

A Practical Guide to Active Imagination

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What is active imagination?

Why did Carl Jung invent it?

What benefits can it provide us?

How does it work?

This guide is the second part of a 2-part series:

Part 1: [What is an Archetype: Everything You Need to Know](#)

Part 2: Active Imagination: How to Work with Archetypes [You are here]

Okay, let's dive in ...

What is Active Imagination?

Active imagination is the process of dialoguing with aspects of one's unconscious. In the course of this reflective process, emotions, symbols, images, and subpersonalities are brought into consciousness via one's imagination.

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung discovered this process in the course of his own [inner work](#). Jung didn't consider active imagination a "technique" or "method." To him, it was a natural, inborn process that he was bringing to consciousness. He used this form of inner work in his analytic practice with patients.

Today, active imagination has been further refined and is used by individuals—with and without a therapist or analyst—to help bring unconscious material to consciousness and move the individual toward wholeness.

How Jung Discovered Active Imagination

As a psychiatrist, Jung worked in various mental institutions trying to treat patients with severe psychotic tendencies like Schizophrenia and other neurotic disorders. But prior to the start of World War I, Jung began to have repeated dreams and visions of Europe being devastated by a sea of blood.

As these prophetic visions became more frequent and pronounced, he realized he was descending into a kind of madness similar to what he observed in his patients. Jung went through many "ordeals" and long bouts of disorientation from 1913 through 1916. It was during this challenging period that Jung had his "confrontation with the unconscious" where he "plunged into the dark depths" that led to the development of active imagination.¹

Jung chronicled his own inner journey into the depths of the unconscious, including his experiences dialoguing with archetypal figures in his psyche in *Liber Novus* ("New Book"), now known as *the Red Book* (2009). That is, Jung created active imagination *out of necessity*—both to heal his own psyche as well as that of his patients.

The Goal of Active Imagination

Why would you engage in active imagination? Why invest the time to dialogue with archetypal figures in the unconscious?

The goal of active imagination and the totality of Jung's work is to bring the forces of the unconscious into balance with our conscious mind—that is, to integrate the archetypes to arrive at *psychic wholeness*.

Jung realized that inborn tensions of opposites exist within the psyche. The only way Jung found to move toward wholeness—to resolve these tensions of opposites—was to *build consciousness*. Active imagination is one of the means by which he was able to build consciousness and bridge the gap between the conscious mind and the unconscious.

¹ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 1989.

Jung explained in a letter to "Mr. O":²

Thus you can not only analyse your unconscious but you also give your unconscious a chance to analyse yourself, and therewith you gradually create the unity of conscious and unconscious without which there is no individuation at all.

Dream Analysis versus Active Imagination

To help bring the unconscious to consciousness, Jung used two complementary processes:

1. Dream Analysis
2. Active Imagination

For Jung, dreams provided a way for us to bridge the gap between our conscious mind and our unconscious. He perceived dreams as a kind of love letter from the unconscious.

In his analytic approach, the patient (analysand) would recall a specific dream or series of dreams. Then, Jung (the analyst) would ask probing questions to go deeper into the dream's meaning via associations. Dream analysis was his primary method of revealing the psyche to the individual. Jung used active imagination to augment his dream analysis. For example, in the course of analyzing a dream, sometimes you hit a dead end and neither the analyst nor the analysand knows where to go next.

This is when active imagination was most often used. Perhaps there was a shadowy figure in the dream. Jung might have the analysand call forth the figure and try to communicate directly with it. Dreams occur to the *dream ego*, but there's no conscious operator.

In contrast, with active imagination, the ego becomes the conscious mediator that interacts with the unconscious psychic material (symbols, impulses, images, emotions).

² C.G. Jung, Letters Volume 1, page 460.

Active Imagination versus Passive Fantasy

In his work, Jung celebrated the power of the imagination:³

Every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination, and have their source in what one is pleased to call infantile fantasy. Not the artist alone, but every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy. The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, a characteristic also of the child, and as such it appears inconsistent with the principles of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable.

