

Photographs in therapy

For some time now I've noticed a trend among my clients of bringing personal photographs to sessions, without any prompting or suggestion. These have struck me as natural, organic actions, offering potential for self-exploration and healing, and have prompted me to conduct personal research on the topic. Personally, I feel more connected with clients after one of these sessions. Looking at photographs together is an intimate experience that amplifies and enhances qualities in our relationship and often deepens trust and rapport.

Perhaps due to their accessibility and social ubiquity, photographs seem to offer a way for clients to develop relationship, both with themselves and with me. Roland Barthes write: 'A photograph is always invisible, it is not it that we see'.¹ I think this hints at a photograph's power to activate inner process, and suggests that photographs can be useful in facilitating healing and self-transformation.

Historically, the use of photographs in therapy was developed by health professionals in North America in the 1970s, and eventually the term 'phototherapy' was coined.² Phototherapy is not a psychotherapeutic modality; rather, it is a series of techniques that any therapist can use where the photograph is a tool and efficacy of the intervention is reliant on the skills of the practitioner.³

Linda Berman⁴ and Judy Weiser⁵ have helpfully detailed some specific techniques of phototherapy. The underlying principle is that the use of visual imagery such as a photograph helps bypass cognitive filters such as

rationalisation, verbalisation and other protective defences and thereby gives easier access to the unconscious.⁵ The process helps clients recognise and articulate feelings, tap into creativity, and become more self-aware. It also provides opportunities to work through and explore transference, resistance and conflicts.⁶

A photograph encourages the client to enter into a mindful, perceptive state where they become conscious of what is occurring through their senses, moment by moment. From my own experience of client work, it's not specific technique that matters so much as the client's ability to attain a perceptive state when engaging with a photograph. A perceptive state means that experience is anchored in the mind, in the body and in the present moment. This state resonates with Siegel's description of mindful awareness as a kind of 'intrapersonal attunement' that promotes self-love, openness, and acceptance.⁷ To relate to a photograph with perception bridges the gap between past and present and initiates transformative experience through a meeting of body, heart and mind in the 'now'.

A mindful, perceptive state is made easier with a photograph because of the visual dichotomy between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen. It is as if the photograph becomes both a magnet and visual springboard, offering access to one's inner world. A photograph's imagery represents conscious signifiers in life (people, places, things), yet is also symbolic of unconscious material hovering on the threshold of consciousness. I find

clients are often drawn to a particular photograph without knowing why, only to discover its significance and meaning when the time is right, at their own pace. If the photograph carries an attraction or emotional charge for someone, it must have deeper personal meaning. Even if the meaning is initially unknown, the photograph acts as a catalyst that helps it emerge.

Photograph as catalyst

I have experienced firsthand how a photograph acts as a catalyst in a session, particularly in the contexts of grief and loss. A client's girlfriend had died of a drug overdose nine months earlier. He had found her body, and was plagued by distressing images and intrusive thoughts that her overdose may not have been accidental. Several months into therapy he brought in photos of her taken over a 10-year period. Looking at the earlier photographs he described the 'light' in her eyes that first attracted him, and how this light had dimmed through addiction. The last photograph was taken a few weeks before she died. He now described the illness he saw in the picture, how he could barely recognise the woman he loved.

This triggered a series of repressed memories of the day he found her body and initiated a catharsis of horror, terror and shock. The recalling of submerged details and feelings produced a physiological re-experiencing and release (shaking, sweating, elevated heart rate), as well as a psychological one (the terror and shock). He reported that, following this experience, the intrusive images and thoughts ceased.

The photograph can be a powerful therapeutic tool that can open a window directly onto the unconscious and deepen trust and rapport, writes *Laura Prins*

A colleague who frequently works with bereavement encourages clients to bring photographs of the deceased to sessions. He describes how one client carefully places a photograph in sight between them during each session, and how another puts a photograph in a chair and dialogues with the deceased. Using photographs in this way honours the dead and allows space for grief, communication and remembrance. If we see photographs as attempts to capture the permanence in an impermanent situation, we gain a deeper understanding of their potential role in addressing grief and loss.

Transitional object

This notion reflects Susan Sontag's interpretation of photographs as *memento mori* – objects that invite participation in the mortality and vulnerability of a person or thing.⁸ The western world tends to either ignore death or hurry it along when it occurs; we prefer the grieving process to remain secret and out of sight. Bodies are quickly removed and burial or cremation occurs soon after; there is little time to process the loss. Photographs may be all that is left to honour and remember the deceased.

I think the photograph has a very important role as a transitional object that provides psychological comfort and supports development of the self;⁹ for example, during the grieving process. Another client, a man going through a messy and painful divorce, thought often of suicide. He used a photograph of his daughters to remind him of his love for them in times of distress. Kept in his wallet, it functioned as talisman for strength and became emblematic

of his growing sense of purpose to protect and care for his children. In our therapeutic work we used this photograph as a resource to strengthen his sense of self and reinforce qualities such as courage and compassion.

