LIKE A PHOENIX RISING FROM THE ASHES

How to Disengage from Negative Memories and Thoughts

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Like a Phoenix Rising from the Ashes:

The phoenix is a mythical bird that attains new life

by rising from its own ashes after death.

Foreword

This manual is designed for people who suffer from fearful memories and/or thoughts. The three self-help techniques described below cannot replace psychotherapy with a therapist; however, the manual offers you an opportunity to start addressing your anxiety and can help to reduce it.

The following paragraphs introduce the core characteristics of anxiety and depression. To help you better understand the techniques' mechanisms of action, we have also included a section about human memory processes, particularly how human memory is prone to errors. The techniques draw upon these processes in a helpful and therapeutic way. The methods are intended to reduce negative memories and fearful inner images as well as self-deprecating thoughts.

Even if you do not have significant symptoms, you can benefit from this self-help approach. If you suffer from distressing memories (e.g., of an accident, a shameful experience, a serious mistake you've made, or a traumatic event), frightening thoughts (e.g., that you might fail when giving a presentation, harm someone accidentally, or be re-victimized), and/or a negative self-image, then you should give our method a try.

Anxiety disorders and depression

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health illnesses. About 20% of all people suffer at least once in their life from an anxiety disorder that requires treatment. About the same amount of people suffer from depression, which is characterized by low mood and lack of interest in activities one normally enjoys. Anxiety can present in many forms, including specific phobias (e.g., fear of dogs, heights, small rooms, social places), generalized anxieties (omnipresent anxiety and worrying in various areas of life, which is characteristic of generalized anxiety disorder), recurrent unexpected panic episodes that appear without any obvious reason (i.e., panic disorder), and posttraumatic stress disorder (related to a distressing event that is repeatedly experienced in one's imagination). Another common form of anxiety is social phobia (i.e., the fear of social situations/appraisals, groups, public performances such as giving a speech, and social appraisals). Although obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD; e.g., excessive washing and checking in order to ward off bad thoughts and fears) is no longer considered a pure anxiety disorder and has been classified separately according to a recent psychiatric classification (DSM-5), we would like to add OCD to the list as a form of anxiety.

A common denominator of all anxiety disorders is the intensity and subjective distress of the fears, which leads to avoidance of situations that could possibly trigger anxiety (e.g., avoiding parks due to a phobia of dogs, elevators due to claustrophobia, dark corners due to PTSD after experiencing a robbery, dirt due to compulsions). Many studies have concluded that in the long run avoidance not only reinforces the fears (thus making them worse) but also results in major secondary problems (e.g., loss of one's social network or job). It seems understandable and almost logical to avoid fear-evoking situations as avoidance relieves the anxiety for a short time. Yet, in the long term, a dangerous and vicious cycle is established—the sufferer does not learn alternative ways to cope with their fears and their anxiety further increases, deteriorating their quality of life and self-esteem.

Caution: If you suffer from severe posttraumatic symptoms (e.g., after sexual abuse in childhood) and/or tend to dissociate (e.g., to perceive the environment as unreal or to have a temporary blackout accompanied by the feeling of being disconnected from reality), practicing the techniques on your own is not recommended. Instead, we advise you to practice the techniques as part of psychotherapy under the supervision of a psychotherapist.

The three fronts of your anxiety

Intense anxiety determines how the past is remembered and paints the future in gloomy colors (e.g., fear of being bitten by a dog again, becoming a victim of violent acts, doing something embarrassing, or causing harm to others due to inattention). Moreover, anxiety influences the view of the present through negative verbal self-attributions ("loser," "victim," "milquetoast") and self-talk ("Get a grip") as well as negative images. Fighting this "three-front war" seems a hopeless endeavor for the person affected.

Memories of traumatic and other very negative events, such as being bullied in school or having to suddenly stop an oral presentation due to dizziness or fear, cannot, unfortunately, be simply erased. Such emotional memories fade away more slowly than neutral memories as they are preserved by various triggers (i.e., reminders) as well as by rumination. Trying to suppress these cognitions voluntarily is tempting and seems like an obvious solution but is unfortunately not possible. Active suppression of a memory or an idea simply increases the intensity of the memory if it returns to your mind. If you don't believe this, give it a try:

[Do not think about a blue elephant]

Were you successful? No? There you go!

