

# WHOSE EVIDENCE IS IT ANYWAY?

**We often hear that there is not sufficient evidence to fund non-drug treatments, but we think the evidence is out there in the form of people's experiences. In each edition, we take a look at a different treatment and ask: just whose evidence is it, anyway?**

Phototherapy uses personal snapshots and family photos, and the feelings, memories and thoughts they evoke, as tools to work with people. The therapist uses photographs as a catalyst for therapeutic communication with the client's conscious and subconscious. That's how Judy Weiser, a psychologist and art therapist, explains it on her website [www.phototherapy-centre.com](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com).

In a report for the Canadian Art Therapy Association's journal, Judy wrote,

"Photographs permit the complex examination of a slice of time frozen forever on film as 'fact', and yet at the same time allow an endless variety of 'realities' to be revealed each time the same photo is viewed. In this sense, every photo has stories to tell, secrets to share, and memories to bring forth, if only it is asked."

Mark Wheeler is a Registered Art Psychotherapist who uses phototherapy in his work in a Child & Family Therapy NHS Clinic. He told *The Point*,

"More than 40% of our brain is concerned with purely visual imagery, processing and memories. Talking about them in therapy, without the picture

present, imposes extra limitations on the content and speed of the process. The photograph is a catalyst to memories and emotions that might be inaccessible, or more difficult to access, without the stimulus of that photograph."

"Some people may find their old photos distressing. They may provoke nostalgia for happier times. For others, those smiling family poses may provoke memories that they conceal a very different reality. This is when an Art Therapist, counsellor or psychotherapist trained in phototherapy techniques can work with you to heal some of the lasting damage from those experiences."

Mark has had personal experience of the power of photographs. He says,

"When I was struck by a car and catapulted from my motorcycle, a year of my memory was wiped out. A friend presented me with an album of photographs that he and our friends had made during my missing year, and patiently told me the stories, with much embellishment, that went with the pictures."

"Not only had I lost 12 months of existing memories, but my brain was not yet writing new ones, so the 6 months following my injury are also patchy, and mostly filled by the photos I took then. I used my cameras as therapeutic aids to help learn to create new memories."

Mark is based in England, but phototherapy is also used in Scotland. Allison Brough is a Senior 1 Art Psychotherapist working in Forth Valley. She uses phototherapy as an introduction to one of the techniques that can be used in art therapy, and finds it can help people experiencing mental health problems with issues about identity, self-confidence and self-esteem.

Mark Wheeler sums up, "I have always taken hundreds of photos. Cheap disposable cameras and the ubiquitous camera-phone mean that thousands of others are now doing the same. My own memory loss was mitigated by the hundreds of snaps I'd taken in my missing year, added to by my friends. Every time you think, 'That would make a good picture', take it."

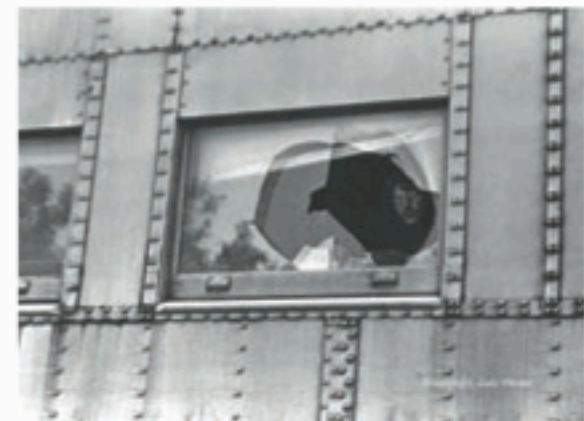
### **So can phototherapy actually help? Judy's report for the Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal gives an example.**

The client chose a photo of a person looking out of a train window, and said,

"I knew that I chose the photo because it said something about me and not about someone else. I just wasn't sure what it said. I had to sit with it for quite a while to try to understand what it meant.

The face in the window looked tired, and that was how I feel... Tired of the constant struggle for money, time and sanity. Tired of having to constantly fight for what I believe in. And...well...just tired."

The client continued, "As I look back on the image, could say that I feel somewhat suffocated and constrained... I can see outside of this train-prison, but I can't get off until the ride is over... I need to get off in the right place, so I have to suffer this isolating ride. I found this quite enlightening and sad at the same time. Because after all, the train ride goes on for some time still."



Some years later, the client reviewed her experience, saying,

"Some time after the phototherapy realisation ... I withdrew from the program I was in and continued doing my clinical work. I immediately felt a burden lifting ... I feel as if I now periodically ride on the train, but I am now enjoying the scenery and know that I can step off and take in the view when I feel the need."

**If you have a suggestion for a future "Whose Evidence Is It Anyway?" contact us at: [thepoint@samh.org.uk](mailto:thepoint@samh.org.uk)**

**Some people may find their old photos distressing. They may provoke nostalgia for happier times. For others, those smiling family poses may provoke memories that they conceal a very different reality.**