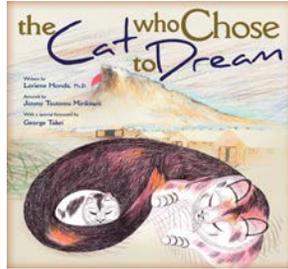


# **The Cat Who Chose To Dream:**

## **Psychological Discussion Guide**



*The following suggested ideas and information can be adapted by professionals in the field of Psychology for technical or developmental-appropriateness as most helpful to the reader. This guide is intended to be an informal resource for teaching psychological concepts relevant to The Cat Who Chose To Dream content to therapy clients, psychology students, supervisees and colleagues. Concepts are presented in the approximate order in which they appear in the book. Please see the “Relevant References and Suggested Resources” section at the end of this guide for more extensive and didactic background information upon which some of the addressed concepts are based.*

### **Concept: Transitional Object**

Transitional objects can hold a vital role in helping and facilitating the often anxiety-provoking developmental transition from dependence to independence. The chosen transitional symbol can represent the felt security experienced in the presence of the positive attachment figure; as a sense of secure attachment that can ideally be internalized and eventually carried by that person into adulthood.

In *The Cat Who Chose to Dream*, Jimmy the Cat scratches his back against and is comforted by a special rock at the beginning of our story and later at its conclusion, the rock serving as a vehicle for both a physical and emotional awakening from a dream-like reprieve. The rock not only aids him in being mindful in the present, it also reminds him of a poignant time in his life and facilitates his transition from the emotional state of vulnerability to one of emotional grounding. Jimmy the Cat’s rock serves as a bridge between the fear and uncertainty he felt in his youth and his later more grounded and independent adult life.

The special rock reminds Jimmy the Cat of the many ways in which he has grown from the important lessons he learned through surviving the WWII camp experience, including those leading to the eventual discovery of his own inner fortitude. In some way, Jimmy the Cat’s

continued affinity to the rock post-camp release may speak to the very real and deeply human need of all persons to have a sustained sense of safety, security and self-empowerment.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

- 1) While a “traditional” transitional object tends to be symbolic of maternal nurturing and comfort, such as a soft baby blanket, can an atypical “attachment” object like a hard and coarse rock be used in the absence of a comforting parental figure? Can the rock serve not as a symbol of a clearly-identified parental figure but instead of one’s own *self*-parenting internal resources?
- 2) How might Jimmy the Cat use his special rock to “own” his difficult emotions associated with the camp experience and in doing so, shift to a more emotionally-regulated, independent state of mind?
- 3) Ask the students/clients what they would pick as a transitional object that would best represent and remind them of positive attachments in their present lives before they might embark on another phase of their lives, i.e. move to another state or country, go off to college, get married, start their own families, get a new job, etc. What transitional objects would bring them comfort or remind them of how they best define themselves today?

### **Concepts: Loss, Grief, Adjustment Difficulties, Trauma**

It is common for those who suffer unanticipated, traumatic loss or change to experience a wide range of emotions – for some, it can be manifested more as an *internalized* state of anxiety while on the other end of the continuum, others might experience this more as an intense *externalized* rage. Some signs of anxiety can include distractibility and inattention, hyperactivity, phobias, catastrophic thinking, perseverative thoughts and worries, etc., while symptoms of depression could include those of a more “vegetative” nature affecting the basic bodily functions of appetite, sleep, alertness, and elimination routines, among others.