Common countermeasures are to critically reflect on the event's meaning ("Well, it did not go well, but honestly, it just happened one time"; "Luckily, nothing worse happened") or to change one's appraisals of an event ("You are not a loser simply because . . ."; "It wasn't your fault; you were just a child"). Patients sometimes find these common verbal maneuvers helpful. But, when especially vivid and intense experiences are relived vividly, these methods typically fail. Even if the mind knows that the images are not real or do not reflect the whole truth or reality, it is simply not possible to escape these cognitions and you may feel that you are at their mercy.

The aim of this guide is to reduce negative memories and fearful images and to transform them into something positive. Before we do this, we need to give a bit more background. Please be patient. Do not skip the next sections.

The treachery of images

Figure 1. René Magritte, "The Treachery of Images"

In 1929, the Belgian artist René Magritte painted "The Treachery of Images," which is subtitled "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe). You may think that this painting is stupid or nit-picky, and you are probably not alone. This is definitely a pipe! Magritte simply wanted to express that even a detailed representation or memory of an object or a situation is not identical to the object or the situation itself. In truth, you are only seeing the image of a pipe, not the real pipe.

Figure 2. Beach scene

Before we continue, look at this picture for 10–15 seconds. We will come back to it later. Try to memorize as many details as possible.

Memory ≠ Reality

Most people think their memory works like a DVD recorder. That is, they believe that in order to remember an experience, they simply need to "call up" the correct film in their head that was recorded during the event. They believe that this film will then faithfully and correctly reproduce the event. However, our experiences and memories are not an exact copy of events but are easily distorted by new experiences, information, and feelings. Generally, this happens very subtly so that we are not aware of this process. Thus, our memory is not a precise representation of an event but can have gaps and can even contain false information. Consequently, what we remember and how we remember is often very different from what we have actually experienced. The following table contains a series of examples of some collective false memories.

Table 1. Collective false memories

Figure 3. Contrary to popular belief, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) never said the phrase "Beam me up, Scotty" in *Star Trek*.
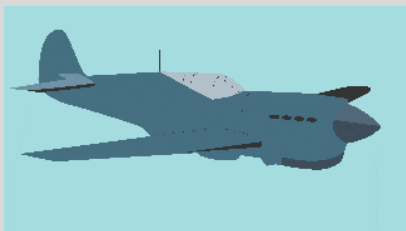

Figure 4. Some eyewitnesses of the bombing in Dresden (Germany) remembered that after the bombardment low-flying planes were chasing fleeing people. Historians increasingly doubt this (e.g., the dust caused by the fires would have made it impossible).
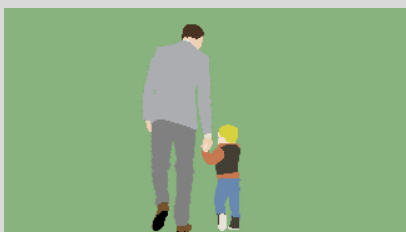
Figure 5. The famous psychologist Jean Piaget remembered being kidnapped as a two-year-old, which turned out to be a story his nanny made up when he was a child.
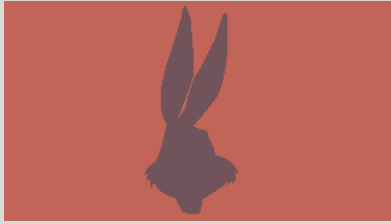
Figure 6. In an experiment, participants were shown advertisements for Disney World showing images of Bugs Bunny. 30% of the participants remembered meeting the rabbit in Disney World as a child— even though Bugs Bunny is a Warner Brothers character, not a Disney character.

But what about our memories of significant events such as September 11, 2001, the day Kennedy was shot, or the day Princess Diana was killed in a car accident? Most witnesses later claim to remember these events almost photographically. Studies show that these memories are indeed more vivid and better preserved than 'normal' memories. For example, hardly anyone remembers what they did on September 9 or 10. However, vivid memories (of 9/11, for example) contain many mistakes or do not coincide with what other people who were in the same situation report. False memories can have many facets. Often, the sequence of events is incorrect (for example, who said what when during an argument) or events are distorted. In an experiment, when witnesses who saw a vehicle crash into a wall were asked about the speed the vehicle was going when it hit the wall, the estimated speed was much higher if the word "raced" was used in the question. The participants' memory, in other words, was "written over" by a verbal cue and, as a result, they overestimated the speed.

Back to the beach image, which you were just asked to look at (please do not turn back to that page). What do you still remember that was depicted in the image? Were the following objects shown?

Ball

Water

People taking a sunbath

Lifejacket

Towel

…

If you recall seeing a ball or a towel, then you have responded like 80% of all people. However, those objects were not displayed in the beach image! Our memory plays tricks on us. In this case, by overwriting the actual scene with a prototype of a beach, where one would usually see a ball or a towel, or could logically expect them to be there (most people lie on towels while sunbathing).

"Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers

and how one remembers it in order to recount it."

(Gabriel García Marquez, 2002)

The fact that our memory is not an exact representation of the past and is also modifiable is important to this technique for two reasons. First of all, it should be clear to us that our memory does not function like an archive, in which events are sorted in strict chronological order and stored to represent an exact place and time. Rather, we tend to retain memories that have had a formative impact on us or that we tend to think about often. Such memories can be from a relatively short episode in our lives. For example, if you were bullied and harassed at school for two years, which had a lasting impact, it is possible that when you look back at your childhood at the age of 40 you perceive your childhood as being completely (100%) negative rather than only 11.11% negative (2 out of 18 years). Additionally, you may think, "My childhood was horrible. I was teased by everyone." In comparison to the dominant memory of being shoved into a trash can or the terror of being locked in a locker in the changing room of the swimming pool, other neutral or positive memories fade away. Those memories may be fairly accurate or may even be depicted in part as photographic memories, but because of the strong emotions that accompanied (or still accompany) these experiences, they become dominant. Therefore, these specific negative childhood memories are overrepresented, although they by no means reflect the entire childhood experience.[1]

On the other hand, the fact that our memory and also our imagination can be modified is useful for the new psychotherapeutic techniques designed to modify negative memories and imagination, which will be described below. To reduce possible misunderstanding, we need to emphasize the following. We don't want to twist the facts—what has happened has happened. We cannot travel back in time like in the Hollywood classics *Terminator 2* or *Back to the Future* to change the course of our lives. But, we can reduce the impact of these images that have been tormenting us. The goal is not for you to deny what happened but to learn how to deal and cope with these memories. Two horrible years of teasing remain two horrible years, but they should not come to represent your entire childhood in retrospect. To refer again to Magritte, we have to eliminate the "the treachery of images" (tormenting memories and images) that are preventing us from living fearlessly in the here and now.

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[1] Unfortunately, some individuals have had a truly horrible childhood. We do not mean for this example to sound cynical or patronizing.

"It's never too late for a happy childhood!" This phrase nicely summarizes this point. Bring back your beautiful, positive memories and do not let them be overshadowed by horrible memories. This does not mean you need to gloss over negative memories, but the goal is to not perceive everything in the past with a sense of doom and gloom. We simply recommend not solely focusing on the dark side of the past because this compromises your well-being in the present and future. In order to do this, it is important to recognize negative experiences as being in the past and to actively work at reducing the power and seemingly validity of the images and imaginations.

As we said above, we have to distinguish between memory and reality. We do not want you to question memories that actually took place. At the same time, memories are frequently modified and, importantly, may contain an unrepresentative piece of the past. Such negative memories must be contained and their negative impact attenuated. Illustrating the treachery of images, these images of the past only enhance our discomfort!

Because negative memories and images can rarely be defeated with words, psychologists have increasingly come to fight fire with fire. This means using images against images (thinking of something beautiful when negative images come up) or modifying memories (the past) and imaginations (the future) and weakening negative attributions (the present).

Let's go! Changing the script of inner images and motifs

Now, let's get started with the techniques you should apply over the next few weeks. These techniques are supposed to help you to reduce negative memories and catastrophic ideas. We would like to explain briefly why we did not start by describing the techniques but instead addressed issues related to memory. We discussed the difference between reality versus memory and imagination because the techniques are not about questioning or denying the past—they are all about reducing the power of the images triggered by a negative past event or by fear of a future event happening. We also wanted to demonstrate that our inner images are fragile and changeable. In addition, the effect of a psychotherapeutic technique is increased if we understand its rationale and purpose. Psychological procedures do not act as passively as medications.

There are three techniques that we would like to teach you. These involve

1. transformation of negative memories (the past)
2. transformation of frightening imaginations (the future)
3. transformation of negative attitudes and self-attributions (the present)

1. Transformation of negative memories (the past)

To begin, first reflect upon which negative memories arise the most often in your mind's eye and which memories worry or plague you the most. If there are many, select the one you want to work on first before applying the technique to other inner events. It may be best to start with a negative memory, but don't choose the worst negative memory you have. Even if it is agonizing, recall the memory and experience it consciously once more (you have done this anyway already many times, but usually not voluntarily). Try not to avoid thinking of the details of the memory or thinking about it only superficially. Instead, try to be as curious as possible about the image or scene, and try to perceive it in as much detail as possible. Ideally, write down a description what is going on.

