Mantras and Visualizations for Trauma Therapists

Supportive self-talk and related practices play a part in helping us not become incapacitated and caught up in our clients’ trauma fields. This list is a compilation of ideas and practices offered in an online group for therapists. <http://emmacameron.com/self-care-for-therapists/mantras-and-visualisations-for-trauma-therapists/>

Mantras are things you can say to yourself, either sub-vocally or out loud, depending on the situation. Sometimes mantras are most effective when repeated over and over, according to what you feel you need.

Single-Word Mantras

You might repeat single words to yourself, perhaps combining this with tapping or patting on your chest.

* ‘Love’
* ‘Patience’
* ‘Calm’
* ‘Serenity’
* ‘Peace’
* ‘Whole’

What’s Mine; What’s Theirs

Simple statements can remind you that even though your heart goes out to your clients, and you may care deeply for them, you and they are separate and you don’t have to hold their trauma as your own. Here’s what some therapists tell themselves:

* ‘Their story is not your story.’
* ‘This does not belong to me.’
* ‘This is not my pain.’

Faith in the Existence of Good

“I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers -so many caring people in this world”—Mr. Rogers. Holding an awareness of ‘good’ can be immensely helpful, especially when you are confronted with so much evidence that very bad things do happen. Mantras help many therapists hold on to an awareness that goodness, healing and growth are real:

* ‘There is good in this world.’
* ‘Healing is possible.’
* “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well” (Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416)
* ‘I remember that it’s not all down to me. There are other good people and supportive forces in the world.’
* ‘I am part of an enormous circle of helpers all around the world.’

Positive Reframing

When we encounter a lot of trauma it can be helpful to remind ourselves that within something very dark can also lie the seeds of transformation and growth:

* ‘The wound is where the light enters.’
* ‘No one is shooting at me today.’*(From a therapist who is an army veteran)*
* ‘I try to focus on the strength and resilience of the client in front of me. That leaves me feeling hopeful (typically) versus filled with doom.’
* ‘I remember that the caterpillar turns to mush during its process of transitioning into a butterfly. This helps me sit with my clients in their dark places and honor where they are now, knowing that sometimes it can be a necessary part of their journey to a more ‘whole’ place.’
* ‘I think about kintsugi, the Japanese tradition of mending cracked pottery with gold, to create something that is even more beautiful because of having been broken and re-set.’

Gratitude

Along with awe, joy, vitality, pride, and feeling moved, gratitude is a ‘healing affect’, according to Diana Fosha PhD, author of *The Transforming Power of Affect*. We can boost our own resilience by consciously making space for acknowledging and feeling gratitude.

* ‘I think of it as a privilege that I get to be present for the freedom of release of these often decades-long secrets.’
* ‘How beautiful is my profession that someone can trust me with their traumas?!’
* ‘In session I remind myself how blessed I am to be a conduit for hope and healing.’

You Are Enough

Despite years of training, therapists sometimes feel very inadequate when we are trying to help people who may have suffered very traumatic experiences or longstanding relational disruptions. These mantras address that:

* ‘You are the helper, not the healer.’
* ‘It’s their journey not my journey, and I’m here to listen.’
* ‘When I am truly present with someone, I am enough.’
* ‘I remind myself of Brene Brown’s maxim, ‘Don’t shrink, don’t puff up, stay on your sacred ground’.
* ‘I am making a difference’
* ‘I am here to witness not rescue.’

Self-Compassion

Acknowledging and holding pain with not just compassion for your client but also tender self-compassion, can be very powerful.

* ‘I touch my hand gently to my cheek, and say ‘May I be at ease. May I accept myself. May I know deep peace. May I be kind to myself’.
* I particularly like to say to myself, ‘This is a moment of suffering, and anyone would find this hard’.’

Visualizations

Neuroscience studies have shown that creative visualizations can have a measurable effect on the nervous system of body and brain. Many counsellors and psychotherapists use visualizations to help release trauma and stress, and bring themselves back into a state of emotional equilibrium and resilience.

Releasing and Taking Back

* ‘I often visualize releasing whatever I’ve held from the client, and taking back whatever of myself that I’ve given to the client, with the intention of compassion and trust in their strengths and resources.’
* ‘I am a vessel of light and love to ease pain and suffering… my cup overflows with light (visuals that remind me that I am NOT a container or vessel for the pain or trauma). Take a moment to ground and release (visualize it all running through the soles of your feet into the ground).’
* ‘I use a process called “cord cutting”. It is an energy healing technique in which I visualize having the ability to detach from any ‘cords’ that might keep me connected to said client. I use this practice daily and in all areas of my life.’
* ‘After each client goes out the door, I visualize them surrounded by a protective color and I say ‘May you go in peace and may you be released from suffering’. Then I do the same for myself, with a different color.’
* ‘I like Tonglen practices (from Buddhism). I visualize myself breathing in the other person’s suffering and breathing out loving-kindness towards them. I do find it beneficial for myself, even though I’m taking in the other person’s difficult stuff.’
* ‘I imagine I am a screen door when listening to the story…so I am present and available, and the story doesn’t ‘stick’ but passes through like a soft breeze.’

