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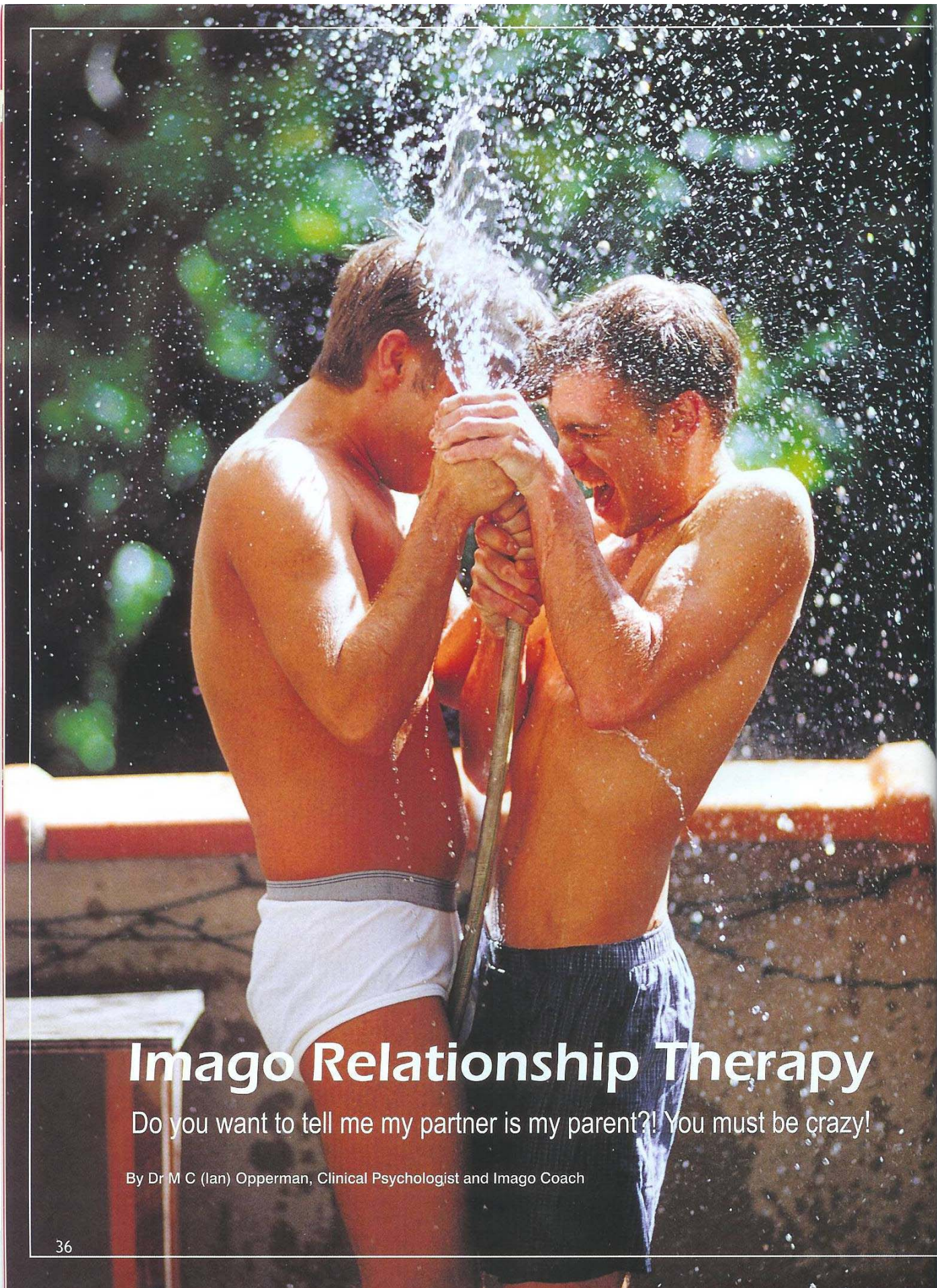
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Imago Relationship Therapy

Do you want to tell me my partner is my parent?! You must be crazy!

