



PhotoTherapy Centre

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Photos BY Clients

Photos That Clients Take, Create, or Collect

Every photograph someone takes is also a type of self-portrait reflecting them, because each one contains information about the person who made it. Its visual contents metaphorically represent what was important to them at that moment that they chose to freeze it permanently. Every step of choosing where, when, who, how, and why to take any photograph says as much about its creator as it does about the subject matter, whether or not the photographer is in the photo.

The visual contents of people's photos, along with the unconscious decisions they make while planning or taking them, are all indications of people, places, and things that have mattered most to them. These were moments that made a difference for some reason, whereas photos of things that don't matter, don't get taken (or kept) in the first place!

Therefore, all photos in people's personal photographic collection (including images appropriated from other sources) not only make visible the underlying values that help activate their life, but also illustrate how these then construct the beliefs and perceptions they measure it against. These are the very source of their feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours — as well as the foundations for their expectations and judgments of themselves and others!

When clients are guided to explore the photographs they have taken, kept, or chosen to collect from others' images (such as internet downloads, magazine photos, postcards, and so forth), they can discover a lot of therapeutically-important information about what has most touched their heart, mind and life. Photos are nonverbally encoded with many clues about the way their makers perceive, make sense of, and evaluate the world around them — as well as their role within it. It's as if photos are the physical site where people deposit their feelings, thoughts, and memories onto a photograph, in order to find them there later...

It is clear that people take and keep pictures because of what the scene or moment is about emotionally, rather than what it is just simply of visually. Because of this, exploring below the surface of a photo's simple visual contents will quickly help to connect with the client's inner thoughts, feelings and emotions.

How This Technique Works

In addition to working with photos that clients have taken with their own camera or brought to therapy from their personal collection of images, this technique can also include working with photographs that have been photocopied, collaged, digitally-created, electronically-scanned, or otherwise appropriated.

Therapists not only explore the who, what, where, when, and why of their clients' pictures, but also look for larger patterns of repeated themes, personal symbols and metaphors, and other visual information that the client might have been unaware of when they first took or encountered the photograph.

Sometimes when clients simply take the time to discover what they have been photographing and explore what these images say about them (as well as their inner thoughts and emotions) they are better able to see the roots and contexts of their presenting problems through the themes that present themselves to this kind of conscious investigation.

Whether clients bring in photos on their own initiative or create new ones at the therapist's request, these can be used to focus discussions towards things in their life beyond what appears in on the surface of their photos. While clients may think they are simply explaining their photo better, they are in fact helping their therapist learn more about themselves, their lives, and what matters to them. By discussing, partializing, reflecting upon, and examining the photo's story — as well as the reasons they took or kept it — clients will usually bring to light other associated feelings, thoughts, memories, or related issues that have therapeutic value for helping them solve their problems.

In addition to having clients look at, and talk about, existing photos (or those they remember or imagine), therapists can also design more active assignments for the client to take or find photos tailored toward specific goals or issues they want the client to explore in greater depth, before their next session. The photographic results of these assignments can be used to activate therapeutic process in much the same ways as older photos that the client has brought from home.

Photo-taking assignments do not need to be tightly focused and usually work best when created with a wide focus because “fishing with a wide net often brings in a bigger catch” (*see a list of assignment examples below*). Photographing what affects them gives clients more control over its unknown or unexpected aspects; getting it outside themselves gives them a better viewpoint from which to explore it more safely.

As with the other four PhotoTherapy techniques, *Photos BY Clients* can be worked with either on their own or in combination with other kinds of client photographs, as well as in combination with expressive arts media and other appropriated imagery for additional therapeutic enhancement.

Examples of Assignments

"This is the last roll of film on Earth; please take pictures with it and bring these to your next session"

"Go take photos you'd like to leave as a visual legacy for your grandchildren"

The client could be asked to take or find photos that show:

"Places, people, and things that interest me"

"What I most like to do"

"My home, family, friends, and pets"

"A typical day in my life"

...or even a bit deeper, such as:

"What I'd like to change about the world"

"What makes me happy (or sad or angry or...)"

