

# *PhotoTherapy Techniques*



*Exploring the Secrets of Personal  
Snapshots and Family Albums*

*Judy Weiser*



## Unlocking the Power of Photos to Help and Heal

**P**hotos not only record what is important to us, but reflect a lot about us as well. Consequently, exploring snapshots and albums can provide deep personal insights that words alone often cannot fully explain. *PhotoTherapy Techniques* shows mental health professionals how to use clients' interactions with ordinary snapshots to evoke insights that can foster the healing process.



## PhotoTherapy Techniques Weiser



*"Fills a tremendous gap in the literature . . . Therapists, psychologists, mental health professionals, educators, and expressive arts therapists will find this volume an invaluable resource on phototherapy with a variety of client populations."*

—Cathy A. Malchiodi, editor, *Art Therapy*, and professor and coordinator,  
Graduate Art Therapy Program, California State University, Sacramento

*"Judy Weiser has written a thorough, exciting, and most necessary book for all mental health professionals who wish to expand their helping repertoires. She lucidly brings to light both the theory and practice of phototherapy techniques, and demonstrates the latent power of photographic images to help and heal."*

—David A. Krauss, psychologist and coeditor of *Phototherapy in Mental Health*

*"A valuable addition for therapists of all mental health disciplines. An innovative and fascinating modality for therapy. Weiser's writing style is engaging as she presents case examples that are clinically sound."*

—Helen Landgarten, professor emeritus, Loyola Marymount University and  
author of *Family Art Psychotherapy: A Clinical Guide and Casebook*

*"We live in a world of photographic images, and it is time to engage them psychologically. Judy Weiser's wide-ranging ideas and methods will expand and deepen the creative arts professions."*

—Shaun McNiff, professor of Expressive Therapies, Lesley College  
Graduate School, and author of *Art as Medicine* and other books

*"Judy Weiser is developing an interesting and useful way of using photography for stimulation of personal growth. I think it holds great promise for therapeutic purposes."*  
—Virginia Satir, D.S.S. June 26, 1984



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# 1

## *Photographs as Therapeutic Tools*

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**P**hotographs are footprints of our minds, mirrors of our lives, reflections from our hearts, frozen memories we can hold in silent stillness in our hands—forever, if we wish. They document not only where we may have been but also point the way to where we might perhaps be going, whether we know it yet or not. We should converse with them often and listen well to the secrets their lives can tell.

The mind can only absorb information through the organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Since about 80 percent of sensory stimuli enter through our eyes (Hall, 1973), sight-based information is crucial to our understanding of what we encounter. Thus there is a strong visual component to our experiences, and to our memories of them. Moreover, meaning doesn't really exist "out there" apart from us, but rather in the relationship between the stimulus object and the perceiver. It isn't just beauty that is "in the eye of the beholder"; our idea of reality itself is based on our perceptions. If we notice something, it is because it has some kind of meaning for us. If we don't notice it, it hasn't stood out as distinct; in some ways it doesn't exist for us at all. When we first perceive an object, it is already etched with our personal meaning. That meaning is impossible to remove; it is permanently fixed in our memory.

Different people will interpret the same sensory stimulus in different ways, based on who they are and the background factors that influence what they do or do not notice. The basic units of visual and other data will be more or less the same for everyone; for example, each person looking at a photograph might see a woman dressed in a red shirt and jeans,

with curly dark hair, and so on. What these facts mean, however, depends primarily on what each perceiver brings to the photograph.

Things or people we don't notice are likely those that are not significant to us; differences that make some difference in our minds will likely be those we pay attention to. (Was there a photo on a previous page? What color is the cover of this book? Is there background noise as you read this question?) In the act of perceiving, we partially bring into being that which we later accept as "reality." The meaning we think we are getting from a visual stimulus (seeing a person, seeing a photograph) is primarily *created* by us during our process of perceiving it. Important components in how we create that reality are our personal sets of perceptual filters, personal symbologies, and unique "inner maps" or frameworks for logical thinking. These factors shape the practice of photography on many levels, from influencing which pictures we take to affecting which ones we like or remember years later.