*The Cat Who Chose to Dream* depicts how in a moment’s notice, Jimmy the Cat’s family members, like over 110,000 others of Japanese ancestry in the US, experience a similarly traumatic and immediate loss. They are instantaneously stripped of what they cherish in their home life: their beautiful house; neighborhood friends and tree-lined streets; schools, playgrounds and community parks that echo with children’s laughter...and, most of all, their sense of belonging.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

- 1) Ask the students/clients what would they miss most in their own lives if it were suddenly taken from them?
- 2) Help them to identify what aspects of their lives are irreplaceable and what could be re-created no matter where they are and in what circumstances they find themselves.
- 3) Discuss how Jimmy the Cat copes with the following symptoms of grief, depression and anxiety: feeling overwhelmed with sadness, frustration, shame and anger; feeling scared, confused and powerless; and manifesting “vegetative” symptoms of sleep and appetite loss. Help students/clients develop strategies on how they, too, might cope with such symptoms.
- 4) Discuss how the emotional symptoms of anxiety, grief, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder might manifest differently in children versus adults. Across cultures?

### **Concept: Power of the Witness**

The presence of the therapist as “other” -- a “witness” who listens compassionately and supportively while a client shares the narrative of his/her traumatic experiences -- can be one of the most powerful benefits of therapy. Teachers, friends, caregivers and even anonymous bystanders could potentially have this vital, reparative role of being a “witness” to a person’s traumatic life experience -- someone to validate that the experience was, for example, wrong or unjust; to acknowledge the reactions this person is having in response to the traumatic experience; and to help this individual feel reassured that he/she is not alone.

When traumatic narratives are shared with others, whether through words, drawings, dramatic re-enactments or in child play, people can often begin to heal by externalizing and diminishing the power that these painful memories have over them. The therapeutic witness, in being able to tolerate or hold what can otherwise feel overwhelming and thus unthinkable, helps the client to break through the dissociative pattern of self-distancing that can occur through the act of not believing one’s own recollection of the events.

By helping the clients know that they can indeed truly believe that what happened to them was real and survivable, and also trust that others will too, the therapist begins to help clients transform a fractured narrative to a more healthy and coherent one. The experience of being heard, or “feeling felt” as Daniel Siegel says, can help shift the isolative nature of the trauma to a *shared* recollection and therefore one that is “held” by more than just those who originally experienced the trauma.

15-year-old Ralph Lazo was a rare and brave young man who volunteered to be in the Manzanar WWII prison camp and stand alongside his Japanese American friends as a statement of solidarity. Mr. Lazo served as an inspiration for *The Cat Who Chose to Dream* storyline in which Jimmy the Cat decides to similarly sacrifice his freedom to be beside the family members he loves and cherishes. For many of those incarcerated at Manzanar, Mr. Lazo, like Jimmy the Cat, held this important role of participant-witness to the injustice of the WWII prison camp experience and therefore helped in some way to diminish the felt pain and sense of isolation and abandonment.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

1. Ask students/clients what they imagine was the impact on Jimmy the Cat’s family in having him be a witness to their suffering? How might this role have impacted Jimmy the Cat himself?
2. How do individuals serve as witnesses when viewing artwork, whether drawn by a child or an esteemed artist like Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, when the artwork so powerfully and evocatively depicts a traumatic experience?
3. Why is the role of the “observer-witness” so important and reparative in this process?

### **Concept: Displacement**

At times, when faced with an unjust situation that is perceived to be of potential danger, people can try to diminish feelings of vulnerability and distance themselves from unwanted, associated emotions (in this case, guilt and shame) through displacement, i.e. placing the “blame” on a readily accessible and at times more safe target, such as a pet or someone who is younger and/or perceived as less powerful. This allows people to redirect feelings away from the intended target while affording themselves feelings of perceived power. In displacing this blame, they can thereby assuage the feelings of immense helplessness and lack of control, while still managing to ensure their sense of survival and security.

