

# Preface

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*"If you still have my photograph, then I'm still safe in your heart."*

She knew exactly what she wanted: "Over there, beside the tree, with the ocean in the background." She looked at the scene to arrange it in her mind (and camera viewfinder), and then traced an  $x$  in the dirt with her foot to mark the exact place for the friend holding her camera to stand. "Wait until I'm ready and I pose with my arm around the tree. When I smile, take the picture, but don't let any other people get in," she directed. And her friend tried his very best to record what she asked. Watching all this from the hotel balcony, I was struck again, as I had been many times before, by the preciseness of people's expectations regarding photographic records of their special moments. I was also rather concerned for the woman's friend, who was expected to produce the perfect image that would later be used as proof of that much-enjoyed vacation.

I wondered what would become of this single snapshot: Would it have a treasured place in her home as a memory of holiday time spent with a friend or be instantly rejected because it didn't turn out "right" (as she had visualized it)? Would she like how she appeared in the final print or perhaps find that it instead reminded her of her mother (ugh!)? Would this picture perhaps bring to mind associated memories of other places, people, and times in her life, connecting related experiences, or would it serve only as an icon of one isolated happy time amidst later disillusionment? Was she at all conscious of such potential significance of her chosen moment of time-stopping? Did she understand that the reality

in the finished print had its importance more in her heart than in the emulsion-covered paper? Did she stop to recognize that her interpretation of it was only one of many possible versions? Was she aware that she was being watched, and would this awareness have made any difference in that scenario?

It is just such hidden components in the lives of ordinary snapshots that add to the meanings within their borders, yet it is these “secret” aspects that most often remain out of conscious awareness of the photo’s maker or later viewer. Many years ago I began to notice how people’s conversations about their own personal photo collections would produce factual and emotional information that I had not been able to find out by asking them direct questions. I also discovered that the same thing happened when people viewed my photographs hanging on gallery walls. I would sometimes even hear people arguing about the meaning of the photograph in front of them, having made opposite assumptions about why the photographer originally took the photo or included it in the show.

It was often possible to engage them in casual conversation about the photo, and as an artist, I was fascinated to hear what they were seeing and feeling in response to an image that I myself knew very well, but which they obviously were perceiving very differently (especially if they didn’t realize I had created it). I began to realize that there would never be a way to clearly predict what people might “get” from one of my photos or what emotions might be evoked in them as they interacted with it. The part of me that is a therapist was intrigued by all this silent communication “accidentally” embedded along with the visual details of the photo.

My initial conception of photographs as art objects had led me to these experiences where the pictures were serving instead as nonverbal communicators, regardless of any potential artistic merit they might also contain—and this book now presents the consequences of this transition as it attempts to give readers “a better picture” of ways that different kinds of ordinary photographs can be used as powerful tools in the hands of those providing therapy or counseling. The artistic components of people’s snapshots quickly become irrelevant as the therapist begins to probe the inner meaning that each photographic catalyst holds for the person perceiving, taking, posing for, keeping, or even only remembering it.

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## A BRIEF HISTORY

When I then decided to start using clients' ordinary personal snapshots and family album photos as stimuli, I discovered that their responses to my questions about their pictures permitted connection with unconscious and deeply-buried memories, thoughts, and feelings that my verbal inquiry on its own had been unable to reach. Using the symbolic communication that is naturally embedded in the photographs my clients responded to, created, posed for, or collected, I noticed that they began to contact feelings and information in ways they were simultaneously unaware of and yet totally familiar with: talking about the ordinary informal snapshots and album pictures that were already part of their daily lives. Because of these realizations, I began to develop a more formalized interrelated framework of techniques based on this spontaneous informal process of "photo explorations" that often happens while people casually discuss their personal photos (especially those they appear in).

I first tried these techniques when counseling several hearing-impaired First Nations children (*First Nations* is the term used for Native Americans in Canada), and the results were very exciting. When asked to write an article about the work (Weiser, 1975), I was asked to come up with a title for this process. I chose the name "PhotoTherapy," trying to emphasize an equal balance of its two parts by using two capital letters. I thought that as a result of this publication, I would soon be famous; I thought I had invented a new field all by myself.

About six months later, I received an invitation to the first International PhotoTherapy Symposium in Illinois. Ideas of fame quickly disappeared, but I explained my work at that first conference and met dozens of other therapists who presented their own similar versions of these photo-counseling combinations; it was obviously an idea whose time had come. A quarterly journal began publication, an international association formed, and a 1983 publication of a book called *PhotoTherapy in Mental Health*, edited by Krauss and Fryrear, provided many of us with the opportunity to write about what we had been doing.