The postmodernist art movement is based on the concept that there is no one universal reality that can be objectively observed by all spectators. Rather, postmodernism posits reality as totally relative and conditional upon human perception of it. People's experiences of reality actually construct its meaning for them, and their eventual definition of it will be based on their deconstruction of that meaning.

Constructivism holds that there is no neutral knowledge; all perceptions are given value and context by the perceiver. Knowledge does not relate to facts but to assumptions about life; all we can know about an object's reality is its surface appearance, as we selectively perceive it. Therefore its meaning is personally, socially, and culturally constructed during the process of making sense of it to ourselves, including later verbal explanations or artistic representations about it. Similarly, photographs can then also be considered constructions of reality rather than objective recordings of it, owing in part to the choice of a moment to depict and the subsequent imposition of a frame around the fragment we select from the "whole picture" available to the eye.

Deconstruction deals with how objects are interpreted by viewers. Just as constructivism suggests that there can be no single fixed reality, deconstruction denies that objective meaning can be decoded from a given image or object. Ideally, when we examine art or life from either of these perspectives, we become more aware of how our own unconscious has contributed to meaning formation and how language—both verbal and nonverbal—mediates significations.

In therapy, as people attempt to unravel layers of meaning beneath even familiar persons' ordinary behaviors or conversations, they can begin to recognize how feelings unconsciously connect to thoughts or words, and how some people can manipulate others' emotional responses by using "loaded" images or words to construct visual or verbal messages. In this sense, postmodernism can be seen to have evolved from existential and phenomenological theory, all three of which provide a theoretical framework for understanding how people get meaning from photographs.

The postmodernist view that meaning is selected through the filters of the individual and that a different meaning can be taken from an image by every person who perceives it holds true in all human interactions with external reality. These ideas have great import for therapy, which deals with people's understandings about their lives and identities.

Most of us think, feel, and recall memories not in words directly, but rather in iconic imagery: inner, silent thought-pictures (sometimes accompanied by kinesthetic or other cues), and visual codes and concepts. All of these make up the mental maps that we use when later trying to cognitively communicate about things, whether using words or artistic symbolic representations of them.

A snapshot seems to me a simultaneous representation of the thinking and feeling parts of people, and thus, it is very difficult to distill a simple objective observation or direct correlation of meaning from its initially spontaneous origins. Feelings are transient unless a camera catches their behavioral or affective manifestations; it is only their visual traces that appear on film. Trying to "read" a photograph like a book results in problems similar to those of wave-particle theory in quantum physics, where the act of observation automatically alters what is examined, changing it from its natural, unobserved state. A camera does not just record; it also mediates. Cultural, ethnic, sociological, gender, and other types of filters cannot be removed from the person doing the observing or interpreting, and so the meaning extracted from any photograph is personal and idiosyncratic, and often not the communication intended by the original photographer. As each viewer's response is based on unique individual perceptions, the meaning of the photograph therefore exists as an unobservable, though not necessarily random, combination of possibilities that occurs only in the interface *between* that person and the image itself.



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## HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO PHOTOGRAPHS

If you stop to think about it, a photograph is a rather curious thing. It's a piece of very thin paper that we perceive three-dimensionally, as if alive, and as if existing right now. The moment we look at, inside its borders, is "now"; we are *there*, within the space and time of that image, as if really physically there ourselves. Our mind does not separate viewing the visual contents of a photograph from viewing those visual facts themselves; it is a transitional object that bridges without our even realizing this is happening. Looking at a photo of our relatives of a hundred years ago, we conceptually process the image as if we are seeing them alive in front of us at that moment, and we are right there, across from them, looking on. Our mind achieves a cognitive leap that equates looking at the photo with being in the actual scene. Thus we feel certain that the camera did not, and could not, lie, because it obviously took a picture of what was really happening right there, right then, right in front of it. Except, the camera didn't take the picture; a person did.

