

Therapeutic Photography

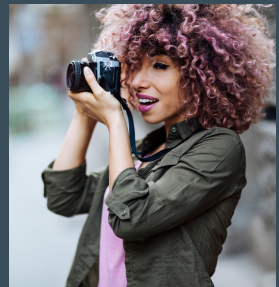
YOUR SMART GUIDE

NEW!

Cj Swaby MA, BSc (hons)



"Your "how-to" guide for using photography for clarity, emotional wellbeing, and personal growth."



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NICE TO MEET YOU!

I'm Your Guide, Cj Swaby.

I'm an Artist, Educator, Coach and Researcher based in the UK. I specialise in visual media and combining it for personal and public wellbeing. I love to work with socially engaged projects, along side commercial work.

So how did I end up here? Health has always been important to me. I come from a family where long term medical conditions are the norm - I have four siblings who have also died from health related or medical conditions. Two of which were cancer. And in 2015 I had my own health crisis which left me in hospital for two weeks and almost ended me.

I first picked up the camera at a short university course back in 1997 and instantly fell in love with it - but I didn't pursue it as a career. I chose a different field. With over 30 years experience in the health and wellness industry I had seen what it means to have good health and the impact it has on people's lives when poor health takes a hold.

Before the COVID 19 pandemic switched careers to become a Visual Artist. Wanting to deepen my knowledge and skills in 2023 I decided to return to university. When I was studying at Arts University Bournemouth for my MA in Photography, I discovered participatory photography. This ultimately led me to therapeutic photography. I became hooked and dived into the research.

But what I noticed was that while it had a history of over forty years, outside the realm of academia and limited circles, it was not widely heard about. Few even practiced. The public was largely unaware of its existence and how this low cost intervention it could help them achieve a better quality of life. So I made it my mission to change that - and here we are!

I hope you find this guide useful. I hope that you get curious enough to learn more. But most of all, I hope that you develop your own creative practice.

- Cj Swaby

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CHAPTER ONE

What is Therapeutic Photography?

Ready to get started?

Simply put, Therapeutic Photography is,

“The deliberate and strategic use of photography with the intention of improving mental health and wellbeing (with specific outcomes)”

There are many different techniques that you can use. The learning is in the doing. But for our purposes, for it to be considered therapeutic photography

It must do three things.....

1. **It must centre around themes and issues that are important to you.**
2. **It must involve the use of photographs / photography in any of its various forms.**
3. **It must be reflective, and create a shift for you - whether creatively, emotionally or dare I say it, spiritually.**

Therapeutic photography is a creative reflective practice, it is not therapy or a replacement for therapy. Reflective practice simply means to “critically think about our own experiences, actions and decisions, so that we can learn and make sense of them”.

There is no diagnosis, no clinical analysis, and no requirement to go deep. You remain in charge of the pace, depth, and interpretation. Therapeutic photography offers a flexible and creative approach to meet your needs. It’s open to all skill levels. No experience is required.

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CHAPTER ONE

What is Therapeutic Photography?

4 Basic Therapeutic Photography Techniques

1) Photos which have been taken or created by you, whether actually using a camera to make the picture, or "taking" (appropriating) other people's images through collecting "found" photos from magazines, postcards, Internet imagery, digital manipulation or collage.

2) Photos which have been taken of you by other people, whether posed, or taken spontaneously while you were unaware of being photographed - but where people other than you have made all the decision about timing, content, location.

3) Self-portraits, which means any kind of photos that you have made , either literally or metaphorically - but where in all cases you had total control and power over all aspects of the image's creation (this included casual "Selfies").

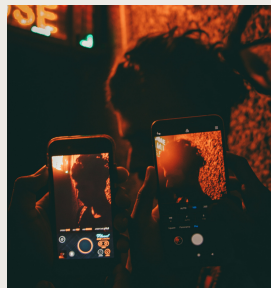
4) Family album and other photo-biographical collections. This may be from your birth family or family of choice; photo albums that are created for a variety of reasons - whether formally kept in albums or more "loosely" combined into narratives by placement on walls or refrigerator doors, inside wallets or desktop frames, into computer screens or family websites etc.