A decade later, professional activity, media attention, academic publications, and collegial networking have all increased. A few of us began offering training to other therapists who wanted to learn more about using

photo-based therapy techniques, and in 1982, the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, Canada, opened as a resource, training, and networking base for the field. The Centre includes an open library that contains several hundred articles, books, and numerous videotape recordings of "live" case sessions that are maintained for use by students and practitioners.

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**AUDIENCE**

A wide cross-section of people have attended public or professional presentations on PhotoTherapy as relevant for therapeutic practice or for more general applications. These audiences have included not only the expected mental health professionals whose work involves conducting therapy or related counseling activities (psychologists, marriage and family therapists, psychiatrists, art therapists, social workers, and so forth), but also those from secondarily-related backgrounds, such as special education teachers, English as a second language instructors, summer camp personnel, clergy, and so forth. There has also been a lot of interest expressed by theorists who apply concepts of visual literacy, cross-cultural studies, and nonverbal communication to social learning or classroom situations, as well as anthropologists and sociologists interested in the way visual information is coded, represented, and placed in context, as well as many people involved in the photographic arts or those involved in their teaching or critical theory. And finally, there has been a lot of curiosity expressed by the general public, people who may not necessarily be having psychological problems themselves, but nevertheless want to explore more about their own lives as reflected back to them by their photos as a way of enhancing their self-knowledge and personal growth.

This book, though written primarily for the first group above, will still certainly be of interest to all the others listed. It may prove especially useful to art and expressive therapists, whose theoretical foundations are based on the concept that symbolic art expression gives form to feelings that otherwise might resist translation into conscious or verbal investigation. This is a book for demonstrating serious therapeutic process, which is an activity best done by those properly trained to do so. Yet I am certain that anyone else interested in visual communication or self-exploration and the ways personal photographs can be asked to share their embedded

secrets will also find it interesting and personally useful, even if only for themselves rather than for professional work applications.

PhotoTherapy as presented in this book is a set of techniques for already-competent therapists to add to their professional repertoire of counseling skills when involved in the work of helping others. This book is not written to teach therapy per se, but rather to teach already-trained professionals how and why to make use of these additional tools to permit them to do their helping work a bit better. It is up to readers to adapt PhotoTherapy to the types of therapeutic model and client difficulties, populations, or settings they prefer to work with. For readers not already trained in therapeutic skills, these pages can still be very useful, but you are cautioned that you must also have professional training in therapy itself if you wish to try using them with anyone other than yourself.

A question that often arises in regard to PhotoTherapy is whether you have to be a skilled photographer to do really good PhotoTherapy work. The answer is no. Professional training in the art of photography has often turned out to be more of a handicap than an advantage because esthetic concerns about image composition, tonal qualities, zone system, formulas for deconstruction, and so forth, get in the way of spontaneous therapeutically focused responses to photographs as communications and emotional stimuli.

In my clinical therapy practice I treat photography as a verb as well as a noun, as an active agent of change as well as an object to reflect on, as very direct emotional communication as well as art; therefore ordinary personal snapshots that are blurry, wrinkled, "poorly" composed, and so forth, are just as useful as those made for artistic reasons. Thus, therapists who are amateur hobbyists, or even those who have never taken photos, would likely be just as good at incorporating PhotoTherapy into their repertoire of counseling skills as those trained in the photographic arts.

In addition to being a therapist, I happen to also be an artist, a "full-fledged" photographic artist whose work is shown and sold in galleries, and so I have frequently reflected upon my photographic work as being able to provide me with much insight into my own inner processes. However, I want to very clearly state that I consider my most primary "art" (that is, the main outlet driving my creative passions and giving form to my inner feelings) to be rooted more in the creating and doing of successful therapy. Doing therapy, and doing it well, *is* my art. My specialization

is helping people, and photography is one of my main languages for communication with the subconscious when words alone are not enough. This itself is an art, and readers don't have to be official "artists" in any other discipline to do well with PhotoTherapy techniques.

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**RATIONALE**

Over the past decade, many mental health professionals sought further training in using PhotoTherapy techniques, but as interest grew, it became evident that one person alone (or even in combination with other colleagues) could not possibly personally train every individual interested, especially as so much of learning how to apply PhotoTherapy techniques in your professional practice must be accomplished by first experiencing them personally in order to comprehend their potency.