But in *active imagination*, it's important to differentiate it from passive fantasy or daydreaming. In passive fantasies, the conscious ego is generally not in charge. Instead, the ego is "checked out." Similar to being in a passive dream state where the dream story runs on autopilot, there's no active conscious agent in daydreaming. As such, with passive fantasy, there's no "consciousness-building" taking place.

In active imagination, however, this isn't the case. The conscious ego is *actively* engaged in the interaction with the unconscious. That is, active imagination was Jung's way of helping the person get to know the archetypes operating within the person's psyche. This process requires conscious participation where you actually dialogue with the parts of your unconscious within your imagination. Jung also prescribed this inner process for people overwhelmed with too many dream images.

Jung's Active Imagination Process

Jung wasn't one to codify things into clearly defined steps. After all, he was trying to map the psyche as a kind of blind explorer. As such, his volumes are kind of all over the place. He often jumps around from topic to topic, going on tangents based on where his muse takes him. It was up to later Jungians to clarify much of Jung's ideas.

³ C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*. CW, Vol. 6. (Bollingen Series XX), 1976.

That said, Jung did highlight two essential stages of active imagination:⁴

1. Allow the unconscious material to come up
2. Reconcile this unconscious material

The first stage requires the conscious mind to "step back." In the second stage, the individual's consciousness guides the process.

Four Steps to Active Imagination

Jungian Marie-Louise von Franz flushed out the active imagination process in Keyes's *Inward Journey*.⁵

Marie-Louise von Franz's four steps are:

1. Empty the "mad mind" of the ego
2. Let an unconscious fantasy image arise
3. Give it some form of expression
4. Ethical confrontation

Jungian analyst Robert A Johnson provides a slightly more structured process. Johnson also outlines four steps of the Active Imagination process in his book *Inner Work*.⁶

1. Invite a particular part within your unconscious
2. Actively dialogue with this part
3. Add the ethical element of values
4. Make it concrete with physical ritual

If you're interested in concise, detailed instructions on how to use dream work and active imagination with examples, [Robert Johnson's book](#) is the best and most accessible I've found.

The Active Imagination State of Mind

⁴ Jung on *Active Imagination*, 1997.

⁵ Margaret Frings Keyes, *Inward Journey: Art as Therapy*, 1983.

⁶ Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work*, 1991, 160.

Whether or not one is able to do active imagination successfully depends on their psychological state. Oftentimes, the conscious mind resists inner processes like this because it can be messy and uncertain. You don't know what's going to happen, what you might discover, and what might result from the process.

Because inner processes aren't too structured, you may hear a nagging voice constantly infusing you with doubt: "*Am I doing it right?*" Also, the ego mind tends to resist feeling out of control; we tend to fear the unknown. Active imagination works best in a relaxed, reflective, and curious state. Can you [adopt a beginner's mind](#) and embrace the journey into the deep?

But this process isn't just about "stepping back." Once you allow the unconscious material to rise to the surface, the conscious mind must make sense of these images and emotions in order to arrive at some resolution.

From Jung in [Memories, Dreams, Reflections](#):⁷

In the final analysis the decisive factor is always consciousness, which can understand the manifestations of the unconscious and take up a position toward them.

The other essential component of this process is the ability to personify the unconscious material in order to dialogue with it. As Jung explains:

The essential thing is to differentiate oneself from these unconscious contents by personifying them, and at the same time to bring them into relationship with consciousness. That is the technique for stripping them of their power.

Living With the Image

The language of images and symbols is, for the most part, foreign to the modern conscious mind. In contrast, the conscious mind is at home with logic, reason, concepts, and language. But the material that arises from one's unconscious is *symbolic*. As such, Jung often advised his patients to "live with it."

⁷ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 1989, 187.

That is, instead of trying to consciously "figure out" what the images that arise from the unconscious (from both dream work and active imagination) mean, *just sit with the image itself*.

The importance of the image cannot be overstated in Jung's work. He writes of his personal experience in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:⁸[mfn][/]mfn]

To the extent that I managed to translate the emotions into images—that is to say, to find the images which were concealed in the emotions—I was inwardly calmed and reassured. Had I left those images hidden in the emotions, I might have been torn to pieces by them.

As Jung explains, the images have everything you need so simply allow the meaning of the images to present themselves.

