Harnessing the Power of Imagery, Behavioral Rehearsal, Embodiment Techniques, and Alternating Bilateral Stimulation in Trauma Therapy

In my work, I'm constantly exploring innovative approaches to help clients navigate their healing journeys. Over the years, the integration of imaginal resourcing (guided imagery), behavioral rehearsal, embodiment techniques like *power posing* and *fiero* in combination with alternating bilateral stimulation (ABLS) has emerged as a powerful set of tools, particularly for complex trauma clients in the stabilization phase of therapy. These approaches, rooted in both psychological theory and practical application, empower clients to shift their internal states, build resilience, and reinforce their capacity for healing.

Application in High-Performance Settings

Guided imagery isn't just for therapy—it's also used in high-performance settings, such as by Navy SEALs and professional athletes. The Navy SEALs, for instance, utilize guided visualization to mentally rehearse for demanding missions. This practice helps them prepare for the psychological and physical challenges they'll face, building mental resilience and enhancing performance under stress (Thom, Johnson, & Robertson, 2016). Similarly, athletes use guided imagery to mentally simulate their peak performance, improving muscle memory, concentration, and confidence (Callow, Roberts, & Fawkes, 2015; Williams, Cumming, & Balanos, 2017).

Imagery and Behavioral Rehearsal: Crafting Multisensory Experiences

Entering into the world of imagery, including its application in acquiring new skills, offers a journey into the mind's immense power. Imagery, far beyond simple visualization, invokes a multisensory experience—a vivid, multi-dimensional scene in the theater of the mind, where every sense plays a pivotal role. In this space, experiences are not just seen but felt, heard, tasted, and smelled. **This intricate process blurs the lines between imagined scenarios and tangible experiences, demonstrating our brain's remarkable inability to differentiate between the two**.

Imagery stands as a cornerstone in mental practice, particularly when learning and refining new skills. It offers an additional rehearsal space, a mental gym where individuals can engage in extra rounds of practice without physical exertion. This preparatory tool fine-tunes skills and strategies before their execution, enhancing performance through visual and kinesthetic senses—elements critical in psychomotor skill development.

Historically, imagery's impact has been well-documented, dating back to initial studies by pioneers like Sackett and Perry, who illuminated the benefits of mental rehearsal. Their work laid the foundation for countless further studies, especially in sports psychology, showcasing imagery's profound ability to enhance athletic performance, from improving accuracy and speed to boosting confidence and reducing anxiety (Perry, 1939; Sackett, 1934).

Imagery isn't just for athletes; its benefits extend across various domains, aiding in skill acquisition, strategy development, and psychological preparedness. Cognitive-specific imagery allows learners to construct a mental blueprint of a skill, offering a bridge between cognitive

understanding and physical execution. This mental practice proves particularly effective for novices, fostering deeper engagement with the task at hand.

Combining mental (imaginal) and behavioral rehearsals (role play)—blending the conceptual with the tangible—emerges as a highly effective strategy. This integrated approach maximizes learning and performance, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between mind and body in skill acquisition.

Integrating Embodiment Techniques into Imagery and Behavioral Rehearsal

Behavioral rehearsal is a powerful tool in trauma therapy, allowing clients to practice desired behaviors or coping strategies within the safety of the therapeutic environment—or their imagination—before applying them in real-life situations. Whether through role-playing exercises or guided visualization, clients gain confidence and mastery over new skills, reducing anxiety and improving their ability to manage real-world challenges.

To enhance the effectiveness of behavioral rehearsal, I often integrate embodiment techniques. Two key examples are *fiero* and power posing.

- **Fiero** is the intense sense of pride and fulfillment that comes from overcoming significant challenges. This emotion, felt deeply in the body, is a prime example of how recalling and re-experiencing triumph can anchor a client in their embodied sense of resilience. When clients connect with their moments of *fiero*, they physically embody the strength and empowerment that accompanied those victories, making these feelings more accessible during current challenges.

- **Power posing**, as researched by Cuddy et al. (2010) and Carney et al. (2010), involves adopting expansive, open postures—like the Wonder Woman stance—that can significantly alter our neuroendocrine profiles. This embodiment technique leads to increased testosterone levels and decreased cortisol levels, which are associated with greater confidence, reduced anxiety, and a higher tolerance for risk. By physically embodying a sense of power and confidence through power poses, clients deepen the impact of their mental rehearsal, making the experience more tangible and accessible in moments of need.

Fiero Worksheet: A Tool for Integrating Triumph

To help clients fully harness the power of fiero, I created a worksheet (included) designed to guide them in exploring and integrating this powerful emotion. The worksheet encourages clients to build personal narratives of strength, imaginally re-enact their triumphs, and develop positive inner dialogues centered around their achievements. Through this process, clients learn to embody their sense of fiero physically, often using power poses or other embodiment techniques to reinforce the connection between their mental and physical states. By practicing these exercises, clients can anchor the emotion of fiero in their bodies, making it a readily accessible resource during times of stress or self-doubt.

