

# Using PhotoTherapy Techniques in Art Therapy and Other Counselling Practices

## The Secret Lives of Personal Snapshots and Family Photographs

Every snapshot a person takes or keeps is also a type of metaphorical self-portrait, a kind of "mirror with memory" reflecting back those moments and people that were special enough to be frozen in time forever.

Collectively, these photos make visible the ongoing stories of that person's life, serving as visual footprints marking where they have been (emotionally, as well as physically) and also perhaps signaling where they might next be heading. Even people's reactions to postcards, magazine pictures, or snapshots taken by others, can provide illuminating clues to their own inner life and its secrets.

The actual meaning of any photograph lies less in its visual facts and more in what these details evoke inside the mind (and heart) of each viewer. While looking at a snapshot, people actually spontaneously *create* the meaning that they think is coming from that photo itself -- and this may or may not be the meaning that the photographer originally intended to convey.

Thus, any photo's meaning (and emotional "message") is dependent upon who is doing the looking, because people's perceptions and unique life experiences automatically frame *and define* what they see as real. Therefore, people's reactions to photographs that they find special can actually reveal a lot about *themselves*, if only the right kinds of questions are asked.

## How Therapists Use Photos to

### Help People Heal

Most people keep photographs around, without ever pausing to really think about why. But, because these images permanently record important daily moments (and the associated emotions unconsciously embedded within them), personal snapshots can serve as natural bridges for accessing, exploring, and communicating about feelings and memories (including deeply-buried or long-forgotten ones), along with any psychotherapeutic issues these bring to light. Counsellors find that their clients' photos frequently act as tangible symbolic self-constructs and metaphoric transitional objects that silently offer inner "in-sight" in ways that words alone cannot as fully explain or represent.

Under the guidance of a therapist trained in PhotoTherapy techniques, clients explore what their own personally meaningful snapshots and family albums are *about* emotionally, in addition to what they are *of* visually. Such information is latent in all clients' personal photos, but when it can be used to focus and precipitate therapeutic dialogue, a more direct and less censored connection with the unconscious will usually result.

During PhotoTherapy sessions, photos are not just passively reflected upon in silent contemplation, but also actively created, posed for, talked with, listened to, reconstructed, revised to form or illustrate new narratives, collected on assignment, re-visualized in memory or imagination, integrated into art therapy expressions, or even set into

animated dialogue with other photos.

### What are the Techniques Involved in PhotoTherapy?

Making the photos, or bringing them along to the therapy session, is just the start. Once the photo can be viewed, the next step is to activate all that it brings to mind (exploring its visual messages, re-awakening old memories or feelings it evokes, entering into dialogues with it, asking it questions, considering the results of imagined changes or different viewpoints, and so forth). Therefore, what for art photographers is usually the end-point (the finished photo) is, for PhotoTherapy purposes, just the beginning...

The therapist's primary role is to encourage and support clients' own personal discoveries while exploring and interacting with the ordinary personal and family snapshots they view, make, collect (such as postcards, magazine photos, greeting cards, and so forth), remember, actively reconstruct, or even only imagine.

Therefore, each of the five PhotoTherapy techniques is derived from one of the following five kinds of photographs, although these are frequently used in various combinations

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# PhotoTherapy Techniques

in Counseling and Therapy



PhotoTherapy Techniques use clients' own personal snapshots and family photos (and the feelings, memories, thoughts and information these evoke) as catalysts for therapeutic communication and personal healing.

## BOOK:

***"PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums"***

Cost: CAD\$38.95 (U.S.\$32.95; £17.99) • To order, see: [www.phototherapy-centre.com/bookvid.htm](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/bookvid.htm)

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## ***JUST ANNOUNCED!***

**Introductory PhotoTherapy Workshop • Toronto, ON • January 2008**

Sponsored by Toronto Art Therapy Institute ("TATI"):

***"Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums --  
Using PhotoTherapy Techniques in Art Therapy and Other Counseling Practices"***

Wed. evening January 16 (7 pm - 9 pm) and 9 - 5 Thurs./Fri. January 17-18, 2008  
(Wed. evening can be attended separately as a Lecture-only)

For more information about workshop details, contact TATI: [info@tati.on.ca](mailto:info@tati.on.ca) -- or (416) 924-6221

(For more information about Workshop content, contact: [jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com](mailto:jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com))

***For more about PhotoTherapy Techniques, see: [www.phototherapy-centre.com](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com)***

## PhotoTherapy Continued...

Therefore, each of the five PhotoTherapy techniques is derived from one of the following five kinds of photographs, although these are frequently used in various combinations with one another, as well as in partnership with other Art Therapy or other Creative Therapies techniques:

- 1) **Photos which have been taken or created by the client** (whether actually using a camera to make the picture, or "taking" (appropriating) other people's images through gathering "found" photos from magazines, postcards, Internet images, digital manipulation, and so forth),
- 2) **Photos which have been taken of the client by other people** (whether posed on purpose or captured spontaneously unaware),
- 3) **Self-portraits, which means any kind of photos that clients have made of themselves, either literally or metaphorically** (but in all cases, these are photos of clients where they *themselves* had full control and power over all aspects of the image's creation),
- 4) **Family album and other photo-biographical collections** (whether of birth family or family of choice; whether formally kept in albums or more "loosely" combined into narratives by placement on walls or refrigerator doors, inside wal-

lets or desktop frames, into computer screens or family websites, and so forth), and, finally...