By Dr M C (Ian) Opperman, Clinical Psychologist and Imago Coach

I came across Imago approximately five years ago and it has changed my life on a personal and professional level. Imago is both a relationship therapy, as well as a philosophy as to why we become unhappy in relationships. Imago Relationship Therapy was developed by Dr Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.

The word Imago refers to the 'image' or the 'shadow image' which we attract in our relationships. We attract our 'shadow opposite' in relationships with the aim of healing the childhood wounding that has occurred at an unconscious level. When you meet your partner originally you will look for that aspect in him or her that you have unconsciously lost in your childhood. For instance, in the case of a girl being born into a family hoping to have had a boy child, the just born baby will sense that she does not live up to her parents' expectations and feel rejected. To complete the cycle, the child (the adult today) will attempt to find a partner who is going to reject her in a similar manner to which her parents did, but hoping that this time she will heal her wound and find someone who will unconditionally accept her in spite of everything. Another example would be where a boy grows up in a house where, falling off his bicycle one day, he runs crying to his father who tells him that sissies cry. The boy then, wanting his father's love and approval, decides to repress his emotions. In adulthood he will attract a partner that is over-emotional to compensate for his own lack of emotionality. At first he will be enamoured by the extreme emotionality of his partner, but later on in the relationship his partner's over-emotionality will irritate him and often become the reason for conflict in the relationship. We all repress a lost part of ourselves that we recognise in our partner and hope to get back, but because we do not have the skills to accept this gift in our partner, we become angry and ultimately reject our partner.

The state of first falling in love with one another is referred to as the 'romantic phase'. The stage when our partner starts to irritate us and conflict builds up in the relationship, is referred to as the 'power struggle' phase. Every couple goes through this and the power struggle stage is really an attempt at healing the unconscious childhood wounding that we all carry. During the power struggle phase people often drift apart and give up on the relationship, feeling disillusioned because they expected their partner to be the loving, supportive 'parent' their subconscious feels they did not have in childhood. Unfortunately the partner is unable to live up to that. Taking the example of the child who has been "born" the wrong gender taking it further, this person will subconsciously repeat this pattern and attract a partner who is constantly going to reject him, often leaving him feeling unworthy, incompetent and feeling not good enough in their presence in spite of his best efforts. So, although consciously this person wants to be loved and accepted unconditionally, he will subconsciously attract a partner who will enable him to repeat the childhood pattern. Our Imago carries the 'image' of our parents or childhood care givers, so we symbolically attract our parent in our partner into our lives, so that we can heal the pain and complete the developmental task of childhood. The bad news is that often when it does not work out during the power struggle, we move on to another relationship, projecting the pain of the failed relationship onto our partner. Unfortunately we take ourselves with

our childhood wounding along into the new relationship and attract another 'shadow image' or opposite puzzle piece that will replay a similar pattern with us. Gay people often jump from relationship to relationship hoping to find the ideal partner, the Mr or Mrs Right galloping into their lives on a white stallion and sweeping them off their feet to live happily ever after. The bad news is that this only happens in fairy tales! Love in real life is hard work because it is aimed at healing our childhood wounding and achieving developmental completion. If we keep on doing what we have done before we will keep on getting the same results, so if you keep on dealing with the conflict in your relationship without healing the underlying issues you will keep on getting stuck at the same theme in your relationship. The process of Imago Therapy helps the couple understand why they selected one another, and then learn a series of skills on how to heal the relationship and themselves. We all want to be in a loving, mutually supportive, trusting, and sacred relationship with one another. But unfortunately we soon become unsafe, scared, lonely, isolated and rejected with our Imago. Imago therapy will provide skills in communication, listening, being mutually respectful towards one another and helping your partner reach his/her goals in the relationship, because what we give is what we receive in life. It must be emphasised, though, that Imago is hard

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work and not by any means a magic wand that will simply take problems away. Imago is a way of life, as opposed to being an instant cure-all.