This concept of displacing blame or responsibility is addressed in *The Cat Who Chose to Dream* as Jimmy the Cat expresses outrage when he hears people try to make discriminatory and inaccurate excuses for the mass imprisonment, saying that the Japanese Americans were “forced to leave for their own protection”. Jimmy the Cat knew that this was an erroneous rationale, just as it was also later confirmed by the United States Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians that the unconstitutional incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII was instead heavily influenced by “racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership”.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many in positions of power made decisions influenced by and amidst this climate of wartime hysteria. As a tragic consequence, many wrongly presumed that American citizens of Japanese descent would inevitably be at risk of serving as allies or spies for Japan. To the contrary of these expressed unwarranted fears, it was later confirmed by the same United States Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians that *not a single person* of Japanese American ancestry was ever found guilty of any acts of treason or espionage during WWII.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

1. How might the experience of justifying the purported motivations for the WWII incarceration process be a form of *displacement* or *rationalization*, in helping people gain a sense of empowerment and alleviate distress over a situation over which they may feel no control?
2. How might the concepts of *rationalization* and *identification with the aggressor* help to explain some of the coping mechanisms that might have been used during this period of WWII incarceration by both prisoners and non-prisoners?

### **Concepts: Self-Empowerment, Power of Words**

The descriptive words one uses to accurately depict an experienced trauma can be of particular significance in the healing and recovery process. For many, moving away from euphemistic terminology to one that truly embodies and effectively registers the depth of the trauma can have a profoundly cathartic impact.

Like many stuck in traumatic situations that feel out of their control, Jimmy the Cat uses words of self-empowerment to emotionally survive without having his spirit eroded beyond repair, reminding himself that “others may have the power to shackle my body, but I always hold the power to free my mind”.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

1. What does Jimmy the Cat mean by this statement? How does this mindset help him shift to an internal locus of control, i.e. a belief that how he experiences events in his life is contingent upon factors within his control such as his attitude, perspective, and effort.
2. How does the use of the word “shackle” illustrate that the torment of being “shackled” extends far beyond the physical containment of a person through the use of actual chains and shackles? Rather, it speaks to the equally dehumanizing and painful *emotional*

impact that discrimination and civil rights infringements can also have in “shackling” and debilitating the human spirit.

3. How might the word “shackle” speak to the universality of potential mistreatment of humans perceived as “different or inferior” -- as an experience that transcends historical time periods, nationalities and cultures?
4. In *the Power of Words Handbook: A Guide to Language about Japanese Americans in World War II: Understanding Euphemisms and Preferred Terminology*, the authors discuss the importance of claiming the authenticity of one’s traumatic and unjust experience through the use of non-euphemistic descriptor words. Discuss how the use of technically-accurate terminology like “prison camp, incarceration camp, concentration camp” rather than the more euphemistic terms “internment camp, relocation camp” help to build a sense of empowerment for those affected by or learning about this event?
5. Discuss with clients how this might relate with their own experience of trauma. Do they believe that the words they use to describe their own traumatic experience or difficulties are technically accurate and non-euphemistic? Certainly, not all clients are at the stage of treatment at which they would feel ready to use such terminology, but there can be great potential therapeutic benefit to help clients *begin* to engage in this discussion and feel empowered by the reminder that they have the choice to decide *for themselves* how best to describe their own experience.
6. What is the role of “dreaming” in this book? How is it utilized by Jimmy the Cat as a means of self-empowerment rather than as “self-medicating escapism”?

### **Concept: Relaxation Techniques**

The introduction of relaxation techniques in trauma treatment can potentially help tap into the powerful interplay between the mind and body in positive mental health. This can aid one in contextualizing and making more meaningful for clients the role of relaxation techniques in shifting our minds from the “fight or flight” state to a more calm and secure state in which we can best problem-solve and interact positively with the world around us. Dr. Stephen Porges’ Polyvagal Theory helps us to better understand the vagus nerve’s role in regulating many targeted organs through a joint innervation of both the parasympathetic and sympathetic nerves so as to facilitate a healthy homeostasis between their associated functions.