"What needs fixing in my life"

"My past and my future"

"Barriers that get in my way"

"How my life would be if I wasn't having these problems"

"Things I can't tell in words!"

Important:

These sample questions above are provided only to illustrate the kinds that trained therapists might ask clients when using this technique during their therapy session.

You are welcome to try them out for yourself using your own personal photos, but **unless you are professionally trained in conducting therapy, please do not try to use them with other people, as the results could be harmful.**

An Example of this Technique Being Used

William's collection of years of snapshot-taking was kept in large piles in storage boxes and overflowing drawers in his home. As he felt there were still a lot of unanswered questions "leftover" about his childhood that might be related to his current difficulties with entering intimate relationships, he asked for therapy to help him better understand himself.

When asked to bring about twenty to forty photos to his appointment, William did manage to narrow his large collection down to a smaller selection. But it became more difficult when he was asked to reduce this to the ten he most wanted to focus on during his counseling session. By the time the therapist finished having him prioritize his choices down to only one to begin with, his eyes were brimming and his voice nearly inaudible, especially when having to decide between the final two photos, one of each of his parents.

William describes what happened to him during that session:

"This was much more interesting than I had thought it might be... It was quite a task gathering twenty to forty photographs that meant something to me! The process of the session had begun with this search. Why did the six-year-old "me" with the neighbor's dog bring that warm feeling? Why did that Halloween photo make me grin with a flow of memories? Why did I find pictures that I thought I'd thrown away in anger?

"I arrived for the session feeling like I was carrying something very special in my leather carrying case, this collection of "me". It's funny too, because photos never really seemed to hold that kind of power for me. I began to wonder what this collection of photos was saying about me. I remember being quick to say that I wasn't the photographer for most of the collection, trying to lessen the responsibility or impact. (Ha!).

"Choosing ten was fairly straightforward. Narrowing those ten down to five was much more difficult. Who (not what) could I do without? Narrowing from five down to even fewer became a very anxious event.

"My parents are divorced, and in my collection of forty photos there wasn't one of the two of them together (interesting...). So as important as they both are in my life, I wanted to have a picture of each of them. I wanted to include a picture of an old boyfriend -- my first. The photo has always been a reminder of the passion I have for life (among other things!).

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

"I had wanted to include a picture of another boyfriend (the end of that relationship had been recent and difficult), but I didn't own a photo of him. So my therapist had me use a piece of blank white paper as a substitute (actually a folded-up Kleenex!). With some imagination, I could picture him clearly in the whiteness of the tissue. I seem to have totally blocked out what the fifth photo was.

"Narrowing the number of photos was hell. No one could have convinced me that pictures I had already seen hundreds of times could be such a big "key" to information about me. But they were a "roadway" leading to well-defined (but well buried) memories. In verbal therapy sessions I've spent a good deal of time talking about my parents.

"My close friends would be the first to complain that when I talk, I distance a certain amount of emotion. And yet here, with this picture of my mother four inches from my face, I'm feeling angry, unloved, alone, and four years old. My therapist's probing questions kept me on track for much of the time, but also allowed me to feel in control.

"Back to the folded Kleenex. Angry, disappointed, unloved, and alone. This is what the last relationship had left me feeling. I had been the stable understanding one throughout most of the relationship. Here I was feeling alone again. And recognizing it in context with other relationships in my life.

"At times I couldn't see the Kleenex for the warm tears that flooded my eyes. The sadness and anger took the form of huge sobs, a crying from within my body that I'm not used to. I've been able to connect with this type of feeling in a traditional verbal therapy session, but not this readily!

"All my photos of other people turned out to be so much about me and I never knew this before. People just cannot know how powerful this is internally for someone unless they hear about it from someone who went through it".