These images were put together for the purpose of documenting the personal narrative or special moments of your life.



A Brief History.....

The origins of therapeutic photography are not straight forward. In the early 1970s in the UK, Keith Kennedy developed a method using photography around the concept of the therapeutic community. These sessions were at Henderson Hospital - a residential psychiatric hospital. One of the assistants on the course was Jo Spence who later went on to develop Re-enactment Therapeutic Photography, alongside Rosy Martin. Kennedy also developed the ID Kit (also known as Identi-kit) a method for self exploration which was used at various hospitals and schools.



As an artist Jo Spence started out in the field of commercial photography. Her interests turned towards more socially engaged work, and with her diagnosis of breast cancer began turning the camera on herself. Giving us some of her earliest examples of what is now known as therapeutic photography. Her project, "Putting Myself in the picture" is a landmark body of work.



Meanwhile in the United States.....

Along similar timelines, Judy Weiser (a Clinical Psychologist) was developing Phototherapy. She released her book, "Phototherapy Techniques". This is the use of photographs with a trained psychologist within a therapy session. From these connections were forged with other professionals nationally and internationally, and as it is known currently, Therapeutic Photography was born. The purpose of which was to empower people to improve their wellbeing through the use of photography - without the need of a therapist. There was no "one way" of doing it, and Weiser invited us to consider it as a variety of techniques, rather than a singular method.



You'll learn more about some of these techniques later in this book. And I also take a deeper dive in my online therapeutic photography course, *Changes in Frame*.



CHAPTER TWO

What are the benefits?

Does it actually work?

Short answer?

Yes. Yes it does!

But don't just take my word for it, let's take a look at some of the current research together.

There are decades worth of research on Therapeutic Photography.

A systematic research and literature review by Buchan, C, 2020 found that Participatory Photography (such as therapeutic photography) can be a helpful intervention with adults who want to improve their mental health.

They also found that projects higher in personal relevance and intensity were linked with the greater therapeutic benefits. What that means is

the better tailored it is to meet your specific needs - the more effective therapeutic photography becomes.

Themes of empowerment, mental clarity, enhanced relationships, peer support, creative expression, a sense of achievement and enjoyment were high.

In a research project that focused on children in palliative care, Henrich and Henrich (2024) explored the power and potential of photography as a therapeutic modality for children with life-impacting illness.

The results showed that all but one of the 177 participants found the photography impactful, with over 95% rating it as "high". A dozen themes were identified and explored, including love, share, connect, and fight, among others. These themes articulated the diversity of ways that "impact" manifested in families.

This is just a small example, but if you pull up Google scholar, and search "Therapeutic Photography" or "Participatory Photography" you will find numerous studies. And I invite you to explore these academic papers if that is something that interests you.

But what they do show is that therapeutic photography, when led by the participant, and focused on themes important to them, can be extremely effective across age, gender, sexuality and social-economic backgrounds.

Ref: Buchanan, C, 2020,
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpm.12606>

Ref: Henrich, M, Henrich, H, 2024
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
 DOI:10.1177/08258597231189152 journals.sagepub.com/home/pal

CHAPTER THREE

Getting Started

Ok, now that we've established exactly what therapeutic photography is, and that it works; let's get to the core of what you really came here to learn, "How do I get started?"

As there are many different techniques in therapeutic photography, it would be impossible to cover them all here in the smart guide - but we will go through one that you can do with minimal equipment. For this exercise you will need

- A camera of your choice
- A pen and notepad or an audio recording device
- A space to take self portraits

On the next page I have included a comprehensive equipment checklist that you will find useful for when you want to explore the many different techniques and possibilities of Therapeutic Photography - many of which we explore in our online course ***Changes in Frame***. But for now, all you will need is the three things mentioned above and you are ready to get started!.....



