
PhotoTherapy Techniques — Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums

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

The Secret Lives of Personal Snapshots and Family Photographs

Every snapshot a person takes or keeps is also a type of 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 their reactions to postcards, magazine pictures, and snapshots taken by others can provide illuminating clues to their own inner life and its stories.

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, its meaning (and emotional “message”) is dependent upon who is doing the looking, because people's perceptions and unique life experiences will always automatically frame, and actually define what they see as real. Therefore, people's reactions to photographs that they feel are 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

Because personal snapshots permanently record important daily moments (and the associated emotions unconsciously embedded within these), they 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. Clients' photos are tangible symbolic self-constructs and metaphoric transitional objects, silently offering them inner “in-sight” about things less consciously-evident or verbally accessible.

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 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. This allows clients to better reach, understand, and express parts of themselves in ways that words alone cannot as fully represent or deconstruct.

The Techniques of PhotoTherapy

Like the fingers of a hand, the five PhotoTherapy techniques are interrelated and interdependent; they work best when synergistically combined. PhotoTherapy is not about interpreting people's photos for them; instead, the input should always come from the client, guided by the therapist's photo-stimulated questions, while both explore the image (and its emotional impact) together. As clients discuss the layers of meanings contained within their photographs, they also reveal a lot about themselves: their inner value system, beliefs, attitudes and expectations that inseparably accompany their words. These nonverbal codes hold important clues about how people make sense of their world (and their place within it).

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, entering into dialogues with it, asking it questions, considering the results of imagined changes or different viewpoints, and so forth). Therefore, what for photographers is usually an 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, remember, or even only imagine. Each of the five PhotoTherapy techniques is based on one or more of the following kinds of photographs, although in practice these categories often naturally overlap:

- 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 wallets or desktop frames, into computer screens or family websites, and so forth), and,

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 viewer'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.

Like so many holistic approaches, PhotoTherapy suffers somewhat from having to be taken apart for studying in any step-by-step order, when in fact each technique is partially formed by, and overlaps, several others. Therefore, the most effective application of these techniques will occur when they are creatively combined — because they comprise an integrally interconnected system that is far more useful as a whole, than in any linear summation of its parts.

PhotoTherapy — The Bigger Picture

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, mentally, or emotionally limited, socioculturally marginalized, or situationally inappropriate due to misunderstanding of non-verbal cues. And, since PhotoTherapy is about photography-as-communication rather than photography-as-art, no prior experience with cameras is required for effective therapeutic use.

As the general public becomes increasingly comfortable with using electronic technology and digital imagery, more exciting possibilities arise for using photos as counseling tools with clients who have scanners, digital cameras, photo-manipulation software, family websites, and/or those who are able to participate in online cyber-therapy.

In summary, since PhotoTherapy is a collection of flexible techniques, rather than fixed directives based upon only one specific theoretical modality or therapeutic paradigm, it can

be used by any trained therapist, regardless of their conceptual orientation, preferred intervention model or theoretical approach, or degree of prior familiarity with photography itself. Doing good therapy, and doing it well, is itself an art, and one which needs as many intervention tools as possible for helping a client in the most beneficial way...

Recommended PhotoTherapy Readings

Hunsberger, P. (1984). *Uses of instant-print photography in psychotherapy*. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 15:6, 884-890.

Krauss, D.A., & Fryrear, J.L. (Eds.). (1983). *Phototherapy in mental health*. Springfield, IL: Charles Thomas.

Weiser, J. (2001). *PhotoTherapy techniques: Using clients' personal snapshots and family photos as counseling and therapy tools* (Invited feature article in "Special Double Issue: Media art as/in therapy"). *Afterimage — The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, 29:3 (Nov/Dec), 10-15.

Weiser, J. (1999 [first edition: 1993]). *PhotoTherapy techniques — Exploring the secrets of personal snapshots and family albums*. Vancouver: PhotoTherapy Centre Press / Distributor: MMB Books.

Weiser, J. (1990). "More than meets the eye" — Using ordinary snapshots as tools for therapy. In T. Laidlaw, C. Malmo, & Associates (Eds.), *Healing voices: Feminist approaches to therapy with women*. (pp. 83-117). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Weiser, J. (1988a). "See what I mean?" *Photography as nonverbal communication in cross-cultural psychology*. In F. Poyatos (Ed.), *Cross-cultural perspectives in nonverbal communication* (pp. 245-290). Toronto: Hogrefe.

Weiser, J. (1988b). *PhotoTherapy: Using snapshots and photo-interactions in therapy with youth*. In C. Schaefer (Ed.), *Innovative interventions in child and adolescent therapy* (pp. 339-376). New York: Wiley.

Weiser, J. (1986). *Ethical considerations in PhotoTherapy training and practice*. *Phototherapy*, 5:1, 12-17.

Editors' Note:

Here are some ways you can pursue your interest in PhotoTherapy techniques:

1. Attend the BCPA presentation on this subject
2. E-mail Judy Weiser at jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com
3. Browse <http://www.phototherapy-centre.com>
4. Read Judy Weiser's "PhotoTherapy Techniques - Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums" (1999)
5. Phone (604) 689-9709 to attend Judy Weiser's next training workshop.