Although the 1983 book about PhotoTherapy contained an excellent conceptual introduction, it only detailed what various therapists had individually done using PhotoTherapy techniques in their particular practice or setting and thus really provided no practical advice for readers to learn how to actually get started doing PhotoTherapy themselves. *This is the reason for this book:* to make available a practical guide giving readers fresh ideas (with reasons to support them) and activities to try out for yourselves as well as with your clients, because I believe the best learning is internalized from personal experience. It provides a structured framework combining theoretical foundations, richly illustrated technique explanations, plus a significant amount of practical suggestions and "how to get started right now" exercises to try for yourself first, and then later to use with your clients.

A brief note should be added here about what this book is *not*. Some theorist-authors (notably, Akeret, 1973, and Lesy, 1976, 1980) base their entire practice on the assumption that they already know what people's photographs are about, and that they can instruct readers to decipher a photograph much like a book. Similarly, many postmodernist art theorists and critics suggest that it is possible to decode and mentally take apart the visual "texts" of photographs according to preestablished rules for interpretation (for example, Burgin, 1982; Roskill, 1989; and Roskill and Carrier, 1983).

I do understand that it may be possible to at least partially explore some embedded meanings in this manner, but only if you have advance guidelines (including a specific awareness of the privileges of power, culture, gender, race, and so forth) that will enable you to understand and translate according to those given rules. Nevertheless, in such cases, your “truth” will still be only relative to the reality of the person who authored those guidelines—and thus may be totally irrelevant to someone else whose value system is altogether different. So this book will not give readers lessons on how to go read the meanings of someone else’s photographs *for* them; rather it will show how a collaborative therapist-client approach to the journey into the image can permit people to bring to light their own previously unconscious associations and feelings about the picture.

By the time you have finished the book, you will have learned the “why,” “what,” and “how” of PhotoTherapy techniques, and hopefully also made some enlightening personal discoveries along the way. If you are a therapist wanting to then begin working with these techniques, I would hope that you will have also learned that perhaps, instead of “walking in your clients’ shoes for a day” to better understand their lives, you might metaphorically step behind the lens of their cameras in order to see what (and how) they see; to pose for them according to their directions of how a person “should” look for a portrait; to reflect with them on the meanings, feelings, memories, and thoughts stimulated by a photographic image; to explore their albums or photo-taking projects with them as they explain why they took certain photos in particular ways (and what, if anything, was missing that should have been in those pictures). You may also serendipitously encounter valuable insights into their families and their values by looking with them at their family albums and exploring with them the subtle nuances of their nonverbal behaviors as you see how they were captured unknowingly or in posing. Finally, if you ask them for their reactions to photographs you yourself have taken, you may discover anew how uniquely different and special each human mind truly is.

In this book, I have used a framework for presenting the techniques that corresponds to each position a person might take with regard to a camera: for example, as the subject, having a picture taken of yourself by someone else (who arranged or chose the moment to capture); as the photographer, doing the picture-taking (of others, scenery, objects, or whatever else catches your eye); as the photographic director, posing for

a photo of yourself, but making all the choices involved (including control over the moment the shutter is pushed); as the “curator” of the photos in your own personal collection that have special meaning for you, such as those found in albums, on desktops, or on the walls of your home; and finally, as the reflective viewer looking at photos of your own, shown to you by others, or “found” in magazines, gallery exhibits, in greeting cards, and the like.

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## OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

The major chapters in the book present the different PhotoTherapy techniques from much the same perspective: what happens when you view any photo (*photo-projective techniques*), your interactions with photos of yourself when you had all the control over the image’s creation (*self-portraits*), photos taken of you by other people, whether posed or spontaneous, but where those others made all the decisions about timing, content, and so forth (*photos of the client by others*), photos taken by you, including those “taken” by gathering photos or photo-reproductions that other people may have created but which hold special meaning for you (*photos taken or collected by the client*), and finally those photos put together for the purpose of documenting the personal narrative of your life and the various family and other contexts from which you have developed (*album and photo-biographical snapshots*). Each technique chapter includes numerous anecdotes that illustrate various clients’ experiences with it, and each is followed by a sampling of recommended “starter” exercises or activities.