Alternative Approaches to Jung's Active Imagination

Let's review a few other variations of Jung's active imagination process.

Active Journaling

Active journaling isn't necessarily an "alternative" approach, but a helpful augmentation to the original process. In general, the process of recording your thoughts, feelings, and dreams helps cultivate greater self-reflection.⁹ That is, journaling can help you access the right frame of mind for using active imagination.

Let's say you want to address a shadowy figure from one of your dreams. You can invite it to have a dialogue and write out the discussion (in real-time) in your journal as you would a screenplay.

Ego/me: Can we talk?

Shadowy Figure: About what?

Ego/me: Well, for starters, what's your name?

⁸ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 1989, 177.

⁹ Blake TK. Journaling; an active learning technique. *Int J Nurs Educ Scholarsh*. 2005;2:Article 7. doi: 10.2202/1548-923x.1116. Epub 2005 Apr 15. PMID: 16646932.

Basically, you engage with these semi-autonomous personalities within your unconscious and record the dialogue *as it unfolds*. Especially in the beginning, I found this form of active journaling highly effective. There was far less internal resistance to the process. With journaling, the active dialogue usually flowed naturally.

Psychosynthesis

The founder of psychosynthesis Roberto Assagioli noted:¹⁰

We are not unified; we often feel that we are, because we do not have many bodies and many limbs, and because one hand doesn't usually hit the other. But, metaphorically, that is exactly what does happen within us. Several subpersonalities are continually scuffling: impulses, desires, principles, and aspirations are engaged in an unceasing struggle.

The stages of psychosynthesis are similar to active imagination:

1. *Recognition*: A subpersonality emerges through some inner conflict or dream image.
2. *Acceptance*: You have a willingness to work with this subpersonality.
3. *Coordination*: You manage the relationship between multiple subpersonalities.
4. *Integration*: You resolve the conflict between the subpersonalities, establishing cohesion.
5. *Synthesis*: You discover the Transpersonal Self beyond the subpersonalities.

As in Jungian psychology, the goal of psychosynthesis is unity consciousness in contrast to having a family of disjointed subpersonalities.

The most accessible book I've found on psychosynthesis is Piero Ferrucci's [What We May Be](#).

¹⁰ Piero Ferrucci, *What We May Be: Techniques for Psychological and Spiritual Growth Through Psychosynthesis*, 2009.

Internal Family Systems (IFS)

IFS is the most modern and perhaps most structured system for working with subpersonalities that I'm aware of.

Richard Schwartz, a psychologist with a background in family therapy, developed IFS. He was working with numerous patients who all spoke of voices in their heads telling them to, for example, overeat and then purge. At first, he thought he was dealing with multiple personality disorders. But after inquiring how these patients heard these voices, shocked, he heard them too. These voices, or *parts* as they call them in IFS, play characteristic roles that help define a person's inner world.

All of these parts, Schwartz recognizes, constellate around a wise leader, called the Self. The Self is mature, loving, compassionate, curious, and kind. It can heal and integrate the various parts.

IFS is a comprehensive system with a rich language to help you understand your psyche and work with your subpersonalities. For a step-by-step guide to using IFS, see Jay Earley's [Self-Therapy \(audiobook\)](#).

Questions for Active Imagination Dialogues

Regardless of which method you use, the process is similar. You get to know your subpersonalities mainly through dialogue.

Robert Johnson explains in *Inner Work*:

A good way to connect to the inner parts of yourself is to think of each dream figure as an actual person living inside you. Think of each person in your dream as one of the autonomous personalities that coexist within your psyche and combine to make up your total self.

Here's a list of questions psychologist John Rowan has found to be the most useful in working with his client's subpersonalities:¹¹

1. What do you look like?
2. How old are you?

¹¹ John Rowan, *Subpersonalities*, 1989.

3. What situations bring you out?
4. What is your approach to the world?
5. What is your basic motive for being there?
6. What do you want?
7. What do you need?
8. What have you got to offer?
9. What are your blocks to full functioning?
10. Where did you come from?
11. When did you first meet (name of person)? What was going on?
12. What would happen if you took over permanently?
13. What helps you to grow?
14. How do you relate to women/men/children?