CHAPTER THREE: GETTING STARTED

Equipment Checklist

- ✓ Camera (phone camera, dslr, mirrorless, analogue camera, instant camera etc)
- ✓ Note book / journal (or alternative note taking device)
- ✓ Pens / pencils
- ✓ Remote control timer (or camera app with this function)
- ✓ Flash

And that's pretty much all you need to get started. Realistically, a remote control timer and flash are optional. You don't really need them. However, they can come in handy, especially if you are doing self portraits.

As we get into staged portraits, there may be other things that you need to set the scene, but that is very much specific to the individual and what you are trying to create with your image.

On the next page I've provided a framework to create self portraits, and have filled out an example for you that I created during the Covid 19 pandemic. When you go through the process you can make it as complicated or as simple as you like. What matters is that you choose a theme or issue that is important to you right now - whatever that is. This framework was one of many in the *Changes in Frame* online course.



CHAPTER THREE: GETTING STARTED

Framework For Creating Your Self-Portraits

Question	Response
Topics / themes that are important to me right now	Frustration, anger, uncertainty, loss, grief, focus, hope.
My experience with this theme?	Feeling trapped during the pandemic. Unable to connect with loved ones. Not being able to work. Friends dying.
Does this theme have a colour?	Grey tones. Low key lighting.
Does this theme have a texture	Grainy. Coarse.
Does this theme have a sound?	Deathly silence / Loud scream.
Image construction (location/ props/ style)	Self portrait. Clear background. Close up of me to capture emotion. Multiple versions of me (exposure) to show different sides of me / feeling of mental wellbeing deteriorating during the pandemic.
Other ideas	Shoot image topless. Nakedness to emphasise rawness and vulnerability. Crop image to remove focus on body. Want focus on emotional expression.

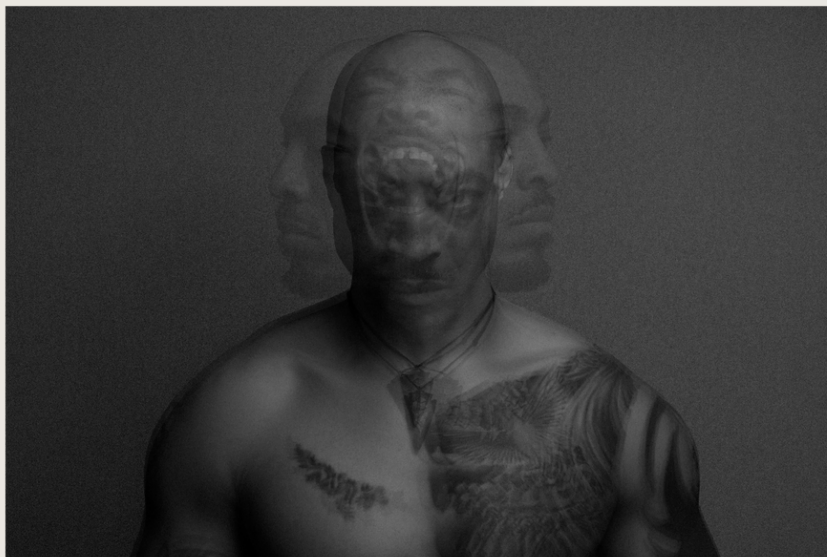


Image Credit: © Cj Swaby

This was the final image from the framework used on the previous page. The multiple exposures were not done in camera. Four different images were taken, I then merged them in photoshop. I created a series of images from the initial concept.

After creating the images, I shared them with a select few I trusted, and we had a conversation about the themes, and what it stirred in us. What was central for me was that, even with all that was going on, I can maintain some kind of focus. I then shared this image online via instagram.

You don't have to use photoshop, and you don't have to do multiple exposures. You don't have to do it in black and white. You don't even have to share the image. Create what inspires you, and connects to your situation.

I shared this to give you an insight into my process using therapeutic photography. Now its your turn to use the process and get creating using the framework.

CHAPTER FOUR

Putting it into practice

Why is self care important?