Someone once told me a photo was paper with "emotion" all over it; of course he meant emulsion, but the malapropism stayed with me. Photographs are indeed emotionally charged, as if electromagnetically etched, and we can never view our personal photos dispassionately. In fact, these small pieces of paper are empowered far beyond their apparent value; their significance resonates to and from people, over the past and into the future. Emotions connected to the subject matter become transferred to the photographic representation of that subject as a type of stand-in for the real person, place, or thing. It is natural that people respond to these visual artifacts as if they were full of life.

A photograph, then, has the special quality of being simultaneously a realistic illusion and an illusory reality, a moment captured—yet never fully captured. We use film to stop time, which cannot be stopped. These aspects are crucial for an understanding of why (and how) PhotoTherapy works: it permits the complex examination of a slice of time frozen on film as a "fact," and it also allows an endless variety of "realities" to be revealed as each viewer responds to it differently. Every snapshot has stories to tell, secrets to share, and memories to bring forth.

The person who takes a picture is trying to make a permanent record of a special moment (it is special because the perceiver sees it as such; perhaps no one else would). If the picture turns out "right" it is because

it satisfies the photographer's expectations; if it doesn't, he or she will likely have some idea about what was missing or "wrong." The photos people take (or collect as postcards, posters, magazine or calendar pictures, and so forth) can tell something about them. These photos were taken or gathered because they mattered. As a collection, they constitute almost a mirror-reflection of their owner, in that we usually won't keep photos around that we don't like or that don't matter. The ones that are most special to us express many things about us and our life that we might explain. We only need to be asked good exploratory questions.

When people pose for photos, even those they take of themselves, they usually have certain ideas about how they should look in the final picture, and these reflect their expectations about how they should be perceived by other people in real life. Asking them questions about photos of themselves can be a good way to find out how they evaluate themselves.

The visual contents of the photographic image itself are important, but the meaning of these contents to each person encountering them is also significant. A photo will "mean" differently to the person who took it, to each person in it (whether posed or captured unaware), any person later viewing it (regardless of their familiarity with the subjects of the photo or the photographer), and certainly any person who keeps it as part of a permanent collection or, perhaps more important, a family album. (Family albums have their own private lives and reasons for existence.)

Frequently, in PhotoTherapy processes, clients' explanations of the meaning of a snapshot turn out to be far less significant than their explanations of why what they know is true and how they know that it is true. A lot can be revealed as a person delves into what a photo is about emotionally as well as what it shows visually. No matter how large the photograph, it is never more than a detail of an even larger picture of life in space and time. Its significance grows as we learn more about its context. Clients who are able to regard their photographs as starting points rather than end products, and who can use them to initiate questions and explore feelings, can learn a great deal about themselves in the process.

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## **THE POWER OF PHOTOTHERAPY**

Throughout our lives, we store information for later recall without any words coming into use. We may use words later to try to translate back

to others the thoughts and feelings that we understand “wordlessly” from inside ourselves, but the words we use are only an attempted representation of that inner meaning, not the meaning itself. Each of us uses an inner language to categorize reality and code our experience of it so that it is accessible inside us, but raw experience isn’t necessarily translatable into words for full description. Photographs, however, have the power to capture and express feelings and ideas in visual-symbolic forms, some of which are intimately personal metaphors.

The symbols and visual representations that appear in photographs are clearly a language, but one that an outsider may not understand without assistance from the person who produced them. Language constructs reality, yet language is not always solely verbal. Artistic representation is a language, and certainly it communicates as well as words about our thoughts, feelings, and relationships. When we become aware of our visual (nonverbal) literacy—and understand fully that it differs for each of us—we can begin to appreciate the extent to which decisions, expectations, feelings, thoughts, and memories are based on nonverbal stimuli and meaning-making and are thus directly connected with our sensory perceptions.

In summary, most of what we absorb in everyday interactions with life is not verbally coded when it goes into our brains and is not accessed that way when we want to refer back to it. Information only shifts into verbal language when we are trying to make something that is inside our mind comprehensible to the mind of someone else. Thus it should be no surprise that communicators—teachers, therapists, and others whose work focuses on inner meanings—need to make use of nonverbal means of expressing and sharing meaning, such as music, dance, the visual arts, and definitely photography. All the various arts therapies and expressive therapies are based on this concept. Before considering how PhotoTherapy both is and isn’t art therapy, it will be useful to discuss how PhotoTherapy can fit into the spectrum of therapeutic models and techniques.