Rowan also says it's important to give the subpersonality a name, as it helps if you want to go back to him or her later.

Working Alone versus with a Therapist

Do you need a therapist to do active imagination?

While there is certified training available for most if not all of the above integrative therapies, active imagination can be done on one's own in most cases.

However, individuals can use these methods for psychological development, assuming they meet two criteria:

1. You take the time to learn a system. Consciousness/cognition is necessary to work with your parts.
2. You are mentally stable and [grounded](#).

If you don't meet these criteria, seek professional guidance.

I have used all of the above methods in the past. However, I worked with several qualified IFS practitioners initially to gain more confidence in my ability as I continued to work with archetypes on my own. (I also worked with a Jungian analyst for a brief period as well.)

The primary risk of using active imagination is that you're bringing up material from your unconscious that might be buried there for a reason. Your conscious mind must be in a position to navigate through this psychic material including difficult emotions and past trauma.

Referring to active imagination, Jung explained in a letter to "Mr. O":¹²

If you apply this method, then I can come in as an occasional adviser, but if you don't apply it, then my existence is of no use for you.

So even Jung advocated going solo on one's inner journey.

The Principle of the Center: The Key to Active Imagination

The goal of these “integrative therapies” is to liberate yourself from being dominated by various archetypal forces and move toward integration (residing in the Self).

The Self is an organizing principle within our psyche that maintains balance or order. But there is an inherent problem with inner work processes like active imagination: We use the mind to get to know what's in one's psyche—including the pantheon of archetypes found therein. (Here's a [list of over 300 archetypes](#).)

Can you see *why* it's challenging to work with archetypes?

Said another way: Only the Self—your psychic center—can organize the mind. Yet, the Self is often unavailable because various archetypes are often in the driver's seat.

In IFS, they call this dynamic "blending" when you're trying to talk to one archetype that's "blending" with at least one other.

Taoist and Chan Buddhist psychology explain the situation with the concept of the host and guests in a house. The house represents the psyche. The guests are the pantheon of archetypes within this house. These guests are mostly ill-mannered and rowdy. They are often nasty to each other; they don't play well together. As neo-Jungian Robert Moore often put in his lectures, "Archetypes are imperial."

¹² C.G. Jung, Letters Volume 1: 1906-1950, page 460.

The host's job is to establish order and harmony within the household. The problem is that, for most of us, there's no host around to keep order. We need the host (Self) to bring order to the psyche. This host isn't emotional; it doesn't judge or analyze. The host is clear, neutral, active, alert, and empty. It's unaffected by the thoughts and feelings of the guests.

Holding to the Center

So before you engage in any in-depth psychological work, especially active imagination, do what you can to get in a more centered state.

These two guides provide methods to help you enter a state conducive to active imagination:

- [How to Center Yourself: Powerful Methods to Increase Focus and Recharge](#)
- [How to Ground Yourself: Effective Techniques to Achieve Instant Calm](#)

If you can access this Center *first*—or at least move in that direction—you can navigate through the archetypal characters in your mind with a certain level of fluidity and naturalness. If you don't, the guests remain in control of your house and your progress will be limited. As the traditions explain, the Center is the pass to return to one's Original Nature—the Self.

Enjoy your inner journey!

Further Reading Related to Active Imagination

This guide was part 2 of a 2-part series. Read part 1 here:

Part 1: [What is an Archetype: Everything You Need to Know](#)

Part 2: Active Imagination: How to Work with Archetypes [You are here]

If you want a highly accessible book on how to use active imagination, see Robert Johnson's book *Inner Work*.

Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* provides a lot of first-hand accounts of his discoveries in this area. These segments are also included in *Jung on Active Imagination* (but of the two, I would recommend *Memories*).

Memories, Dreams, Reflections by C.G. Jung

Jung on Active Imagination

The Red Book by C.G. Jung

Inner Work by Robert A. Johnson

Alchemical Active Imagination by Marie-Louise von Franz

Subpersonalities by John Rowan

Embracing Our Selves by Hal and Sidra Stone (Voice Dialogue)

What We May Be by Piero Ferrucci (Psychosynthesis)

Self-Therapy by Jay Earley (IFS)