Generally stated, in a moment of fear or perceived danger, according to Dr. Porges, we first look to our skills of social engagement and connection with others as a strategy for calming the “fight or flight” impulse. This could then allow us to remain healthy in heart and body, but still work through a difficult situation with a sense of relative calm. When the social engagement system

cannot be utilized effectively, then our next go-to strategy can be one of activating the elevated energy levels, increased blood pressure and faster heart beat associated with the sympathetic nerve to escape from danger. Some individuals who have experienced chronic trauma can find themselves in this heightened vigilant state even without the actual presence of a tangible threat – an understandable mode of survival after their bodies have been conditioned for so long to sustain this heightened self-protective state. One can easily imagine how the capacity to learn, self-regulate emotions, and be at one’s best calm state can be greatly compromised under these conditions.

Relaxation exercises like focused breathing and positive visualization might help to allow the mind to shift from a state of perceived danger and fear to one of more calm and security, thus activating the myelinated vagus nerve to do its good work of, among other things, promoting positive social interactions that keep us feeling safe and secure. This could help the parasympathetic nerve to decrease blood pressure, slow down pulse rate and rest the body enough to allow the client to shift to a calmer state in which the capacity to process information and make good decisions is more likely to be maximized.

In *The Cat Who Chose To Dream*, three basic informal relaxation techniques are introduced: deep breathing, “safe place” visualization, and self-empowerment visualization. These techniques can be used by people of all ages, but any potential medical contraindications or safety concerns should first be ruled out, and it is recommended that the reader consult with a trained professional first to determine the appropriateness of use.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

1. Discuss how this hyper-vigilant state can be caused not only by a single experience of heightened trauma, but also potentially by everyday lesser degrees of “micro-traumas” that may happen to children and adults at school/work and home. Draw a parallel between Jimmy the Cat’s story and the clients’ identified experiences of when they have felt scared and alone -- perhaps feeling trapped in a situation beyond one’s control. It could be an everyday situation experienced by a child such as feeling stuck in a classroom forced to sit next to someone who is a bully. Or by a person living with a parent or partner whose anger can feel threatening and unpredictable.
2. Review the three informal relaxation techniques in the *Relaxation Tools for Young Readers* guide (available on [www.martinpearl.com](http://www.martinpearl.com)) and consult a professional certified by a nationally recognized organization for appropriateness of use prior to guiding others in informal application of the techniques. If deemed appropriate by such a professional, review the exercises with the client prior to reading *The Cat Who Chose to Dream* together and allow the client to practice use of these techniques alongside Jimmy the Cat in subsequent readings.

## **Concept: “Processing” Trauma through Art**

The use of art as a vehicle for expressing difficult emotions, externalizing distress, and healing from trauma can prove to be such an indispensable part of trauma treatment for children.

Acclaimed trauma specialist Dr. Eliana Gil also speaks to the powerful impact of art in helping one convey through creative modalities like art, writing, and play what is otherwise at times a level of "unspeakable" trauma. Some clients can also respond cathartically to the evocative work of artists, like Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani, whose powerful images tell a story of survival they can relate to so well.

As Dr. Gil explains, the therapeutic border or frame is meant to serve as a "container" in art therapy, whether it be the bordering edge of a sand tray (in sand tray therapy) or the rectangular border of a piece of paper used in a child's drawing (in projective art modalities) -- each serves as a frame or border to protectively contain those difficult memories and associated emotions.

Once a child externalizes these traumatic emotions or memories by placing them onto the paper, for example, this creates a safe "emotional distance" with which a child can begin to better understand and cope with a particular event, memory or emotion with the help of an empathetic witness. For children, art is like play – a familiar and safe “language” through which they can communicate difficult experiences and emotions. For adults, art can also be a safe and tangible modality used to represent what is otherwise unspeakably terrifying or shameful.

