

Eidetic Image Therapy - Recalling The Vision Within

by Kristen Georgi

I am standing under the shed next to the garage, bundled in a green wool coat and hat. The frigid air smells of ozone and the tart, wizened apples in the bushel basket at my feet. Chin-level with a discarded antique pedestal sink, I feel the frosty porcelain against my skin and peer down into the sink's basin. Five newborn gray and white kittens lie stiff and still. Their mother is nowhere in sight, but mine appears beside me. She helps me carry them into the basement and place them on a musty blanket near the furnace, in hopes that the heat will revive them.

This kind of vivid memory, composed of crystal clear visual images as well as physical sensations and body posture, is common to everyone. Scientists who study the workings of the mind call this Eidetic Imagery, pictures we form, retain and recall without the need for words. Studies have shown that children are especially good at accessing numerous vivid descriptions of places and events, though this ability seems to diminish somewhat as we grow to adulthood. Yet all of us, when given the opportunity, can tap into select times in our lives that have remained as moving images in our minds, no matter how long ago they happened.

Using the natural ability to tap into this kind of imagery, Ahkten Ahsen, Ph.D., developed a new variant in the field of consciousness psychology called Eidetic Image Therapy. Consciousness psychology, or how we perceive the world, dates back to the early 1900s but at the time was overshadowed by Sigmund Freud's theories and the psychoanalytic approach. Since the 1970s Dr. Ahsen's approach has been described as a breakthrough in contemporary psychology that is equally as significant as the work of Freud and Jean Piaget, another great thinker who explored theories of how we learn.

The author of 30 books and numerous articles, Dr. Ahsen is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Society, founder of the International Imagery Association, editor of the Journal of Mental Imagery and director of research and training at the Image Institute in Yonkers, New York.

Based on his scientific and clinical studies, coupled with his roots in Eastern culture, Dr. Ahsen conceived of a way to use these mental images to help people resolve personal conflicts. To begin to understand Eidetic Image Therapy, it is important to consider one of its most important elements; the very definition of consciousness. Since the days of Rene Descartes in the 1700s, and his motto, "I think,

therefore I am,” we have accepted that there is a separation in man between the mind and the body, the “I” and the world. The mind perceives and analyzes a world outside of itself, which leads to a feeling of separateness.

In Ahsen’s thinking, the mind and body are united and inseparable in the world. The images in the mind are firmly tied to the experiences felt by the body, an internal experience, not an external viewing of it. By recapturing this internal experience in its purity and vividness, it is possible to examine the diverse elements of a significant life event, the organization of it, the person’s relationship to it, and the meaning the person ascribes to it, allowing them to gain a greater understanding that leads to increased well-being.

All this sounds very complicated, but in fact the process is quite simple according to Dr. Toni D. Nixon L.L.C, a psychotherapist who trained extensively with Dr. Ahsen and is director of the Eidetic Therapy Institute in Port Ewen, N.Y. “We’re all used to telling stories,” Dr. Nixon says. “I think about memory as a kind of telephone game. The more it is told, the more it gets distorted and embellished. With Eidetic Imagery, on the other hand, the truth is in the image. These images are reliable and consistent. When I work with people, they will invariably see this kind of image fairly quickly.

One way to begin accessing the images is by using a step-by-step process called the Eidetic Parents Test. Nixon explains that she might ask a client to think of his mother (or father), describe where he is in the room in relation to his mother and describe what his mother is doing. She asks the client to move the image of his mother closer, or move it further back to the horizon. Then she asks, “How does that feel? What is happening in your body? How do you feel when she is closer? When she is further away?” These are personal images and sensations recalled by the client, not visualizations suggested by the therapist or otherwise manipulated to have a different feeling or outcome.

As an example of how Eidetic Imagery can be used to create well-being, Nixon tells about a 65-year-old woman who worked in the mental health field. Even with her own training and years of different types of therapy, the woman retained her rage at the mother who had badly mistreated her. By looking at some of the eidetic images of these scenes, by bringing the image of her mother’s face closer, the client was able to look into her mother’s eyes as she pictured the scene

“In her eyes she saw that her mother was truly depressed and unable to cope. Something shifted in her. It wasn’t forgiveness, it was understanding. The things her mother had done were not OK, but now she was able to have compassion toward the woman who had done them. It was an epiphany,” Nixon

says. “That’s where the body comes into this. When that shift happened, her whole physiology relaxed. There was a sense of release from the tension she had carried around all those years.

When the internal conflict was removed, Nixon explained, the client experienced a greater sense of happiness. Her relationship with her husband got better as her own depression lifted and she was able to stop directing her burden of rage at him.

Eidetic Image Therapy has been successfully used to treat alcoholism and drug addiction, tapping into the capacities for curiosity and pleasure that get deadened by substance abuse. By asking the client to recall the time he took his first drink, how it felt and the meanings associated with it, the client can be helped to return to a state where alcohol and drugs aren’t necessary to achieve the euphoria that life can offer.

Nixon has a particular interest in using Eidetic Image Therapy with musicians, artists and writers. “Creative people are different than most,” she says. “When these people are in that place of creative flow, that’s a high for them. It is a place where all things are possible. When they leave that place, they know it, and often neurosis takes over. Alcohol and drug abuse can come into this, to fill that sense of emptiness. Yet they ultimately diminish the capacity to achieve. It’s a trap.” Using Eidetic Imagery techniques, creative people can learn to sustain that sense of euphoria and engagement in life even while carrying out mundane tasks.

When applied to learning difficulties like attention deficit disorder, Eidetic Image Therapy can be used with children to model a way of focusing on the images in the world around us and incorporating them into the child’s understanding. For women, it can be a means of revisiting moments that conveyed a message of disempowerment to find new sources of power and productivity.

At its most fundamental level, what Ashen has discovered is a method of using our own imagery to create an ongoing personal engagement with the universe. In his seventies now, Ahsen may not have the pleasure of seeing his own vision gain wide acceptance and application among the general population. It may take more than one lifetime before people are able to look inside, and see.

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