Now, without entering the scene again, think about how you could change it to have a happy ending. There are several possible ways this can be accomplished.

You can change your appraisal of situations from the past by entering the scene as a present-day adult and intervening. In this way, you can help support the person (i.e., your younger self) who then was in an unpleasant, embarrassing, and/or dangerous situation.

Alternatively, another person or being could intervene in the scene so that the situation has a more positive ending. It is often helpful to first think of a person or figure with whom you attribute only positive virtues, such as strength, trust, and support. It can be a real person, a movie hero, or a fictive person.

Once you have determined how you would like to change the course and outcome of the situation so that there is a happy ending, you should begin to write a script for it, like for a movie. In psychology, this is called imagery rescripting. Afterwards, go through this new scene again and again, incorporating as many details as possible, including sounds, colors, odors, and voices. The livelier the new scene becomes, the more likely it is to transform the disturbing images and reduce the influence of the past on your present functioning. Try to figure out which of the following suggested variants of the technique works best for you.

Exercises for negative memories

Variant 1: "Back to the future"

Figure 7. Your present self (the person you are today) intervenes in the scene, which you change to have a happy ending in which your younger self is protected. Examples: You chase a dog away who bit you once as a child; you steer a car back onto the road so it won't hit a tree; you complete a presentation that you previously had to end due to crying and tell your younger self you did a great job and that things will work out like this in the future.

Variant 2: Superman intervenes
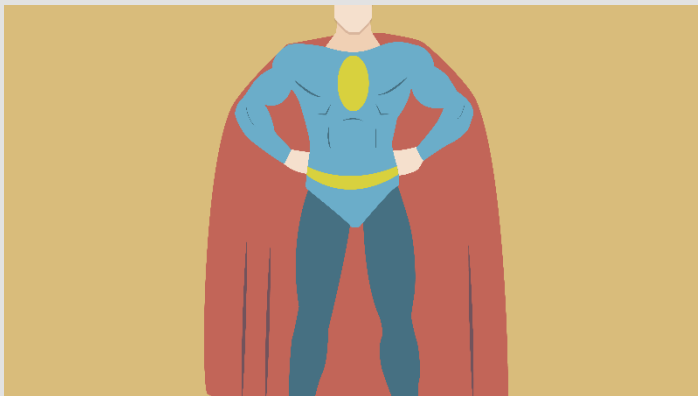
Figure 8. Here, you proceed similarly as in variant 1, but you do not enter the scene as your older self. Instead, you imagine another savior who protects you, such as a loving companion (e.g., Superman, Batman, an avatar from a computer game). You can also imagine a real person whom you associate with loving support and strength (e.g., mother, best friend). Absurd scenes can also be helpful in pushing negative past scenes aside; turning memories into a sort of cartoon can lead to a reduction in anxiety. For example, when you think of a car crash, you can imagine Harry Potter and his friends getting into the car and, before the car hits the guardrail, it goes faster and faster and then becomes a flying vehicle (like in the Harry Potter movie).

Variant 3: Transformation, like a phoenix rising from the ashes
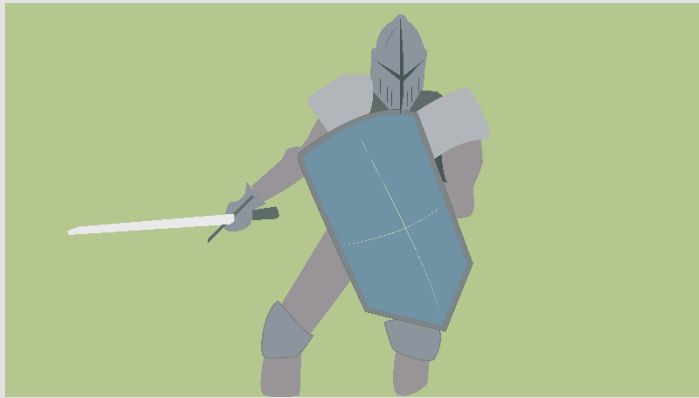
Figure 9. Your "victim" self" is transformed into a different person or fantasy character (e.g., a knight or elf) or develops special powers in order to change the course of things to create a good outcome.

Feel free to add as many details as possible to the scene. It is important that the starting point of the script is the old scene so that both scenes are in competition with one another. In this way, whenever old images arise, the "new edition" comes with it. A completely new scene will not be able to overcome the old images because both are kept separate in memory. To put it metaphorically, cover up and transform the old ugly tattoo by putting a new one over it—not next to it.