The Role of Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Alternating Bilateral Stimulation (BLS), often used in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), involves stimulating both sides of the body alternately, through visual,

tactile or auditory means. When combined with imaginal resourcing and behavioral rehearsal, BLS can further anchor the embodied experience of calm, strength, and resilience. For example, as clients visualize their inner sanctuary, recall moments of fiero, or practice new behaviors, introducing BLS through eye movements, alternate tapping or auditory cues helps solidify these positive internal states, making them more accessible during challenging moments.

The Historical and Cultural Roots of Guided Imagery

Guided imagery, or imaginal resourcing, has deep historical roots, tracing back to ancient civilizations such as the Greeks, Chinese medicine, and American Indian traditions. Over centuries, it has been integrated into various cultural, religious, and therapeutic practices, showcasing its universal appeal and effectiveness. In psychotherapy, guided imagery gained significant traction in the mid-20th century through the work of pioneers like Jacob Moreno, who developed psychodrama, and Hans Leuner, who refined the technique into guided affective imagery. Their work laid the foundation for the therapeutic use of guided imagery, which has since been further developed by figures like Dr. David Bressler and Dr. Martin Rossman, particularly in addressing chronic pain and serious health conditions.

Conclusion

In my practice, integrating imaginal resourcing, behavioral rehearsal, embodiment techniques like fiero and power posing, and alternating bilateral stimulation has proven to be a dynamic and effective approach to trauma therapy. These techniques, grounded in both psychological theory and practical application, empower clients to shift their internal states, build resilience, and navigate their healing journeys with greater confidence and strength. By leveraging the mind-body connection and the powerful emotion of *fiero*, we can help clients create lasting change and foster their mental and emotional well-being.

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Worksheet: Embracing Your Triumphant Self Through *Fiero*

Purpose: This worksheet is designed to help you identify and connect with moments in your life when you've experienced *fiero*—a deep, rewarding feeling of having overcome a significant challenge through your efforts. By recognizing and reflecting on these moments, you can cultivate a greater sense of self-efficacy, resilience, and personal pride.

Part 1: Identifying Your Fiero Moments

Reflect on Your Achievements

Think about times in your life when you've overcome a significant challenge. This could be related to personal growth, professional achievements, academic success, or overcoming personal obstacles.

1. **Describe the Challenge:** Briefly describe a situation where you faced a significant challenge. What made it difficult? Why was it important to you?

2. **Your Actions:** Detail the steps you took to overcome this challenge. How did you approach the situation? What qualities or strengths did you draw upon?

3. **The Moment of Success:** Describe the moment you realized you had overcome the challenge. What were you doing? How did you feel in that instant?

Part 2: Visualizing Your Fiero with Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Create a Vivid Image

Using your description from Part 1, close your eyes and vividly imagine the moment of success. Involve all your senses in this visualization while engaging in alternating bilateral stimulation (BLS), such as gently tapping your shoulders alternately or using auditory cues.

1. **Sensory Details:** What can you see, hear, smell, or feel? Imagine the environment around you and any sounds or sensations present at the moment of achievement. Use BLS to deepen your connection to these sensations.

2. **Emotional Landscape:** Dive deep into the emotions you felt. Beyond just happiness or satisfaction, focus on the unique feeling of *fiero*. What does this emotion feel like in your body? Where do you feel it most strongly? Use BLS to help anchor these feelings in your body.

3. **Self-Reflection:** Reflect on what this accomplishment says about you as a person. What strengths or qualities does this reveal? Use BLS to reinforce these positive reflections.

Part 3: Embodying Your Fiero with Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Bringing Fiero into the Present

Now that you've identified and visualized your *fiero* moment, it's time to connect that feeling to your current self, using BLS to enhance the embodiment process.

1. **Drawing Strength:** Think about a current challenge you're facing. How can recalling the feeling of your triumphant moment help you in this situation? Imagine infusing this current challenge with the same strength and determination while engaging in BLS.

2. **Physical Embodiment:** Reflect on the physical sensations and body posture you experienced during your moment of *fiero*. Stand up and physically mimic the posture you held or imagine holding in that triumphant moment, using BLS to deepen the embodiment. Notice how embodying this posture makes you feel now.

3. **Movement of Triumph:** Replicate the celebratory gesture or movement from your *fiero* moment, or create one that represents your triumph. As you perform this movement, engage in BLS to further anchor the experience in your body.

Part 4: Applying Fiero to Current and Future Challenges with Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Visualization and Strategy

Use the vivid memory of your *fiero* moment, combined with BLS, to apply this resilience and strength to current and upcoming challenges in your life.

