

## Protocol for a Conflict-Focused Visualization for Treating Depression

Susan Heitler, Ph.D.

Depression produces feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and helplessness. Energy may be low or absent; everything feels effortful. People often describe depression as the feeling that a dark cloud is hanging over one's spirit. When people are depressed, they tend to think of themselves in negative terms. Psychologist Aaron Beck described this tendency as the "negative cognitive triad," that is, the tendency to see oneself, others, and the future in negative images and thoughts.

Conflict resolution theory posits that depressed feelings get triggered by a situation in which a person gives up on getting something that is important to them. Giving up creates feelings of loss, similar to the feelings of grief that occur after a death or after the ending of an important relationship. Fortunately however, a return to the conflict in which a person has given up, followed by a successful attempt to re-address the conflict in a win-win manner, can cause depression to evaporate.

The following visualization treatment for combating depressed moods, illustrated on my audio-CD **Depression: A Disorder of Power**, is based on these conflict resolution theoretical understandings. Designed for therapists to use with patients, the visualization may also be used as a self-help technique.

The depressed person closes his/her eyes, and the therapist, a friend, or a person doing self-help asks the following questions, guiding the depressed person through six re-empowering steps. If you are doing the technique as self-help, either ask a friend to read you the questions at each step, or open your eyes to read each question, and then close them again to observe the images that come up on your visual screen.

- 1. Identify the conflict.** "If you were going to be mad at someone or something, *not yourself*, notice what image comes up of who or what you could be mad at."
- 2. Fill in the details.** "In that scene, what do you see him (her) doing? How do you respond? What do you want? What do you feel, and think?"
- 3. Check relative sizes.** "Who appears bigger, more powerful, in this interaction, you or the other? By how much? a little, or by a lot?" Note: if there are no size discrepancies, or if the "depressed" person looks larger, you are not dealing with depression, or have not yet identified the depressogenic situation.
- 4. Alter the sizes, increasing the sense of power.** "Picture yourself suddenly growing very tall, like Alice in Wonderland, shooting way up tall."
- 5. Broaden the database.** "From this new height, from this perspective, what can you see now that you may not have noticed before when you were small?"
- 6. Find new solutions.** "Knowing what you now know, from this bigger size, what are some new ways you might handle the problem to be more effective in getting what you want?"

Believe it or not, this visualization can lift depressive feelings, reestablishing a normal sense of personal power. It can eliminate the negative thinking of depression, and reestablish a sense of positive humor and well-being.

For well-being to be sustained, however, a person's patterns of depressogenic interactions need to be changed. That is, to become depression-resistant people need to know how to negotiate win-win solutions to their differences with others.

For this reason, when depressogenic conflicts occur with a spouse, both partners need to be included in the therapeutic process so that both make the changes necessary for cooperative, rather than dominant-submissive, interacting.

With effective win-win conflict resolution skills, most people become essentially immunized to serious depression. In most situations they will have the ability to create solutions to differences between what others want and what they themselves would like that are mutually satisfactory. They may occasionally find themselves temporarily knocked over emotionally by unexpected losses. At the same time, they will be effective at returning to the situation where someone they were interacting with responded in a dominant or coercive manner to a conflict, and re-addressing the conflict in a win-win manner.

In sum, when giving up has produced a depression, returning to the conflict, re-addressing it from a position of full inner strength, and then emerging with a win-win plan of action makes depression disappear. Try it!