2. Transforming worries and fears

You can also apply the exercises for feelings of "angst," that is, worries directed at the future, particularly if you tend to become distressed over worst-case scenarios. Again, you should first identify the fears that frighten you the most. If there are several situations, select the one you want to work on first. Imagine the feared situation as accurately as possible and imagine how it could play out up until the expected bad outcome. Try to imagine the image or scene and describe it in as much detail as possible. Ideally, write out the details of the scene like a movie screenplay.

Now, think about how you could change the situation so that there is a happy ending. Unlike in the exercise for negative memories, it may be easier to imagine a more positive outcome because the event has not happened yet (and for most worries, it will likely never happen) but is only a figment of your imagination. In the imagination exercise for future events, you may change the course of events yourself or imagine others assisting you and thus experience a feeling of strength and competence. Again, there are several possibilities. For example, imagine yourself not failing as expected but solving the problem successfully—you are competent, so nothing bad happens. For this, you should also write a new script. This means writing down the changed sequence with as many details as possible, including a positive ending. Then, go through the new situation again with all the details. Imagine your worries and the new ending as a movie that involves as many of your senses as possible (sound, vision, smell, etc.). The livelier the new scene becomes, the more potent it is in transforming and challenging fear-inducing images.

Identify the version of the technique that works best for you!

Exercises for frightening images and fears about the future

Variant 1: Face your enemy

Figure 10. Imagine your future self as a strong, competent, and fearless person who reacts differently in fear-inducing situations than you currently do. Perhaps you are bigger, stronger, and larger than in reality. Maybe you go directly to what scares you and behave like others who have successfully handled similar situations. For example, you can talk in front of a group and everyone listens to you, or you can go up to a dog and pet it, or you see a spider in your home and can remove it yourself. Another example might be that you enter an elevator and realize that it is so fun that you ride it up and down several times. Again, if you drastically exaggerate the scene, the technique may work even better.

Variant 2: Superman in your ear

Figure 11. Imagine again a loving, competent, and strong companion who supports you in the feared situation and helps you to master it. It is important that the supporter whispers (as if you had headphones on) helpful and competent instructions before you take a next step. Importantly, they should not solve the problem for you! You should follow their instructions yourself but know that the powerful helper is close to you. This can be very effective because most anxious people know what they want to do in a frightening situation but are simply not able to actually do it. It is often helpful when these instructions come from a competent other person.

Variant 3: Transformation, rising like a phoenix from the ashes

Figure 12. This method corresponds to the one already explained above for memory. You can use it in the exact same way for fears about future events. Your "victim" self transforms into another person (e.g., your fearless "future" self) or into a fantasy figure (e.g., a knight, an elf; see also the example in Figure 13) or develops special powers and turns the tables on the "aggressor" (e.g., during an assault, as in the example in Figure 14).

If you would like, you can make the scene very detailed. It's important that the old, frightening imagination is the starting point so that the two scenes compete with each other. Whenever old fears intrude, the positive image will automatically start. "Rain" on your brain's "parade" of negative images.

Figure 13. If you are afraid of being teased, bullied, or attacked (or if this has actually happened to you in the past), just imagine yourself transforming into a well-protected knight in armor or imagine another savior rushing to your side to help.

Figure 14. Other happy endings could be that you imagine yourself getting larger and stronger so that others are unable to harm you (example on the left). Or, you imagine that you fight back and then both bullies starting fighting one another rather than going after you.

3. Changing negative attitudes and self-attributions (the present)

As previously shown, strong negative memories and fears about future events usually shape our self-image. This happens in two ways: (1) directly by making us view ourselves as inferior and weaker than others and (2) indirectly by leading us to devalue ourselves verbally. Here, a technique may help that is similar to variant 3 above. Choose an image, symbol, or metaphor that best depicts you when you feel anxious or depressed. Take, for example, a scared rabbit that is afraid of their own shadow or a blobfish deep down at the aquarium's bottom looking up at everyone and condemning itself because of its ugliness.

Then, transform this image in your mind's eye into something of beauty and pride (see Figures 15 and 16)—your ideal self, so to speak. The images below are just examples; feel free to make up your own. Let your imagination run wild and think about strong and powerful images that fit for you. Keeping your image in mind, assume the appropriate posture. Push your shoulders away from your ears and stretch as if someone is pulling you up like a puppet with a thread at the top of your head. Make yourself bigger while you rise up like a phoenix from the ashes.