Before these more detailed technique chapters, Chapter One gives some theoretical background and context for the rationale of the techniques, and then Chapter Two provides an overview that not only gives a brief introduction to each, but explains how they really are more an interrelated and interdependent system than discretely separate, individual steps of some particular fixed linear progression. I have not attempted in this book to provide the full developmental history of PhotoTherapy, nor any comprehensive literature review, though I do mention particularly relevant sources occasionally when I believe them important. A philosophical tome of many pages documenting others’ findings is not

my aim. It is one thing to read a book about therapy and something altogether different to actually start trying techniques out with a live client, and this book is definitely oriented toward the second option!

Similarly, although I emphasized earlier the additional value of this book for art therapists, there is not room in this book about PhotoTherapy for much in-depth discussion of the purely art therapy elements of exercises or examples given in this book. There are already numerous texts available about art therapy itself, some of which are listed in the Recommended Readings, should readers wish to learn more about these components of the client's expressions.

After the general introductions of the first two chapters, the remainder of the book contains primarily practical information, illustrations, and suggestions about each technique involved.

The *photo-projective techniques* in Chapter Three make use of the spontaneous associative process of connecting visual stimulus with conscious and unconscious meaning, quickly affirming that there is more than meets the eye when a person views any ordinary snapshot. At its most elemental level, seeing is believing. Both metaphorically and literally, we see what we believe and we believe what we see—the two are basically inseparable. *Seeing* is a word frequently used synonymously with *understanding*. This chapter establishes the foundation for all remaining PhotoTherapy activities, in that projective interactions with photos take place within all the others as well.

Readers are shown various ways to engage clients with photographic imagery and ways to structure therapy based on the questions posed during that process. Several examples are provided of people's responses and how these are integrated into the overall therapeutic progress. The chapter ends with a lengthy transcription of one person's encounter with one image over several sessions conducted over many months. This illustration is the longest anecdote in the book and is accompanied by commentary that explains my reasons for asking those particular questions.

Chapter Four, about *self-portrait techniques*, is the second major technique chapter because of the therapeutic primacy of self-oriented issues (such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-acceptance, and other self-perceptive reflections). "Self-portrait" PhotoTherapy techniques focus on the client perceived as a distinct individual identity as removed from surrounding familial or societal contexts. Here the self is addressed as perceived directly by itself, hopefully to obtain a better sense of objective self-

awareness, and the two chapters following this one then deal with the self as a separate individual as perceived by others and as perceiving others.

This self-portrait chapter details the various kinds of self-portraits clients can make spontaneously or in response to the therapist's assignments. Suggestions are given for both the process of creating self-portraits and for what can be done with them in active discussion after they have been created (and, if desired, elaborated on with various art materials, words, collaging, or three-dimensional work).

One key section demonstrates the kinds of questions that can be asked about any format of self-portrait, and I have selected for detailed presentation one of my favorite exercises whose questioning format demonstrates how I would orient questions to the client now holding one of these photographic assignment results. The transcripts used in this chapter's final examples in fact follow exactly this same questioning format model, so that readers can observe how the "live" processing of self-portraits can proceed in real experience as well as how differently one exercise can be interpreted and activated, depending upon the client's needs and the therapist's goals.

Chapter Five is about *photos of the client taken by others*. Some colleagues include photos others have taken of clients as part of the general category of self-portrait work and photos relating directly to self-image and self-perception. However, I prefer to teach "photos of the client taken by others" separately and distinctly from "self-portraits" due to the differential power issues around a photograph being made of a person in situations where the process was not fully under his or her own, independent control. (I also make a similar kind of differentiation about the technique discussed next, *photos taken by the client*.)

This chapter does *not* teach readers to examine photos of clients and then make pronouncements from an external viewpoint about the meaning of their faces, postures, bodies, or other accompanying photographic details. Instead readers are shown how to use photos of clients as starting points to find out more about their life and their feelings, along with discovering more about how they perceive themselves and their nonverbal communications to others. The chapter attends to the visual contents of photos clients appear in, as well as all the extra information that happens to appear in the photograph along with the person's image. There is also discussion about the relevance of the photographer, the person responsible for that photo's existence, whether he or she asked the client to pose or instead spontaneously captured the client on film.

Because this chapter and the following one are closely related to photographic self-statements, I have not included more lengthy transcripts or case studies in them. Rather, this chapter uses several briefer anecdotes to illustrate a variety of ways that photographs of the client taken by other people can provide PhotoTherapeutic benefit.