- 5) **"Photo-Projectives"**, which make use of the (phenomenological) fact that the meaning of any photo is primarily created by its viewer *during* their process of perceiving it. Looking at any kind of photographic image produces perceptions and reactions that are projected from that person's own inner map of reality which determines how they make sense of what they see.

Therefore, this technique is located not in a particular *kind* of photograph, but rather in the less-tangible interface *between* a photo and its viewer or maker, the "place" where each person forms their own unique responses to what they see.

### PhotoTherapy -- The Bigger Picture

As explained in the book, *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*, PhotoTherapy is best viewed as an interrelated system of photo-based counselling techniques used by trained mental health professionals *as part of* their therapeutic practice while helping clients consciously probe, and subsequently cognitively reintegrate, their photo-precipitated insights in order to better understand and improve their life.

Therefore, it is *not* the same thing as "Therapeutic Photography" (which is sometimes also confus-

ingly called "Photo-Therapy", particularly in the U.K.), as these are self-conducted activities done outside any formal counselling context. Nor is it the same as "Photo Art Therapy" (which is the use of photo images as tools during specific art therapy directives).

People use Therapeutic Photography for their own personal self-discovery or artistic-statement purposes, whereas therapists use PhotoTherapy to help other people (their clients) resolve their problems.

While the results of doing photo-based self-exploration (photography-*as*-therapy) often ends up being serendipitously "therapeutic" on its own, especially when using the camera as an agent of personal or social change, this is *not* the same as activating and processing such experiences while under the guidance and care of a trained counselling professional (photography-*in*-therapy) *during* the active therapy encounter.

Since PhotoTherapy is used as a set of interrelated flexible techniques, rather than fixed directives based upon only one specific theoretical modality or therapeutic paradigm, it can be used by *any* kind of trained counsellor or therapist, regardless of their conceptual orientation or preferred professional approach. This is one of the many ways that PhotoTherapy is both similar to, yet distinct from, Art Therapy -- as well as the reason it can be used so successfully by a variety of other mental health professionals who are not trained in Art Therapy specifically.

*Since PhotoTherapy is about photography-as-communication rather*

than photography-as-art, no prior experience with cameras or the photographic arts is required for effective therapeutic use.

And finally, since PhotoTherapy involves people interacting with their own unique visual constructions of reality (using photography more as an activating verb than as a passive/reflective noun), these techniques can be particularly successful with people for whom verbal communication is physically or mentally limited, socioculturally marginalized, or situationally inappropriate due to misunderstanding of nonverbal cues.

Therefore PhotoTherapy can be especially helpful, and usually very empowering, in applications with multicultural, disabled, minority-gender, special-needs, and other similarly-complex populations -- as well as beneficial in diversity training, conflict resolution, divorce mediation, and other related fields.

Now that the general public is becoming increasingly comfortable with using electronic technology and digital imagery, more exciting possibilities arise for using photos as counselling tools for helping clients who have scanners or family websites, digital or cell phone cameras, or those able to participate in online cybertherapy (or their own personal social networking page).

You are encouraged to get in touch with the PhotoTherapy Centre and explore the website\* more fully, to get additional information. Please send your questions or requests for more information or training\*\* -- and also recommend additional publication or contribute your own reviews of the book "*PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*" (ISBN#0-9685619-0-X). There are hundreds of articles in the reference sections and dozens avail-

able for free download and a page listing student Theses and Dissertations on the subject...

Add news or networking suggestions, recommend links, share your own photo-anecdotes, or send any other kind of feedback to the Centre, its website.

And have a look at its Interactive "Discussion Group" (which has a direct link from all pages of the site) -- postings from dozens of people to each other, sharing information and networking, amongst fourteen countries thus far -- PhotoTherapy techniques are all over the world, so have a look!

Your communication is welcomed!  
Thank you,

Judy Weiser, R.Psych., A.T.R.,  
Director, PhotoTherapy Centre

**What is the story behind each of these pictures below? Why wa feelings, or memories come to mind in response to seeing it? What n could speak? What message, secret, or information might it hold? W your own life?**



## Photo Projectives

End of Article; for more information, contact Judy Weiser, at: [jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com](mailto:jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com) or 604-689-9709.