Here, it is also important to begin with the negative scene or images and transform them. Unfortunately, it is not possible to completely erase such images or scenes from our memories or to suppress them. You can, however, transform the scene, like changing an ugly tattoo into something pretty. Make sure you imagine one full transformation sequence.
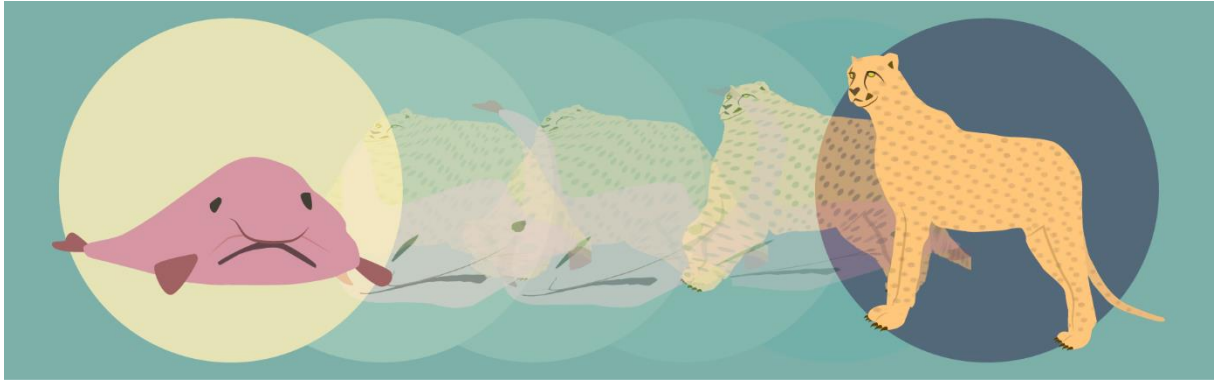
Figure 15. The ugly blobfish[2] that is despised by everyone is transformed into a strong and fast cheetah that is admired by all.

Figure 16. The vulnerable chick is transformed into a proud eagle that no one is able to harm.

Do this in a similar way with the derogatory terms by which you refer to yourself. The tattoo is not transformed, but it can be imagined as negative graffiti on a wall that is made more positive. Play with the words! Instead of "Loser," say "Lose your fear." Build a chain of associations that lead to a positive end that lifts your self-esteem. Another example: "I idiot" becomes "I did it and I will always be able to do it." Sometimes nonsense words or deliberate exaggerations or irony are particularly good because the otherwise prevailing feelings of fear and helplessness are kept in check by humor. This exercise requires your creativity, and it may take some time for you to find the correct new words. Make rhymes or word strings or swap letters in one word so that a new word is created. "I am a coward" turns into "I am a cowboy." There is nothing wrong with silly associations if they work for you. Do not say "Loser—I am not a loser," as this will not help because the negative word remains and you are attempting to suppress an idea, which is doomed to fail (see the elephant example above). Paint over the graffiti—do not create a new saying next to it! Of course, you can also assure yourself you are not a loser or you can contemplate the things you did do well, but those would be a different technique.

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[2] The blobfish is known for its unusual appearance. If you haven't heard of it, you can find more information on the internet.

In closing—The Golden Rules

1 No mental suppression. Do not fight negative images or words but transform them instead. The suppression of negative thoughts, in most cases, will simply intensify the negative thoughts.

2 Do not create a completely new scene that has nothing to do with the current one. Instead, change the "crime scene" and create a happy ending. Embellish and transform the old, ugly tattoo (image/scene) or graffiti (negative self-statement) directly. The impact of the scenes, images, and statements will be reduced most effectively if they are changed directly so that interference occurs.

3 Play around with the techniques. This manual is short and is not a "recipe for success" that should be followed to the letter. We simply offer suggestions and guidance for your practice. You have to go down this path of transforming your thoughts, fears, and memories alone; however, you can and should follow your own path. Trust yourself, but give yourself the necessary time. Rule of thumb: If you feel better after trying one method and are not suppressing or avoiding memories, keep going!

4 If these techniques don't help, try taking a break for one or two days. Read through the instructions again carefully. Are you possibly doing something wrong (e.g., not thinking of the scene in enough detail or fully immersing yourself in it), or have you overlooked something? There are many more psychotherapeutic techniques for negative emotions and memories. If the techniques described here aren't a good fit for you or you do not benefit from them, don't lose hope. Simply try out other approaches or perhaps seek the help of a therapist who can try these techniques with you.

We wish you all the best! May the power of imagination be with you!