Transformer

The transformer, or converter, is a metaphor that some therapists find very powerful:

* ‘I think of my body as a converter. I breathe in coal, breathe out diamonds. Breathe in sickness, breathe out health. Breathe in trauma, breathe out peace.’
* ‘I use the imagery of a diamond, letting energy/light move through, remaining hard and smooth, refracting the pain into something beautiful. Somehow, this enables me to fully listen with compassion, and keeps me from crying.’

Comfort

When we have been deeply touched by a client’s pain, we can offer ourselves some comfort:

* ‘Sometimes when stressed I visualize my bed and my jammies!’
* ‘I visualize a warm, gently weighted cushion over my heart area. Sometimes I’ll put my hand there too, and invite my client to do the same for himself.’
* ‘I like the ‘butterfly hug’, where I hug myself whilst tapping on alternate shoulders.’
* ‘I visualize something that makes me feel warm and happy. I try and involve all my senses on the visualization.’

Sounds

You might use sound and vibration as a focal point for meditation and mindfulness. Some therapists also like to involve aural bilateral stimulation:

* ‘I put on the Mark Grant EMDR cd’s and listen to the audio tones until my distress is down or gone. He has some tracks on the Anxiety Release album that are guided too. Very effective.’
* ‘On the Insight Timer app there’s slow bilateral tones with music that I listen to, to calm and focus me.’

Water

Water is an essential element in our lives, so it’s not surprising that many therapists include water in self-care rituals:

* ‘Fill some water in a bowl before the session, then empty all of the pain and negativity afterwards.’
* ‘At the end of the day, I shower and wash all the hurt away in a renewal process. I imagine that when washing my hands as well.’
* ‘I get in a warm shower and let all the pain go down the drain. Wonderful imagery that works for me.’

Bringing in the Senses

* ‘I wash my hands with scented soap, brush my teeth and think about a breezy Fall day among autumn colored trees.’
* ‘Essential oils help me.’

Breathing

* When a particularly difficult story is shared I pay attention to my body for countertransference and remind myself that this is “Not your story”. I explore the countertransference with my supervisor.’
* ‘One of the things I’ve found is that if I’m starting to feel heavy during a session, usually my client is, too. So sometimes I ask if they want to pause and we do a relaxation/breathing exercise called “setting down the world”. I frame it in context for them but it’s really for me. It works so well.
* ‘I find remembering to breathe, breathe, and breathe. As I am witnessing someone’s story and pain I also remind myself that by being present with this person, I am a representation of light and an opposing energy to what they experienced. But it is hard to remember that in the hard stuff…sometimes I just get exhausted.’
* ‘After a session I practice a few rounds of 9 second breathing.’

Pets

* ‘I work with my dog so I connect with his warm, furry, unconditionally loving self and pull in a whole bunch of positive warm fuzzies.’

Sleep

* ‘I take a nap at lunchtime.
* There are times when I feel intense sleepiness after a tough session, and I need to sleep. It’s like falling off a cliff. I sleep hard, and I awake refreshed, so I know that kind of sleep is what my body needs sometimes. I’ve also noticed different needs at different ages, I needed to “sleep off” the day’s stress much more in my younger years. It’s fascinating to me, how my body has such wisdom to heal itself if I can just tune in and heed it.’

Prayer and Meditation

* ‘I pray before each work day.’
* ‘I sit and focus on the sensations in my body. I track them as they shift in intensity and move within me. When I pay attention to my body, inevitably I become aware of areas that are reacting, and as I focus on these sensations they do their thing and then they subside. This helps me release whatever traumatic energy I absorbed during the session. I also regularly do this when I am falling asleep at night to keep myself balanced.’
* ‘I use Reiki, meditation, poetry, painting, and essential oils.’
* ‘I do an energetic/spiritual “tune-up” each working day, asking for the best possible help in working with [name each client], and a brief re-tune-up before each client, including their name. And I give thanks, give each client by name to the care of God, & “tune-down” at the end of the work day.

Movement

Movement is well known to be an important aspect of processing trauma.

* ‘I really have to move my body between sessions. Stretches and jumping-jacks work for me, and help me release some of the trauma residue that’s been held in my body.’
* ‘I like to swing my arms around, all floppy, twisting my body from side to side.’

Spine Visualization

The spine is not just a metaphor for self-support – it is, of course, concretely there. This therapist combines imagery, movement and body awareness to helps feel supported and strong:

* ‘When I’m feeling wobbly and very affected after a session by my client’s trauma, I sit or stand tall and move my attention to my spine. I visualize it and think about how strong it is, how flexible and supportive. I sense how it needs to move or stretch. That’s usually enough to keep me feeling steady and supported.’

Perspective-taking

Several of the therapists quoted agreed on the importance of taking a particular perspective on the work they do with their clients.

* ‘Not so much a mantra as it is a perspective. I feel that my clients need to release their trauma in order to heal, and I hold that safe space for them. They are reminded of that and the fact that they are safe in the moment while remembering the memories. I think externalizing the trauma for them also helps keep it in perspective for me as well. It also helps when the trauma is expressed through art and is really separated from us. I’m always reminding my clients that once they process something to their satisfaction they can metaphorically “throw it away in the trash can” and sometimes the art ends up there too!’

Purpose, Meaning and Values

Connecting to your sense of higher purpose and meaning can be very supportive. As Nietzsche wrote ‘He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any how’.

* ‘I keep reminding myself of why I do this work, and how it fits with my deep values and what I see as my purpose in life. I find this really helps me.’