

Psychotherapy Guidebook

A pair of hands is shown holding a small, vintage-style photograph of a young girl with a sad expression. The girl has short, light-colored hair and is wearing a dark, high-collared coat. The background is a dark, cluttered space filled with many other old, faded photographs, some of which are partially visible and overlapping. The overall mood is nostalgic and somber.

PHOTO COUNSELING

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Photo Counseling

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DEFINITION

Photo Counseling involves the utilization of family photographs or snapshots in any phase of the counseling process for the purposes of facilitating communication, enhancing client-therapist understanding of problems, and supporting client changes in therapeutically desirable directions. Photo Counseling is an adjunctive therapeutic process used within the context of a broader treatment orientation or program. It allows the therapist to enter more meaningfully into the client's extratherapeutic life space and, by so doing, to "see" the client in his home, his neighborhood, his recreational pursuits, and so forth. Photo Counseling is, therefore, a process of investigating, clarifying, and modifying various adjustment states with the aid of photographs that are, as Oliver Wendell Holmes noted some years ago, like mirrors with memories.

HISTORY

The technology of photography has, of course, been available to the general public for many years, and the practice of snapping pictures to

commemorate special occasions and to capture special moments has become a great American pastime. The vast majority of people have available to them stacks of photos, if not boxes of slides or reels of film. It is surprising that in the therapeutic arena so little use has been made of this rich source of personal history. Traditionally, variations of counseling or psychotherapy have been predominantly verbal phenomena, and the old adage “A picture is worth a thousand words” has fallen on deaf ears.

A few years ago, in my (Gosciewski) capacity as counseling psychologist at the St. Vincent Community Mental Health Center in Erie, Pennsylvania, I had occasion to work with some clients who were, for one reason or another, resistant to the counseling interchange. By chance, one client brought with him one day some snapshots recently taken at a family outing. In sharing these photos with that client I noted a significant change in the quality of interchange between us, leading to increased openness, better understanding, and a generally improved therapeutic relationship. In the years since that fortunate discovery, I have continued to utilize this approach and to encourage others to do likewise. The results thus far have in all cases been positive and, in some instances, impressive.

TECHNIQUE

In using Photo Counseling, the therapist requests that the client bring

into the counseling session a random selection of family photographs portraying himself and other members of his family at varying times in his past. While such a request can be made at any point in the counseling process, it is most often found to be valuable early on, as it tends to facilitate improved communication and relatedness at the outset. The integration of the Photo Counseling technique can be done initially, occasionally, or regularly over the course of psychotherapeutic treatment, depending on its demonstrated utility, availability of photographs, and client responsiveness.

Once the client has brought in the requested photos, the therapist proceeds to share with him the experiences or circumstances conveyed by the pictures. This is an open-ended procedure wherein the therapist enables and encourages the client to relate past experiences to present ones, toward the end result of greater understanding and continuity in life experience. Just how this is done depends ultimately on the personal style of the counselor as he relates to the client. Some productive variations include making then-and-now comparisons, noting similarities and differences with significant others (important people in the client's life), interpreting for the client's consideration indicators of positive and/or negative relationship factors, and focusing on physical and selected environmental features considered to be of particular significance in the client's self-perception.

APPLICATIONS

To this point, Photo Counseling has been found to be of particular value in three broad areas of the counseling process. First, the pictures can be used to establish and build rapport. Sharing with the new client in experiences on such a close and personal level provides an excellent starting point in a less threatening structure.

Second, analysis of photos aids in the diagnostic process wherein the focus is on accumulation and integration of information about the client. Pictures can be used to verify or alter the client's version of problematic concerns; specific photos can lead to investigations of emotionally charged and perhaps highly defended areas of concern; and photos can be utilized in a psychometric manner by, for example, asking the client to tell stories about them, write captions for them, and the like. Finally, photos can be used progressively over several sessions as a way of assessing gains, resistance, and therapeutic changes of all types. In this respect the use of Photo Counseling can give indications of the need for progressive changes in counseling emphases.

Photo Counseling can be used in many settings, at all age levels, and with clients of most descriptions. It is best conceived of as an adjunctive therapeutic approach that facilitates any therapeutic endeavor dependent on rapport, communication, and increased self-awareness as requisites to improved adjustment states.

