of that image, both comforting and painful.

›

THE OPPORTUNITY
Healing together
Conflict can reopen old hurts, and also offers a chance to meet those needs in a safer way.

The imago theory of partner choice is a clinical model; it has received little direct research testing.

02 Three stages of a relationship

as described in Imago theory

STAGE 1
Romantic love
Early closeness and excitement. Differences seem small, and each partner can feel completely understood.

STAGE 2
Power struggle
Differences become frustrating, and old hurts surface in conflict. Each partner may try to change the other.

"Why can't you just see it my way?"

STAGE 3
Conscious partnership
Partners learn to understand each other's histories and needs, and to respond with intention rather than reaction.

03 Making the dialogue work

simple guidelines for both partners

Ask for a time
"Is now a good time to talk?" If not, agree on a time soon.

One topic at a time
Keep to a single concern, rather than a list of problems.

Speak in small pieces
Share a few sentences, then pause so your partner can mirror.

Use "I" statements
Describe your experience and feelings, rather than your partner's faults.

Hold your reply
The listener's turn will come. For now, the aim is only to understand.

Close with appreciation
Thank each other for listening and for sharing.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Imago is widely practised, but its research base is still small. In a randomised controlled trial of 12 sessions with distressed couples, satisfaction increased significantly compared with a control group, though on average the change was not large enough to be considered clinically significant (Gehlert et al., 2017). Its listening skills overlap with those used in other well-supported couples approaches.

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Practising Imago Together

Choose a calm time, and start with something small

04 Our dialogue

one topic, one speaker at a time

SPEAKER What I'd like to share *one concern, starting with "I"*	*"I feel... when... because..."*
LISTENER · 1 Mirroring *repeat back, then ask*	*"What I hear you saying is... Did I get that? Is there more?"*
LISTENER · 2 Validation *it makes sense from their view*	*"That makes sense to me, because..."*
LISTENER · 3 Empathy *name the possible feelings*	*"I imagine you might be feeling... Is that right?"*

05 From frustration to request

a behaviour change request

THE FRUSTRATION
What bothers me
for example, "You're on your phone every evening."

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THE DESIRE UNDERNEATH
What I long for
for example, "I'd love to feel close to you at the end of the day."

›

THREE SMALL REQUESTS
What would help
my partner chooses one to try, as a gift

1
2
3

positive · specific · doable · time-limited

06 Echoes from the past

optional, and only if it feels safe

When my partner...
I feel...
This reminds me of...
What I needed then, and need now, is...

07 What helps me feel cared for

small, specific and positive

Things my partner does, or could do · *for example, a hug when I get home*

Things I could do for my partner

08 Reflection

what did we notice?

What felt different about being heard, or listening this way

To remember, or to bring to a session
if you're working with someone

A note on care. These exercises are for relationships where both partners feel safe. If there is fear or harm in your relationship, please reach out to your GP, a psychologist or a domestic abuse service.

SOURCES Gehlert, N. C., Schmidt, C. D., Giegerich, V., & Luquet, W. (2017). Randomized controlled trial of Imago Relationship Therapy: Exploring statistical and clinical significance. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 16*(3), 188–209. · Hendrix, H. (1988). *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples.* Henry Holt.

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