Bollas writes about the phenomenon of 'transformational objects' – the searching for objects identified with a metamorphosis of self.¹⁰ He believes the infant has knowledge of mother as transformational experience, not just as object. Thus, a transformational object differs from the transitional object in that the object becomes 'known' as a recurrent state of being rather than as a direct representation of something else. I think a photograph has the potential to operate as both: as a direct representation of something or someone, and also as symbol of a person's urge for self-transformation. A photograph brought to therapy may represent the client's desire for transformation and metamorphosis; exploration of the photograph in therapy becomes a way of connecting with and realising that drive.

Sight and seeing

When working with photographs, it seems important to remember the distinction between sight and perception, or seeing and *seeing*. Sight is a sensory faculty; perception is the application of conscious awareness to sensory faculties. Therefore, sight is but a dimension of perception. Photographer Dorothea Lange touched on this difference: 'This benefit of seeing... can come only if you pause a while, extricate yourself from the maddening mob of quick impressions ceaselessly battering us all our lives,

and look thoughtfully at a quiet image... the viewer must be willing to pause, to look again, to meditate.'¹¹

Here Lange provides instruction on perception: look thoughtfully, pause, look again, meditate. In contemplating her statement, it seems she is describing 'respect', a word originating from the Latin *re*-meaning 'back' (as in repeat) and *specere*, meaning 'to look' (as in spectator). Taken together, these root words mean 'to look again', or 'to notice with attention'. Lange's statement subtly equates the act of perception with respect. Working therapeutically with a photograph can therefore be understood as an act of self-respect, where one gives attention and focus to one's inner world through (self)-consciousness and (self)-reflection. The use of a photograph acts as a catalyst to this self-perception, or self-respect. In this case, seeing is not believing; perceiving is believing.

Another of my clients, divorced for over 15 years, found herself having to care full-time for her dying ex-husband, and struggled under the weight and pressure of this task. She came to therapy seeking emotional support for her exhaustion and pain. Early on she brought in her wedding photos, taken in Sri Lanka over 40 years ago, and abruptly threw them across the table between us. I watched them skid across the surface and land in a heap on the floor. I picked one up. In the picture she was dressed in her wedding sari, 19 years old, stunningly beautiful, fresh. I handed her the photograph. 'What do you see?' I asked. At first she wouldn't look at the photo but when she finally did, the atmosphere in the room changed.

'Perhaps due to their accessibility and social ubiquity, photographs seem to offer a way for clients to develop relationship'

‘Sadness. Devastation. I knew it then,’ she said. ‘On my wedding day I knew this marriage would be painful, and I see that in the photograph.’

This moment opened a window of understanding onto her dismissal of self and the underlying pain she carried. A door also opened relationally between us, allowing us to broach a lifelong theme of rejection and abandonment, of never feeling loved. If we consider working therapeutically with a photograph to be an act of self-respect, the importance of this intervention for some clients is clear. My client had resisted giving attention to her inner world, understandably, to avoid facing grief and pain originating in the past. Despite her initial desire to push herself and the feelings aside, the photograph challenged her resistance. It acted as catalyst in breaking down this barrier and creating space for perception, or self-respect.

Lost and regained

I’ve found that a photograph’s influence in therapy extends to finding and retrieving ‘lost’ aspects of self. Perceptive connection with a photograph often culminates in a deep recognition that helps a client consciously re-inhabit that aspect of their self and reclaim and re-integrate it back into their personality. One client who was working through a difficult childhood brought in numerous photographs of himself and his family for us to look through together. I found one picture of him taken at age four particularly arresting, but kept this to myself. Surprisingly, when I asked which photograph attracted him most, he chose that picture. His face in the

photo held an angelic innocence and purity of expression that resonated with both of us. Spending time with this photograph initiated a grieving process that ultimately led to reunion with and reclamation of his four-year-old self.

As a therapist, my role is that of guide and witness. I provide a safe space to explore and encourage a mindful, perceptive state. I am also a vessel and receptor for transference. Because a photograph encourages access to the unconscious, there seems to be greater potential for the activation of transference and re-enactment situations, for amplified relationship. I don’t care to remember the time I was caught unawares by a client’s powerful transference. My response was clumsy and I realised I had responded to his photograph exactly as his mother would have done. It was a powerful learning experience, based on which I would strongly recommend clear contracting and a heightened sensitivity to boundaries and transference in this work.

Overall I have found the use of photographs in therapy a powerful complementary intervention. Its potential lies in helping to facilitate mindful, perceptive states where understanding, change and healing can take place. This can be understood as engaging in an act of self-respect. In her heart-felt writing on facing pain and suffering in life, Tibetan Buddhist nun and author Pema Chödrön captures the essence and importance of this kind of work: ‘The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to

ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.’¹² ■

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