

DP Investigates

A photograph is worth a thousand words...

Judy Weiser is one of the leading pioneers in PhotoTherapy and the founder of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver. Having dedicated most her life to helping others deal with their psychological issues through the medium of photography, she now trains other therapists and photographers in the field. "Ordinary personal snapshots serve as 'footprints of our lives', reflecting what and who has mattered most to us," she explains. "Thus

their value lies more in what they are about emotionally than in what shows on their surface visually."

During the early Seventies, Judy discovered the remarkable effects that working with photographs had on an individuals' therapy treatments. "It quickly became evident that therapy using photos was more beneficial and effective than therapy without photos," she remarks. Having written her first article on her findings and her developing work, she titled it the practice of 'PhotoTherapy'. Judy explains: "Two capital letters to signal the equal power of 'photo' and 'therapy.'" It was from here on that PhotoTherapy, therapeutic photography and the various other related fields have evolved.

Mark Wheeler, a successful art psychotherapist, remarks on the history and relationship between photos and therapy: "Photographs contain a reality trap that is both a cultural contextual force but also, by its lifelong repetition, a personal implicative force. It is from the practice of photography and the encounters with photographs in the therapy room that these ideas have emerged." It seems that the saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' is never more true than in this field of therapy.

PhotoTherapy techniques are often used to help gain further insight and open communication between an individual and a trained photo therapist. As Judy describes, "They use a client's personal snapshots, family photos and pictures taken by others (and the feelings, thoughts and memories these evoke) as catalysts to deepen and enhance their therapy process in ways not possible using words alone... Their 'why' (why they were taken, kept, etc) is always much more therapeutic than their 'how' or 'what'. This work is not about photography, but rather the two-way emotional communication they provide to those who view them, take them, remember them or just imagine them. It's about 'photography as symbolic emotional communication', rather than 'photography as art'."

Therapeutic photography is considered a less formal approach to working with



Looking back: PhotoTherapy at work © Judy Weiser

"PhotoTherapy is about 'photography as symbolic emotional communication', rather than 'photography as art'"

photographs for psychological healing. This technique does not require you to work with a trained photo therapist, and can be embarked upon solely by the individual. Some of the most notable examples of therapeutic photography can be seen through the work of the highly regarded photographer, Jo Spence. Using therapeutic photography techniques, she famously documented her fight with breast cancer and later created a photographic series on her last years battling Leukaemia. Jo's images have not only raised awareness of both the diseases she struggled with, but have inspired others to embark on similar photographic journeys. Psychotherapist Mark was inspired by Jo early on in his own career and remarks, "Jo's motives were about changing attitudes as much as about her own experiences. Her work was both therapeutic and psycho-educational."

PhotoTherapy and therapeutic photography are both equally valuable

in the field, according to Mark: "They are both exciting and beneficial and are on continuum with each other. We might all benefit from therapeutic photography at any time – I certainly have – but sometimes, in times of trauma, grief, recovery from abuse and mental illness, PhotoTherapy with an appropriately trained professional becomes more useful than talking cures."

Techniques in PhotoTherapy and therapeutic photography vary, and can depend largely on the therapists using them. Inspirational photo therapist Ellen Fisher Turk dedicates her time to helping women challenged by negative body image, a more modern psychological disorder. She works to help change their perceptions of themselves and deal with the psychological aftermath of traumatic events and eating disorders using her own PhotoTherapy method, which she calls The Fisher Turk Method of Photo Therapy. Ellen comments, "I

For further information

If you would like some further information on PhotoTherapy, therapeutic photography and other related fields, have a look at:

Judy Weiser – Pioneer in PhotoTherapy techniques (www.phototherapy-centre.com). You can also read her book: *PhotoTherapy Techniques – Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*. Upcoming events and workshops related to PhotoTherapy for 2011 are listed on Judy Weiser's website within the Training and Education chapter.

Mark Wheeler – Art psychotherapist in the UK (<http://phototherapy.org.uk>).

Ellen Fisher Turk – NYC Photographer and therapist working with women on their body issues (<http://photographytherapy.com/index.htm>). Check out her Workshops page for upcoming events.

Terry Dennett – Owner and curator of the Jo Spence Archives, London, England (<http://jospence.com/default.aspx>). Author of the book: *Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism*.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?: Would you ever use PhotoTherapy? Voice your thoughts with us at www.dphotographer.co.uk/forum and



Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image. Taken from her famous photographic series that illustrates her battle with breast cancer © Jo Spence Archive, London

believe the process I use helps women see themselves differently, because they go through something that frightens them and they aren't taken advantage of. They see multiples of themselves rather than myopically, as their self-judgement dictates." Ellen believes this process to be "the beginning of a self-acceptance. The brain can't accept pretty when it thinks ugly. It has to form a new way of seeing." The images created from the process can later be used as a tool to heal. Much like Jo Spence's work, the photographs become

a testament of a time that can be reflected upon at a later stage, in order to gain some perspective and acquire a positive outlook on the emotional journey undertaken.

PhotoTherapy is often considered the next step in treatment after other methods have proved less successful. As Mark Wheeler remarks on his own work: "The staggering changes that have happened with families or children who have been 'stuck', despite many sessions of conventional talking therapy, are the ones that most surprise me."

PhotoTherapy and therapeutic photography can provide those dealing with trauma, grief, loss, illness, family breakdowns and eating disorders (among many) with a chance to heal, grow and move on long after they may have given up hope.

So is PhotoTherapy the next step in mainstream treatments? Perhaps, although our changing relationship to images, most notably over the past few decades due to digital advancements, may have altered our perception and values of a photograph. As Judy Weiser says, "Photographs no longer 'prove'

Your opinions

You give us your thoughts on the subject of using photographs as therapy – can they really help?



ROSIE TANNE

"I think photographs are always a great talking point, so if it makes people begin to open up about memories of the past then it's a great tool. It's often amazing how a photo can jog a million other

memories about that moment in time or period of your life. Having said that, what are the memories the photos conjure up are bad ones? It may make things worse!"



JOE BARNES

"PhotoTherapy appears to be an effective way of stimulating people's minds towards particular emotional goals. The strategy used behind it, with the therapy being implemented

by mental health professionals, would probably give a greater chance of success (whatever the particular goal may be) than therapeutic photography."

Some further reading

Back in 2009, London's Roehampton University launched its first two-year, EU-funded international research project on PhotoTherapy. Its findings are due to be published in 2011 and will include a hardback copy and online PhotoTherapy handbook, alongside a photo exhibition. For further information on this, please visit: www.roehampton.ac.uk/news/phototherapy.html.

that something was true; reality can be seamlessly altered and re-presented as if truly real. The next generations will not be growing up with the basic assumption of earlier ones, that 'if I have a photograph of it, then it happened'. This will significantly change the unconscious processes, by which people have emotional reactions to photographs."

However, she continues: "Technology will continue to evolve, and PhotoTherapy can most definitely keep up, as long as its practitioners are not technophobic and they themselves come along on the ever-evolving journey..."



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