Chapter Six is about *photos taken or collected by the client*. As noted above, I also treat this technique separately because, although all photos are in some ways metaphoric self-portraits in their personal selectivity of focus and attention, clients are rarely conscious of this; thus their photographic selections indicate what kinds of images they have felt worth noticing and keeping. And sometimes it is the events surrounding the moment of picture taking that give the image its strongest emotional meaning, rather than the actual visual contents inside the frame. This also applies to photographic images taken by other people that my clients have collected, often simply because they liked them. These kinds of photos were “taken” by selective accumulation rather than pushing a shutter, so clients may not perceive these as being self-reflective visual statements until later encounters with them.

This chapter discusses uses of photos clients have taken or collected, both those brought into therapy already existing, as well as those created in response to assignments given by the therapist. It also suggests ways these visual artifacts can be used later for exercises concentrating on partializing or prioritizing goals, values clarification, and other multi-photo activities. It concludes not with a client illustration, but rather with a personal reflection by someone who directly experienced one such in-depth exercise working with his own photos (plus one invisible one), and who shares how it felt to journey through its many steps.

*Album and photo-biographical snapshots* are covered in Chapter Seven. The concept of “self” was worked with as an isolate in the previous three chapters. This chapter completes the PhotoTherapy picture by considering the “self” of the family—the family unit as a self, a distinct identity apart from just the sum of those individuals who form it by virtue of birth, affiliation, choice, or whichever type of “family” is being identified with—as well as what this means in terms of one of its members being my client. Either way, self as isolate or self in context, an externalized and objectified self-identity is really its own myth and its own construction. Readers can learn the advantages of using both in family work when comparing the family story created by the album’s keeper with versions of the same photos as defined by the people

appearing in them (or left out!). I also note the isomorphic parallels in considering any album as itself being a systemic level of photographic organization.

This chapter blends a framework drawn from family systems theory with a discussion of how to apply its concepts to both reviewing existing family photos (or missing ones) with clients, as well as activities that can be done to reformat these according to specific assignments. The role of the album keeper (the family story's narrator) is also explored and documented in several anecdotes as being illustrative of several systems-based positionings. There is also discussion of how these can be used in situations requiring discovery of personal support networks, for life review summaries with those facing end-of-life issues, with abuse survivors, and other special applications.

As this chapter discusses the value of clients reviewing their own family photos for both secrets and discoveries of systemic undercurrents, I thought it might be beneficial to use for the anecdotal illustrations of this chapter a thorough album review done by a person who also happens to be trained in systems theory—in this case, myself! Thus readers will find the major illustrative example for this chapter to be a retrospective reflection of my own family's album as divided into sections organized according to systems theory concepts, such as pattern repetitions, intergenerational and triangulation dynamics, gender role expectations, differentiation/fusion, and other key structural elements.

Chapter Eight ends the book with a brief discussion of other related aspects of PhotoTherapy that are important to all readers, therapists or not, and ties the book together in a comprehensive interweaving of applications useful for all.

Following the final chapter, readers will find both a Reference List and a Recommended Readings section that together provide a comprehensive listing of additional literature readers can access directly or contact me for locating. Both demonstrate the wide scope and variety of these techniques as documented in actual application.

My goal is that this book be a practical and functional distillation of information about PhotoTherapy that will guide readers in beginning to use these techniques as soon as they have finished reading it and experienced the recommended "starter" exercises firsthand.

For further information about references listed, networking contacts, author addresses, or for any other information or feedback, including

informing me about your own findings or ideas, readers are welcome to email me at: [JWeiser@phototherapy-centre.com](mailto:JWeiser@phototherapy-centre.com) or contact the PhotoTherapy Centre at:



