



RELEASE YOUR PICTURES

Most of us have pictures, or expectations, of what we want or need in order to be satisfied. For example, the person who wants to be rich doesn't just want a pile of money stashed in a bank vault. She probably has a specific mental picture of what riches can bring to her life: perhaps a new Mercedes loaded with chrome, or a 26-room mansion with an Olympic-sized swimming pool, or a 100-acre estate lined with tennis courts and lush flower gardens.

Of course, pictures can be about anything. The person who's hungry often has a vivid mental picture of the meal that would satisfy him: *Ahhh, I can just see that steaming, fresh bread and rich, creamy soup, that omelet smothered in cheese, and the mounds of gourmet ice cream for dessert....*

Discover your picture album

Just about any time we feel a need, we conjure up a picture of what will satisfy that need.

This habit starts early. A baby feels hunger pangs and starts to scream. Within seconds, her father appears with a bottle. The baby is satisfied. She now stores a mental picture of her father holding the bottle to her mouth. She connects that picture with stopping the pangs. Voila! She knows how to solve the hunger problem, and the picture goes on file. The picture becomes a powerful expectation that can guide her thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Keep in mind that the concept of "pictures" can involve all of our senses. Many pictures are visual, yet they can easily include tastes, sounds, smells, and physical sensations as well.

We could even say that our minds function like a huge photo album whose pages include pictures of all the ways we've satisfied our wants and needs in the past.

Whenever we want something or feel dissatisfied, we mentally search the album for a picture of how to get what we want or how to make the dissatisfaction go away. With that picture firmly in mind, we behave to make the world outside our heads match the picture inside our heads.

Remember that pictures serve us—and hinder us

Pictures often serve us. We actually need them in order to survive.

Imagine trying to find your way to work without an accurate mental picture of the streets of your city. Or imagine trying to find a sock without a clear mental picture of the contents of your sock drawer.

The problem is that pictures can also get in our way. When our pictures become emotionally backed demands—attachments—we set ourselves up for trouble.

Sometimes pictures turn into demands when the outside world changes and the pictures in our heads stay the same.

As an example, take the college student who looks forward to returning home to see her parents at spring break. During the flight, she pictures her mother and father nestled in the living room by the fireplace like they always do after eating dinner. She also calls up a mental picture of her bedroom in which she can see the exact location of each object in that room—the easy chair, the stuffed animals, the compact disc player, and the stacks of her favorite recordings.

When she finally arrives at the airport, her parents greet her warmly. After some small talk, her father delivers the news: "Honey, your mother and I decided to sell the house and most of our belongings. Since we're retired now and you're almost done with school, we've decided to live the carefree life. We've bought a recreational vehicle big enough to sleep four. Wait until you see it! It's got Naugahyde furnishings, bunk beds

galore, two built-in porta-potties, and even an artificial fireplace.”

Our student is crushed.

Gone is her room and all the resting places for those cherished stuffed animals. She starts conjuring up pictures of her parents’ RV. In her mind she sees a cramped, clanky, gas-guzzling motor home that smells like burnt oil.

This is just one example of how pictures and reality can be in conflict—and the negative feelings that can result. Any time you feel depressed, anxious, or sad, check to see how reality is violating one of your prized mental pictures.

Release or replace your pictures

When pictures start to get in our way, there are two simple things we can do.

One is to just notice our pictures and release them. We can open up our mental photo albums and notice how the pictures stored there rule our thinking and behavior. Just becoming aware of what our pictures are and how they affect us can be a huge step toward decreasing their power.

A second thing we can do is to replace the old pictures with new ones. We stored those pictures in the first place. At any time, we can stock our albums with new pictures.

Return to our unhappy college student for a minute. She could take a second look at her mental pictures of her old house. When she’s willing to tell the truth about that place, she remembers that her room had closet doors that never shut tight. Then there were those floorboards that creaked mercilessly on winter mornings. And even though the fireplace was pretty, it leaked a lot of cold air into the house.

Then she sees her parents’ RV for the first time. She’s pleasantly surprised. The motor home is more spacious than she expected. The furnishings are stylish and modern. The bunk beds are actually

comfortable, and the stereo system is a knockout. Even the porta-potties are spotless and exude a kind of rustic charm. Her old pictures of RVs as bulky, stuffy, and generally dorky just don’t conform to reality anymore.

With this discovery, she creates a new mental picture of family bliss—one that’s more in tune with the present. She sees herself lounging on a bunk bed, singing along with her parents to their favorite CD as they hit the highways to Malibu.

Some things about pictures to keep in mind

Caution: The suggestion to release or replace pictures is not an invitation to practice denial or delusion. For example, many alcoholics choose a picture of themselves that says “I can choose to stop drinking at any time I want.” This picture can be highly inaccurate. When releasing and replacing pictures, we can practice a Success Strategy explained earlier in this book: “Tell the truth.”

When we gain skill at working with pictures, we remember a crucial fact about the world—things never stay the same. The only constant we can count on is constant change. When we try to negotiate life with a set of fixed mental pictures of the way things *ought* to be or the way they *used* to be, we’re setting ourselves up for disappointment.

We always have another option: We can take charge of the images that float through our minds. We don’t have to be ruled by an album of outdated pictures. Instead, we can keep releasing pictures and looking for more accurate ones. Ultimately, our pictures can become as fluid as reality itself.





Create an alternate picture

Think of some event that you anticipate with discomfort or even dread. Describe the pictures you associate with this event—the way you expect people to act and the way you expect things to turn out. If you've recently had an argument with your parents, for example, then you might expect to feel miserable at your next family reunion.

Write a description of your pictures in the space below. Feel free to do some drawing in the margins of the page as well; that might help you get pictures out of your mind and onto paper. If you like, continue writing or drawing on separate sheets of paper.

Now consider replacing the above pictures with pictures that are more realistic and more consistent with your happiness. For example, you could picture a family reunion in which you're willing to listen to your parents' point of view, even if you don't agree with it. In your picture, you and your parents communicate effectively and become even more intimate.

Describe your new pictures by drawing in the margins and/or writing in the space below. Again, use additional paper if needed.