Within the therapeutic context, I believe it is impossible to think of a client’s problem as being the effect of any single cause. A person experiencing a problem in a given situation is not only part of that situation but also partial creator of its definitions and potential; thus the person cannot be expected to view the problem from an objective “outsider” position, nor can the person’s therapist be expected to fully understand it from an outside position, looking in. Also, while effects may accompany causes, they do not, in reverse, define them.



In my work with clients, I prefer to see cause and effect not as a linear sequential connection traveling in only one direction at a time, but rather as synchronistic or intuitive movements that are just as valid as cognitive or logical ones. Thus, to paraphrase Rhyne (1990), I have ceased to be single-minded and have become instead “pattern-minded”; I find that chaos or systems/cybernetic theories are much more useful models for understanding the complexities of people’s problems than those based upon linear causality. This in turn has influenced all my other activities, from theoretical lecturing to conducting therapy to planning my weekend calendar; similarly I try to get my clients to understand that they live “more than one-octave lives” (personal letter from Shaun McNiff, February 9, 1990).

I’m a therapist who prefers to use all the tools I can discover for helping my clients: hypnosis *and* dream review *and* Gestalt “empty chair” or role-playing, *and*, of course, also art therapy and PhotoTherapy techniques—when any of these seem the most sensible and promising approaches. But I don’t do the same thing with every client, nor do I force the same identical sequence or selection of PhotoTherapy techniques onto each one, as if following a prescription list. Instead, I fit the amount of PhotoTherapy involvement to each individual client’s particular needs. If one technique doesn’t turn out as effective as hoped, I try something else. I don’t use all the techniques all the time, and the extent to which I join them with various art therapy or other applications will vary markedly, depending on each client’s unique needs and goals. Because of this I also strongly resist using the term “PhotoTherapist” because any good therapist isn’t going to stick to one single approach or technique, any more than a photographer would always use only one lens or an artist just one color from the palette.

In working with people who are having emotional and communication problems, with others or inside themselves, I need to know about them as individuals, apart from family or work contexts, but I also need to gather information about the client’s enmeshing and contexting relationships. PhotoTherapy is an unusually effective way to approach that information, with both self-related photos and family relationship ones playing important parts.

For me, PhotoTherapy involves at least two phases: what happens to clients during the active work component of the PhotoTherapy process, and also (possibly more to the therapeutic import of it all) what happens

as they begin to later synthesize, understand, absorb, reflect upon, and emotionally process all the “fallout” from that doing of the work, the viewing of the results, and all that evolves from the entire process. Anyone who has ever chosen to go take photos or review the ones taken previously has likely encountered the natural process of self-exploration and personal development that the medium of photography can provide. This is photography *as* therapy, and many amateur photographers have experienced its benefits. All photography can be therapeutic, though the effects tend to be more concentrated when assistance is involved. With photography *in* therapy, the primary emphasis is on the therapy, wherein the therapist directs the client’s involvement with photographs and photography as treatment progresses. This is all reminiscent of the argument about whether the focus for art therapists should be art-as-therapy or art-in-therapy; my response is always a confounding but simple “yes, it’s clearly both.”

Some of my colleagues in psychotherapy find it sufficient for their clients to experience, remember, emote, viscerally understand, or re-create. In my experience, clients seem to benefit greatly by progressing to self-witnessing and reflective validation. This also helps them bring their experience into a cognitive, and usually verbal, framework, which they can then use to further integrate and build upon what they have experienced emotionally.