The six images featured in Jimmy the Cat’s positive self-visualization sequence towards the end of the book are enclosed in frames, as a way of using the artwork to symbolically represent the "re-framing" of a traumatic experience in order to focus on virtues of strength, empowerment, and resilience rather than surrender to hopelessness and futility.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

1. Discuss how the sequence of the "framed" pictures is purposeful in the book as illustrated below, representing what can be the experience of some clients progressing through the stages of trauma treatment:
  - a) In the first three pictures of the self-empowerment visualization sequence, the cat is envisioning images that evoke feelings of calm, resilience and belonging like the koi carp, mountain and ancient Japanese temple. This provides more "emotional grounding" so that the cat is able to feel secure and safe enough to explore more evocative imagery.
  - b) After connecting with the strengthening foundation of this cultural and calming imagery, Jimmy the Cat then identifies with increasingly more powerful symbolism of strength and courage, first the tiger then the dragon. He begins to embolden

himself by internalizing these very characteristics he wishes to possess during this difficult time, and therefore gives himself permission to process the anger and frustration that has grown in him and others.

This results in Jimmy the Cat being able to "break through" the safe container of the frame/border, as seen in the tiger protruding out of the frame with his powerful glare and claws, and even more so, the dragon, who successfully blasts through the barriers with his fierce breath of fire and blinding smoke.

- c) Finally, once Jimmy the Cat finds his voice of truth and power, he is able to symbolically "break through the limits of the prison gates" by transitioning to a place of inner peace like the featured rabbit drenched in warming sunrays, instead being *held and comforted*, and not restrained any longer, by the inner security that frames and contains him. The safe container-frame-border now becomes part of his internal resources, to be used to self-fortify and self-calm as needed.
2. For child clients who are having trouble articulating their feelings verbally, encourage them to express these feelings through more indirect mediums such as art, journals, short stories, etc. The key is having THEM describe to you what they are trying to convey.

This can be such a useful tool not only for mental health professionals who are more likely to have training in using art in therapy, but also for teachers and caregivers in helping children cope with everyday difficulties. If you are not professionally trained in mental health, always consult with a mental health therapist or art therapist to gain more insight on the meaning of the artwork and when to seek professional help.

### **Concept: Repetition Compulsion**

Repetition compulsion can be commonly seen in both children and adults who have experienced trauma. It can result from a repetitive unconscious need to re-enact certain distressing elements of a trauma; for example, by incorporating these themes or elements repetitively in play or art. This process is repeated until the individuals "master" the associated emotions to the point of closure and containment when they no longer need to "act out" the associated behaviors, but feel safe enough simply to process the memories in thought and discussion alone.

This pattern can also occur within a dream state in which the real and unreal nature of dream content not only helps one repeatedly re-experience a problem while remaining at a safe distance, but can at times present clues and insight regarding possible ways of better understanding the nature of the problem.

While the compulsion to repeat fixed behavioral patterns may at first serve as one's way of "acting out" and externalizing difficult feelings and memories, this could eventually have a powerful reparative effect over time once the client is helped to safely begin to process the traumatic memories associated with these behaviors.

**Suggested Discussion Questions/Ideas:**

1. How does Jimmy the Cat benefit from the process of repeatedly dreaming about the WWII camp experience and the techniques he chose to survive it?
2. Throughout the beginning of *The Cat Who Chose to Dream*, the panoramic images of the fenced-in camp is seen on multiple pages. It is only in one final depiction of the camp at the end of the book that the fence gate door is seen as *broken fully open* and a train is visible in the background. How does this sequence of repetitive imagery mirror how repetition compulsion could potentially lead to catharsis and healing?
3. How do you think this final open gate and moving train scene partner well with the text on these particular pages?

**Note -- The following disclosure needs to be included in all adaptations made by users of this form:**

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**Created by Loriene Honda, Ph.D., 1/18/2014**

## Relevant References and Suggested Resources

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4. *Children of the Camps*, a documentary and educational resource guide by Dr. Satsuki Ina: <http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/>
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18. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society*: <http://www.umassmed.edu/content.aspx?id=43102>
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20. Dr. Bruce Perry, *Child Trauma Academy*: <http://childtrauma.org/>
21. *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*: <http://www.nctsn.org/resources#q1>
22. Dr. Michael Scherringa, *Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health*: <http://www.infantinstitute.org/>
23. Dr. Daniel Siegel: <http://drdansiegel.com/>

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