1. **Current Challenges:** Identify a challenge you're currently facing. Visualize yourself overcoming this challenge with the same ferocity and determination you had during your *fiero* moment. Engage in BLS as you visualize, and notice how it strengthens your confidence.

2. **Future Visualization:** Imagine a future scenario where you achieve something significant. Visualize this scene in detail, focusing on the sensations in your body and the emotions of *fiero* while using BLS to reinforce these feelings.

3. **Daily Practice:** Each day, take a moment to stand in your *fiero* posture, embody the sensations of triumph, and make the movement of victory, integrating BLS into this practice. Use this as a daily reminder of your strength and capability.

Worksheet: Harnessing Power Posing for Confidence and Resilience

Purpose: This worksheet is designed to help you utilize the technique of power posing, combined with alternating bilateral stimulation (BLS), to enhance your sense of confidence, resilience, and personal power. By adopting specific postures associated with strength and dominance, you can influence your mental and emotional state, preparing yourself to face challenges with greater assurance.

Part 1: Identifying Your Power Poses

Reflect on Your Body Language

Think about times when you've felt confident and in control. What was your body language like during those moments? What postures did you naturally assume?

1. **Posture Awareness:** Briefly describe a situation where you felt particularly confident or powerful. How were you standing or sitting? What was your body doing?

2. **Body Language Reflection:** Consider your posture, gestures, and the way you carried yourself. Did you stand tall? Were your shoulders back? Were your arms open or your hands on your hips?

3. **Choosing Your Power Pose:** Based on your reflections, choose one or two power poses that you can practice regularly. These might include standing with your hands on your hips, raising your arms above your head in a V-shape, or leaning back with your arms behind your head.

Part 2: Practicing Your Power Pose with Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Create a Routine

Now that you've identified your power poses, it's time to practice them regularly, integrating BLS to internalize the feelings of confidence and strength they bring.

1. **Morning Routine:** Start your day by holding your chosen power pose for two minutes while engaging in BLS. Stand in front of a mirror if possible, and observe how your posture and BLS affect your mood and mindset.

2. **Pre-Challenge Preparation:** Before facing a challenging situation—like a meeting, presentation, or difficult conversation—take a moment to assume your power pose and engage in BLS. Hold it for two minutes, focusing on the sensations in your body and the shift in your mental state.

3. **Sensory Awareness:** While holding your pose and engaging in BLS, pay attention to how your body feels. Do you notice a sense of strength or calm? Where do you feel this in your body? Focus on these sensations and allow them to anchor you in the present moment.

Part 3: Embodying Power in Daily Life with Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Integrating Power Posing into Your Routine

Power posing isn't just a tool for moments of high stress or challenge; it's a practice you can incorporate into your daily life to maintain a strong, confident presence, enhanced by BLS.

1. **Daily Check-In:** Throughout the day, check in with your body language. Are you slumping or closing yourself off? If so, take a moment to adjust your posture into a more open and expansive pose while engaging in BLS. Notice how this simple shift, combined with BLS, can affect your mood and confidence.

2. **Anchor Moments:** Identify moments in your daily routine where you can integrate power posing with BLS. This could be during your morning routine, before important phone calls, or even during breaks. Use these moments to reinforce your confidence and maintain a sense of control.

3. **Self-Reflection:** At the end of each day, reflect on how power posing and BLS have influenced your interactions, decisions, and overall mood. Did they help you feel more grounded, assertive, or calm? What situations benefited most from this practice?

Part 4: Applying Power Posing to Current and Future Challenges with Alternating Bilateral Stimulation

Visualization and Strategy

Use power posing and BLS as proactive tools to prepare for challenges and reinforce your resilience.

1. **Current Challenges:** Identify a current challenge you're facing. Visualize yourself approaching this challenge while holding your power pose and engaging in BLS. How does this posture, combined with BLS, change your outlook or strategy for dealing with the situation?

2. **Future Visualization:** Imagine a future scenario where you need to project confidence and strength. Visualize yourself in this situation while holding your power pose and engaging in BLS. Picture the outcome you desire and notice how your posture and BLS influence your confidence and clarity.

3. **Daily Practice:** Continue to practice power posing daily, integrating BLS into this routine. Over time, this will help reinforce your sense of self-assurance and resilience, making these qualities more accessible whenever you need them.

Reflection and Integration

Reflect on this exercise and how incorporating power posing and BLS into your daily routine can influence your approach to life's challenges. How does embodying a posture of power and confidence, combined with BLS, affect your mindset and interactions? Consider how you can make power posing and BLS a regular part of your strategy for personal and professional growth.

This worksheet is a tool to help you harness the physical and psychological benefits of power posing and BLS. By regularly practicing these postures and integrating BLS, you can build a more resilient, confident, and empowered version of yourself, ready to face any challenge that comes your way.