I believe that for people to benefit from therapy, they need to experience both a cognitive awareness and an emotional experiencing of the role of past events, memories, thoughts, and feelings to fully grasp the effect of the past on the present. Both the mind and the heart, both insight and cognitive framing are necessary. One or the other alone is necessary but not sufficient for success. Memory is part of the body as well as the mind, and thus in reconnecting people with their feelings or doing something to help them change, we cannot work solely with the brain. Nonverbal and sensory-based techniques seem the best choices for working with those parts of ourselves that are essentially unconscious and that use a primarily symbolic nonverbal language of representation and communication. For these reasons, therapists who want to help people with deep-rooted problems need to use tools that can reach those nonverbal, and primarily visual, components of our unconscious domains, such as art therapy and PhotoTherapy.

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## **PHOTOTHERAPY AND ART THERAPY: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

Some theorists have debated as to whether photography is indeed art. Some view photographs as only the products of mechanical documentation, involving no creative personal input from the artist. They say that photographs may well be communications, but that they are not “pure” art. Having to decide whether photographs are art *or* communication can only serve to delay their use as both. This dichotomizing issue is not relevant for therapeutic purposes, where both easily coexist simultaneously. It seems a bit silly to argue whether photography is art *or* communication, when art *is* itself communication, and all communication *is* a form of art expression itself! I certainly agree with a systems/cybernetics approach to art therapy practices (Landgarten, 1981, 1987; Lusebrink, 1989; Nucho, 1988; Rhyne, 1984; Riley, 1985, 1988, 1990; Sobol, 1982, 1985).

In that PhotoTherapy has become a popular topic for study, among art therapists in particular, I think it is important to discuss the implications of art therapy theory and practice for the understanding and application of PhotoTherapy techniques. I do not see the two as being mutually exclusive, nor do I find any argument between them.

There is a long-standing debate as to whether art therapy is a set of techniques that all therapists (psychologists, family counselors, psychiatrists, and so on) can learn to use, or whether it is a separate model, with a distinct underlying conceptual basis. Good arguments can be made on both sides, but it is not my purpose or intention to attempt to resolve them here. My own position is that PhotoTherapy is not a separate model, but rather a set of interactive techniques useful for all therapists regardless of their preferred theoretical modalities. To me they are integrally interrelated, reciprocal subsets of each other, even though sometimes very different in product or process owing to their being very different media. They both work on the basis of giving visual form to feelings and making the invisible more visible, a type of “unconsciousness raising” (Martin and Spence, 1988). Krauss (1979, 1983) provides a detailed comparison and contrast of the two, and a summary of some of his points appears within the following discussion of the similarities and differences I have experienced.

Symbolic representation is the only language we will ever have for



expressing and communicating thoughts, feelings, memories, and other inner experiences, even though it necessarily mediates and filters those experiences in the process of describing them. All art therapy is based on the idea that visual-symbolic representation is far less interruptive and distortive than verbal translations of sensory-based experiences, and that we not only often project unconscious meaning through such metaphoric communications from deep inside but also tap into those areas while simply reacting or responding to symbolic imagery produced by others. Krauss stresses that nonverbal personal symbols are immensely powerful because they arise from the unconscious to indicate their own existence; he refers to them as the actual source of our consciousness. When we look at photos or artworks we have produced, or review our responses to seeing them, and when we explore the themes and patterns that emerge when we do so, we are able to learn about our own unconscious by bypassing the verbal translations that also provide good hiding places for rationalizations, defenses, excuses, and other protections.

In art therapy, clients usually produce images spontaneously; these symbolic communications arise directly from the unconscious. Sometimes the many levels of metaphoric signification in these images are readily comprehended, but usually they serve only as a starting place. Although the “art” of art therapy may not be “real” art, it is personally coded expression in nonverbal form; similarly, photographs are in some ways private communications to and from the self, regardless of any serendipitous artistic merit.

Krauss (1983) makes this observation:

Although both art therapy and phototherapy utilize the methodology of pictorial projection, it would seem initially that they do so in very different ways. Art therapy relies on a client’s internal concerns to emerge from the unconscious through the process of a drawing, spontaneously produced by the client, and external stimuli, light, or content, need not be available at the time the client draws a picture for an image to appear in the drawing. . . . Photographs, on the other hand, will be taken at the place where the physical content actually exists [or its symbolized form appears or is arranged to appear]. A photograph of a house will use as content some physical representation of a house. Since art therapy is dependent on externalized internal subjects, and photo-

therapy is dependent on internalized external subjects, it appears as though they deal with different aspects of personal symbolism [p. 53].