Before you get started with your practice, it's important to consider your emotional health in the moment. Are you in the right frame of mind? Will getting started help you or hinder you? Only you will know the answer to this. This doesn't mean that you can't use therapeutic photography when you are distressed - the key thing is to consider its impact on you in the moment.

If you need to put it off for a bit, do that. If you need to take a break during the process because you feel overwhelmed, then do that. My suggestion would be to do some grounding exercises, or breathing exercises that will get you grounded. We cover these techniques in Changes in Frame.

Once you are all set to go, you will want make sure that you are in a space where you can plan and go through the framework without interruption. You may want to put on some music to help with your creativity.....

Then go through the worksheet step by step. At the end of this ebook I have given you a blank version that you can print out and use.

Important

- Don't rush through the questions. Take your time. Be deliberate. Intention matters.
- Once you have gone through the framework, put it aside for a while and then come back to it.
- Now read through it again and see if it still rings true for you - is there anything you would change? Anything you would add?
- If you get stuck for visual inspiration, go online check out other photographers work. Go check out an exhibition or two.
- Look for inspiration in not obvious places too. Films, music videos, books, libraries, street art - these can all help



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CHAPTER FOUR: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Keeping it sustainable...



Energy Efficiency

Rather than squeezing your practice into your day, ensure you have the energy by deliberately setting aside a time.



Generating Ideas

Get your inspiration from as many places as possible. Once you have created an image or series, don't be afraid of doing it again differently if it doesn't work for you.



Technology

You don't have to use the latest technology. Use different types of cameras if you have access to them. Explore how it make you see things.



Recycle

There is nothing new under the sun. Don't be afraid of borrowing ideas and adapting them for your own (just remember to credit)



But is it trash?

It's ok to get things wrong. What you perceive as failure doesn't mean it's trash. Allow yourself to experiment.



The Camera is just a tool

In therapeutic photography is doesn't matter what you shoot on. The camera is just a tool to serve your vision.



Share (if YOU want)

Therapeutic photography is for YOU and not anyone else. You don't have to share your images if you don't want to or feel ready.



Print Your Images

This is optional. But I highly recommend printing the images you create if you can. This way you can look back and reflect on them easily. It also gives an element of "aliveness" to your images.



Mood Changes

There will be good days and not so good days. This is normal. Use Therapeutic Photography to make a shift or make sense of the world - when it's right for you



"You know, the camera is not meant just to show misery. You can show beauty with it; you can do a lot of things. ... You've only done half the job if you don't do that."

- Gordon Parks

YOUR NEXT STEPS....

Just The Beginning

I always thought that photography was about capturing pictures. I was captivated portraits and documentary images (in fact it was the work of Gordon Parks and Don McCullin that initially inspired when I started out). But through the work of Jo Spence and Amanda Wilke I came to understand that it could be so much more....

I learned that there was a whole world of participatory photography that I knew nothing about. It wasn't just about the images that were created that mattered. The process was important. Not the process of images created, but the work that was done even before the camera was picked up and what happened after the image was created.

It had the power to shift things for both individuals and whole communities. It could create new realities and ways of being that might not have otherwise been possible. Therapeutic Photography was just a small territory in this new landscape. One that I was keen to explore, and one that I want to share with you. So that you can see life through a new lens.

Our online course, *Changes in Frame* is your chance to explore personal development through photography in a therapeutic way. With 6 modules and 18 lessons, we'll give you the skills to create a shift and develop your creative practice immediately. Created with the "non-expert" in mind, you will get a deeper understanding of Therapeutic Photography and the confidence to get started.

And right now, I'm offering you 65% off the full course price. Simply click the link on the next page and enter the discount code on enrollment. Your code is valid for the next 30 days, so remember to take advantage of it before the code expires.

I look forward to meeting you inside the course. And I hope that you will put into practice what you have learned in this ebook.

All the best on your creative journey,

— Cj Swaby

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Framework For Creating Your Self Portraits

Question	Response