



PhotoTherapy Centre

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Clients' Self-Portraits

Photos Made by Clients of Themselves

Photos of a person, taken by themselves without any outside interference (self-portraits), let them explore who they are when they know no one else is there watching, judging the results, or attempting to control the process. Since issues connected to self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-confidence, and self-acceptance lie at the core of most clients' problems, being able to see themselves for themselves, unfiltered by the input or feedback of others, can be a very powerful and therapeutically beneficial encounter.

Because self-portraits permit direct nonverbal self-confrontation, they can be not only validating and empowering, but also the most threatening and risky kinds of photos to expose one's emotions to -- which is precisely the reason they are such quick and effective activators of deep process work in therapy situations.

With self portraits there is no one else there to shift blame onto and therefore clients are at perhaps their most vulnerable moments of self-encounter, where defensive rationalization is difficult. Clients can use self-created photos to internally dialogue with themselves in their own private inner language — and explore on their own any resulting consequences or discoveries. When such "face-to-face" meetings are contained and guided by a therapist aware of that client's particular issues, the client is able to "get a better picture of themselves".

Self-portrait PhotoTherapy techniques are a safe way for clients to meet denial head-on and probe their own limitations and defenses in carefully-managed portions. Self-portraits provide a way for clients to differentiate themselves from the parts of themselves that they may not like or want, and try out alternatives (without other people having to know).

Taking photos of themselves helps clients discover more about who they are (and could be), compare similarities and differences between expected and actual parts of their identity, and therefore begin to better understand where some of their expectations, and related disappointments, might be coming from.

When therapy clients visually confront themselves without other people's opinions filtering the process, they usually come to realize how many of their perceptions and self-judgments have arisen from having internalized other people's expectations about them, rather than reflecting their own inner identity.

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Thus clients can begin to understand that they themselves are responsible for initiating any desired changes and improvements (or not!) — and therefore start to realize that it is up to them alone to initiate that process and accept responsibility for the results.

Therefore, self-portrait PhotoTherapy work is the best of the five techniques for helping clients internally understand the difference between “I can’t do this” and “I can do this, but I won’t try” — and therefore they have the power (if they want) to move themselves along a path of change and growth.

How This Technique Works

People usually take pictures of themselves (including visual or metaphoric equivalents of themselves), as they want their image to be perceived by others — whether pre-planned self-pictures or spontaneous in-the-moment "selfies". The same is usually true during therapy sessions involving client's photos of themselves — whether these photos made spontaneously during the counselling session (especially those taken digitally which can be reviewed immediately), or taken or collected later in response to their therapist's homework assignments,. Each image will be an exploration of a different facet or aspect of themselves as they try to capture themselves without interference from others.

The photographic results of assignments (such as given in the examples below) can answer things in ways that words could never as fully encompass or explain. And in discussing the images afterwards, the supportive assistance of this photo-evidence (created by themselves, for themselves — and thus unyielding to any claims of bias or intentional distortion) provides additional contextual details that were previously unconscious and thus unavailable for informing the therapeutic process until given voice through photographic activation.

As with the other four PhotoTherapy techniques, *Clients' Self-Portraits* 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

The client could be asked to create a self-portrait (or series of self-photos) that shows:

"How I feel today"

"How I wish others would see me"

"What I was like as a child"

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"The parts of me I like the best (or least)"

"How my mother wanted me to be"

"What I'll be like when I'm the same age my father is now"

Or even a bit deeper, such as:

"What I'd be like if I didn't have these problems"

"The me nobody knows"

"Who I'd be if not being who I am now".

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.**

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An Example of this Technique Being Used

Lee had been HIV-positive for over seven years when he carefully arranged himself for this photograph, placing himself in a baby crib he found in his guest cabin at a holiday resort.

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

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He had a friend take it, but only to act as a "human cable release". For over 15 minutes, he carefully arranged himself into various poses to get the scene as he wanted it -- and then directed her when to hit the shutter on the camera that he had pre-positioned himself, when he felt he had posed exactly as he wanted. Once the film was developed, he had his favorite one printed large, and framed it to keep beside his bed. Apart from that friend, Lee never showed those self-portraits to anyone other than his therapist, who he began seeing for counseling when he realized the time had arrived to begin coming to terms with his approaching death (which has since occurred).

He explained, "When I was a baby, life was good. I was kept clean, warm, and fed. I got unconditional love from my parents. Life was safe and kind. When I first found out that I had been infected by HIV, it was in those very early days of the plague when nobody knew what it was yet, much less how to prevent getting it. So I didn't even know I had been putting myself at risk. When they told me that I would soon get worse from AIDS and then die soon, it put a cold shock right through my body. My heart froze up in fear. I felt like I'd been raped. It was a bunch of really awful feelings. And it just wasn't fair -- because I didn't know [about all this] or I would have protected myself.

"What's this picture about? Well, when I first got diagnosed, I really felt like a little boy crying out, "I want my Mommy"! Seriously, that's the first thing that came to my mind. But she had been dead a long time [by then], so I had nobody to go "home" to, nobody's lap to crawl into. My lover had already died and [the rest of] my family mainly disowned me when they found out I was gay. They don't know I have AIDS, and I won't let them have the pleasure of finding out so they can tell me it is God's punishment. My friends are understanding, but they aren't coping very well with my dying -- and neither am I! I'm not ready yet -- not sure if I'll ever be.

"Every time I start thinking about it, I get more scared and really need to find a place that is safe so I can catch my breath, and push AIDS away for a little while. I go relax at a friend's cottage, but that's just for a short time. So when I was at this

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motel attending a conference, and there was this crib in the room, it really brought back memories of being so little that I fit into one. So when I saw that crib, I just decided on the spur of the moment to climb in. I didn't think about it much -- just climbed in. And you know what? I felt so safe in there...

"So the next day I asked my friend to come up to my room with her camera and I did it again, so that I could remember that there used to be this place once where I was happy and had no worries, when my life was clean and pure -- and where I had no concept of death. Every once in a while I take out this picture again and remember what it must be like to have no fears. It really makes me feel better for a while..."

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