Many art therapists stress the importance of the client actually making the symbolic images as being often more valuable than the other components. This illustrates one central difference between the two approaches: making images is only one facet of PhotoTherapy, and not necessarily a central one. Another difference is the familiarity and comfort level that most people have with the medium of photography. There is an element of ordinariness to taking and discussing snapshots that is usually not evident in making or commenting on artistic creations.

Similarly, attribution of a work of art is usually part of its meaning. Rarely do we view a piece of art without realizing that it expresses the personal viewpoint of its maker, yet somehow we see a snapshot as a factual image that anyone going by with a camera could have recorded. In PhotoTherapy, therefore, speculation about the goals, needs, or desires of the originator can be built into the investigative process with snapshots in ways unavailable with other art media creations. Indeed, because the creator of a photograph can be so readily detached from the image, PhotoTherapy can easily be done using photos not originating with the client, which is not common in Art Therapy practice (with the exception of collage work).

Art therapy usually seems to focus on the finished product, paying less attention to the concept or development of the image. In PhotoTherapy, the process is more balanced; the photographic print is often the least important element, while the criteria used for selecting the plan, deciding what to do in creating the photograph (where, when, who, why, who for), and so forth, are important and merit exploration. Therapeutically “working” the finished print is an important component, but just as often it is used to precipitate questions that carry discussion away from the photograph.

Krauss points out the additional value of factual documentation provided by so many personal snapshots: “The availability for utilization of personal and family photographs . . . provide[s] a rich source of projective and physical data that could not be obtained any other way. They provide background information about a client’s relationship to the world outside of therapy [including their family members and how they relate

with one another as captured by a camera rather than words]” (1983, p. 53).

Using photographs, we can see a fairly close proximation of the same way we present ourselves to others, rather than the reversed image we see in the mirror. We can also see ourselves in profile or from the back, and also as part of larger groups of family or friends. In art therapy, portraits of ourselves are strictly personal subjective representations; PhotoTherapy provides considerably less subjective images created by a mechanical device.

Finally, I find no parallel in PhotoTherapy for the developmental stages of art making that some art therapists believe to be crucial for measuring progress, improvement, or arrested stages. Photo-snapping skills don't really change much with age, other than perhaps that we learn to stand more still or to consciously compose more sophisticated contents (if that is our goal). I have seen some serious metaphorical photographic communications from eight-year-olds and autistic teenagers and some technically poor or confusing ones from adult professionals. So developmental stages of art-making abilities are not strongly relevant in PhotoTherapy work.

**End of Chapter 1 -- for further Chapters, please see:**

<https://phototherapy-centre.com/phototherapy-techniques/about-the-book/>



# 2

## *The Five Techniques of PhotoTherapy*

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**T**he basic techniques of PhotoTherapy are directly related to the possible relationships between person and camera or person and photo. These are (1) photos taken of the client, (2) photos taken by the client, (3) photos of the client by the client (self-portraits), and (4) biographical snapshots, often of groups of friends or family, in which the client may or may not be included (parties, weddings, family gatherings, and so forth). Each of these four is represented by a major technique of PhotoTherapy, but there is a fifth one that is more a part of the others than it is separate unto itself. This final technique is what I have called the “projective” technique, in that it deals with the ways and reasons that a person gets any meaning from any photograph in the first place.

The projective component of understanding photographic meaning underlies all interactions between people and snapshots. Projecting meaning onto photographs (and anything else our senses encounter) is integral with our looking at them. Photos simplify by partializing life and help slow time into units of meaning that people can study. In describing and reacting to photos, people are frequently able to reach pockets of strong feelings that are usually covered by cognitive barriers such as denials and rationalizations.

PhotoTherapy techniques permit clients to bypass conscious verbal controls and monitors, as well as allow their unconscious metaphoric and symbolic (nonverbal) languages to emerge. Using the camera works particularly well for people who find other visual arts too demanding or too risky to try.