

Suler, J. (2013). Image therapeutics. In the 4th edition of Richard Zakia's *Perception and Imaging*, Focal Press (Elsevier), Oxford, pp. 288-290.

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## IMAGE THERAPEUTICS

From the online book *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche* by John Suler



Figure 8.15 “Image Therapeutics” by John Suler

Can photos be therapeutic? Psychologists think so. They define something as “therapeutic” if it enhances insight into yourself, promotes the awareness of underlying feelings, and moves your identity into new, more rewarding directions. All of these things are possible through photography on at least three different levels: while creating, viewing, and sharing images with others (Figure 8.15).

Some theories claim that images are a powerful vehicle for psychological expression. They enable you to communicate experiences that cannot be captured easily by words, or that might in fact be distorted by conscious attempts to verbalize them. They contain symbols that point to things unseen, to deeper layers of the mind. Like dreams, they are highly creative constructions that convey a wide range of emotions, memories, needs, and wishes. Because a picture is worth a thousand words, many ideas can be condensed into a single image, making it a powerful way to represent your identity. A photograph can be a concrete, external representation of what you are, fear, or need to be. It offers a seemingly more real and tangible form for internal experiences that otherwise might elude you. By providing an

identifiable representation of your inner life, a photo can help you master the problematic aspects of your personality.

Drawing pictures and describing the images one sees inside one's mind have been important components of psychotherapy for decades. More recently, in the form of psychotherapy known as "phototherapy," people are encouraged to discuss their personal and family snapshots. Judy Weiser (1993), one of the pioneers of this type of work, identifies five different categories of photographs that can be explored in phototherapy:

1. **Self-portraits**, which clearly serve as representations of your identity that encourage you look at yourself from an objective viewpoint. When given the opportunity, how do you choose to "create" yourself in an image?
2. **Shots taken of you by other people**, which help you understand how others see you, what they value about you, and the nature of your relationship to them. How do their perceptions of you and your relationships compare to your own perceptions?
3. **Photos taken or collected by you**, which reveal what you think is important in life, as well as give you a sense of mastery over those things that you "capture." In a sense, any photo you take or like is a self-portrait because it says something about you.
4. **Your photo albums or collections**, which reflect your attempt to organize your personal and family history. What do you include and exclude from your collection? What does this say about how you want to remember, as well as present to others, your vision of yourself, friends, and family?
5. **Your reaction to any photo**, because no two people see the same photo in exactly the same way. Each of us project our own personal feelings, memories, and meanings into a picture. Everyone's perspective is valid. Accepting this means accepting each other.<sup>25</sup>

Image therapeutics is by no means limited to the context of professional psychotherapy. Some people use the term "therapeutic photography" to refer to the growth-promoting process of creating pictures on one's own. As we all know, digital photography and the Internet have made it so easy to create and share images that many people are doing so. Perhaps one of the attractions of modern photography is its potential as a therapeutic activity. It provides us with a compelling new form of personal growth.

Online photosharing communities, such as Flickr and Webshots, are thriving with millions of members and billions of photos. In some cases they are the newest manifestation of the support group or "mutual aid" movement that began in the 1960s. As in art therapy, creating an image is a process of self-insight, emotional catharsis, the working through of conflicts, and the affirmation of one's evolving identity. Going public with the image may enhance that process. We can learn about ourselves and help each other by sharing our photos. In fact, it's not uncommon in online photosharing communities to find groups devoted to a particular types of

mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, borderline personality disorders, dissociative identity disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, self-harm, suicide, stress, and ADHD. Such groups are grass roots illustrations of image therapeutics. But one doesn't necessarily have to belong to these types of groups to experience the therapeutic aspects of image creation and sharing. Ask people who participate in any kind of online photosharing to hear how they personally benefit from it. Or join an online photosharing group to find out for yourself.

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