The role of the Imago Coach, in this case a Clinical Psychologist, is to coach the couple so that they can eventually do the processes themselves. The Coach's task is to ensure that both partners maintain mutual respect and to see to it that an environment of safety and sanctity is preserved. The Imago processes are a one-way discussion of one partner's issues, both positive and negative, with the other listening, mirroring what their partner is saying and containing them. Imago is not a two-way conversation. Following is an example of a process in Imago called the Behaviour Change Request, where one partner takes a very small issue that irritates him slightly to locate the underlying theme.

Mark consulted with me and was in tears, as his partner Jason had been unfaithful to him on numerous occasions. When confronted, Jason acknowledged it. Mark wanted to know if he should give up the relationship, but the psychologist told him that he has a subconscious pattern that needs to be completed.

In Imago therapy, Mark says to Jason that what frustrates him is the fact that Jason throws his dirty clothes on the floor every evening, whereas there is a designated basket for it. The Coach takes them to the next level and prompts Mark to say, "What hurts me most about it is..." Mark responds that the fact that he has spoken to Jason many times about it, he somehow keeps on ignoring his requests. The Coach prompts Mark again, "And it makes me afraid that ..." He says to his partner, "And it makes me afraid that what I'm saying is not important to you, that you don't see me as important in your life, or that what I have to say or what I ask of you has no value. It makes me feel that I am of no value to you in your life." Mark is prompted by the Coach to close his eyes, take a moment and see what this reminds him of in his childhood. Mark starts sobbing softly. Jason instinctively leans over and holds his hands. Tears stream over Mark's cheeks. He says, "I am five years old. My father has died in a car accident. We are at the funeral, sitting in church and his coffin is at the front of the church. Everyone is crying. I feel so confused. Why did God take my father away? What did I do to God that he needed to take my father away? What is wrong with me, there must be something wrong with me." The Coach prompts him, "And what I felt was ..." He responds, "I felt confused, numb, sad and lonely. Rejected." He is again prompted, "As a result ..." Mark continues, "I decide that if God can take my father away I must be worthless and have no value. I must be non-deserving of a father." Throughout the process Jason mirrors Mark's childhood experience and the feelings he felt, as well as the conclusions and decisions he made at that time of his life. The couple hold each other and weep together. When the wave of emotion passes, the Coach prompts Jason to say, "And now it makes perfect sense to me that when I leave my dirty clothes lying all over the house, after you have talked to me on numerous occasions that you would feel that I see you as unworthy and unimportant in my life." Jason takes a deep sigh and adds the following without prompting, "Now it also makes sense to me that every time I cheat on you, I reword your childhood hurt of being abandoned by your father, because you feel rejected by me having affairs." The couple are astonished and tearful at their insight. The process closes itself by providing Mark with the opportunity to ask for specific behavioural gifts from his partner, and he asks that

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Jason does three things to make him feel loved, worthy and precious: that Jason bring him coffee in bed every morning, that Jason give him a foot massage once a week, and that he put his dirty washing in the clothes basket. Jason agrees to give these unconditional gifts, which means he wants nothing in return.

The insight that Mark attracted Jason in completion of the wounded five year old whose father dies and wanting his 'dad', now Jason, to remain with him and not leave him and make him feel abandoned and rejected, is being replayed symbolically in him attracting a partner who will cheat. This behaviour will continue if both do not continue with Imago sessions and heal the underlying reasons for repeating dysfunctional behavioural patterns. The process ends with both in an emotional and loving embrace, Jason for the first time aware of the deeper reasoning behind Mark's needs.



Dr Opperman regularly holds Imago Relationship Workshops for couples and singles. Please contact his practice on (011) 615-2020 or (011) 615-7108 for more information.

Recommended reading:

Hendrix, Harville. *Keeping the Love you Find, A Personal Guide*, Pocket Books, New York, 1992.

Hendrix, Harville. *Getting the Love you Want, A Guide for Couples*, Pocket Books, Great Britain, 1993.

Opperman, Michiel Christiaan. *The Creation and Manifestation of Reality Through the Re-Enactment of Subconscious Conclusions and Decisions*, University of South Africa, 2005.