**PhotoTherapy Centre**

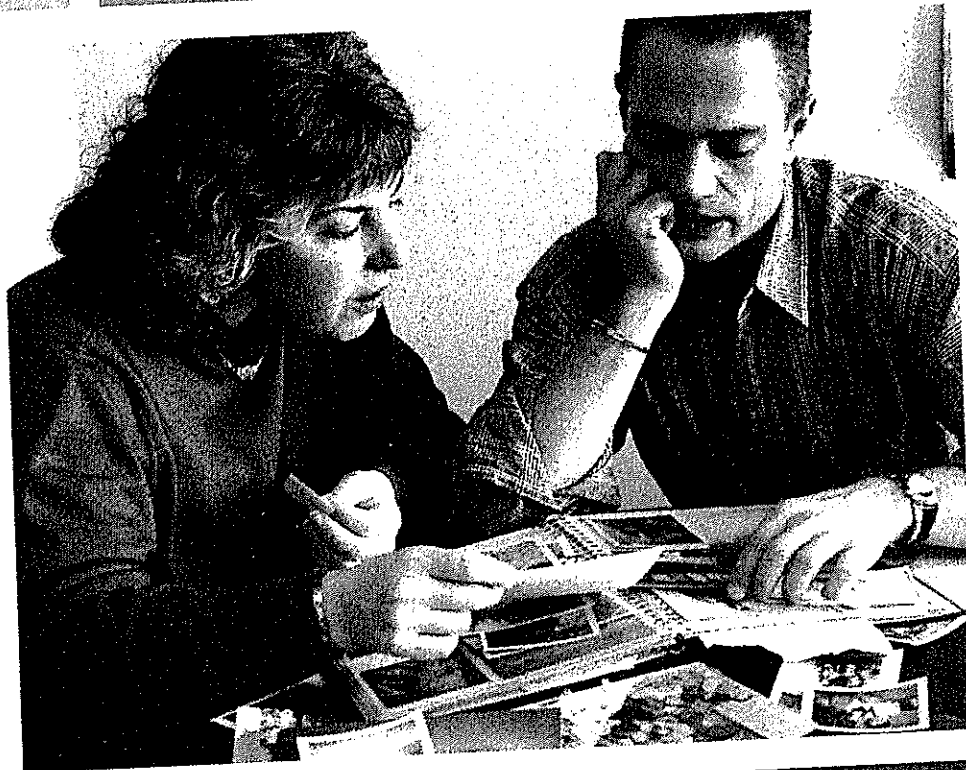
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# *PhotoTherapy Techniques*



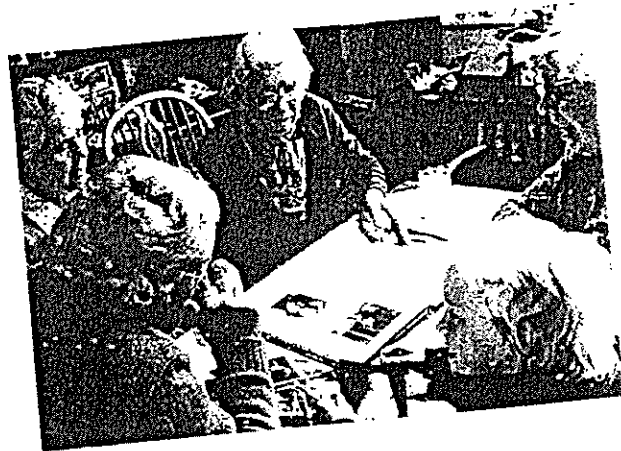
*Exploring the Secrets of Personal  
Snapshots and Family Albums*

*Judy Weiser*

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## *Unlocking the Power of Photos to Help and Heal*

**P**hotos not only record what is important to us, but reflect a lot about us as well. Consequently, exploring snapshots and albums can provide deep personal insights that words alone often cannot fully explain. *PhotoTherapy Techniques* shows mental health professionals how to use clients' interactions with ordinary snapshots to evoke insights that can foster the healing process.



*"Fills a tremendous gap in the literature . . . Therapists, psychologists, mental health professionals, educators, and expressive arts therapists will find this volume an invaluable resource on phototherapy with a variety of client populations."*

—Cathy A. Malchiodi, editor, *Art Therapy*, and professor and coordinator,  
Graduate Art Therapy Program, California State University, Sacramento

*"Judy Weiser has written a thorough, exciting, and most necessary book for all mental health professionals who wish to expand their helping repertoires. She lucidly brings to light both the theory and practice of phototherapy techniques, and demonstrates the latent power of photographic images to help and heal."*

—David A. Krauss, psychologist and coeditor of *Phototherapy in Mental Health*

*"A valuable addition for therapists of all mental health disciplines. An innovative and fascinating modality for therapy. Weiser's writing style is engaging as she presents case examples that are clinically sound."*

—Helen Landgarten, professor emeritus, Loyola Marymount University and  
author of *Family Art Psychotherapy: A Clinical Guide and Casebook*

*"We live in a world of photographic images, and it is time to engage them psychologically. Judy Weiser's wide-ranging ideas and methods will expand and deepen the creative arts professions."*

—Shaun McNiff, professor of Expressive Therapies, Lesley College  
Graduate School, and author of *Art as Medicine* and other books

*"Judy Weiser is developing an interesting and useful way of using photography for stimulation of personal growth. I think it holds great promise for therapeutic purposes."*

—Virginia Satir, D.S.S. June 26, 1984

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