

Mental Imagery – Dealing with the Unexpected

Below are some examples of situations we have encountered when getting students to use their mental imagery and we have given possible solutions to these scenarios.

Your student insists that they do not visualise at all.

We are able to store visual memory from 6 weeks old – we use it to recognise people, objects etc. Be aware of high expectations – not all mental imagery is highly colourful or 3D, some is black & white, whilst others are left with a feeling of just ‘knowing’ the answer.

- Ask your student to think about something very familiar and interesting – the fridge at home, their favourite football team’s kit, chocolate bars, breakfast cereal boxes, Pokémon cards, their best friend, a family member or a favourite TV show or computer game- and describe this to you. They will then realise that they do visualise.
- Can they recognise a McDonald’s sign or their national flag?
- Can they recognise the family car in a car park?
- Use other senses to help to stimulate the visual. For example:
 - Provide an image e.g. of a star, have it on a wall or flip chart at eye level, ask your student to trace round the shape with his/her finger. Does that help?
 - Hold up a simple object in front of them e.g. a pencil, mug ask them to have a look, hide it and then ask them e.g. what colour was it? Then ask them to draw the shape in the air.
 - Your student could hold a 3D object, feel it, look at it and then close eyes and recall in their mind’s eye.
 - Ask your student to smell or taste their favourite food. Does that stimulate a picture?
 - If not, a more high risk strategy is to ask them to think of something unpleasant such as eating their most hated food or a plate of worms. Often the strong response will trigger an image.

Encourage your student to practice recalling images - people they know, things they can see around them, have seen on TV etc. Continue to practice this stage before going on to dealing with words.

Too much is going on – lots of screens, fractured screens, lots of images, lots of movement and chaos.

- Only someone with a highly evolved visual system can have
- so much going on.
- Grounding is essential for controlling mental imagery.
- Guide your student to ‘turn off’ screens, get rid of irrelevant images – get their ideas too on how they can do this. We have been amazed at the inventive ways students come up with once they know what they are aiming for.

Your student cannot keep their mental images still.

- Ask your student to control their imagery using ‘glue’ or ‘nails’, Harry Potter’s wand or any other idea to keep them still, in addition to Grounding.

Your student is performing ‘mental gymnastics’ with their images unconsciously. This may be from early experiences

- Some students adopt the same speed for learning that video games run at –
- much too fast!
- Check your student is grounded and then direct them to slow the images down using an imaginary remote control or stop signs or any idea they come up with.

Your student finds it hard to look up.

- This can be as a result of low confidence they are keeping their head down.
- Being often told ‘the answer is not on the ceiling!’ (Actually it might be!)
- Being told to look people in the eye – this can be daunting and so they look down.
- Students may be very ‘stuck’ in negative emotions and self-talk. Gently encourage them to look up and let go of the self-talk through grounding.
- Past trauma can shut down visual recall so as to avoid recalling any frightening or disturbing
- images. You may have to refer the student to another professional to deal with the issues before you can proceed.

Your student just can't sit still for the session!

As you well know, for some students it is really hard to 'sit up straight and pay attention!'

Sometimes, you can get better results walking around or outside – it might be possible for you to conduct a session in the playground.

One example Paula had was an 8 year-old boy who couldn't stay still for more than a couple of minutes. Here is the story:

"I wasn't getting very far as the boy was so unsettled and had the idea that we could go out to walk my dog together. So the next session, Mum, student the dog and I went out to a park, walked for a while then sat among trees. We spent time looking at the different roots – he was particularly fascinated by the huge network of roots on an ivy plant. His whole being calmed down as we started the grounding process and he got it! I was then able to get him to visualise my dog sitting for a treat and keep the image still. I could then go onto the next part of the process.

We very soon needed to move again, but he had learnt the skill of visualising words. We went to the play area and he went off to run and climb, coming back to me from time to time to get another word to 'put in his mind's eye.' He learnt 5 words that day – something he had never been able to do. We had the Jumpstart!"