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PHOTOTHERAPY

Ellen Fisher-Turk

I call my work PhotoTherapy. PhotoTherapy combines black and white photography and journal writing as tools for changing women's negative self-image. I ask women to keep a journal when they decide to be photographed through six weeks afterward. Women start the photographing clothed and disrobe during the session. Everywhere we look, in magazines, on television, the images are retouched. They look perfect. How should we feel?

This article is about how women take back the appraisal of WHAT IS BEAUTY. PhotoTherapy uses a woman's multiple images to shift her negative self-perceptions. By being seen and not judged, by being photographed nude and seeing what they're most afraid of seeing, women have had the opportunity to reconstruct how they see themselves.

I remember photographing Camilla six years ago. When she called to set up an appointment, she said, "I must be crazy to do this, but my body image is terrible. I can't keep getting up in the morning being disgusted with what I see."

The morning after we photographed, Camilla called to tell me that when we were photographing she looked in the mirror and saw that she was beautiful. She'd never noticed before.

I photograph all women. Some suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. Others are overweight. Some have negative feelings about their bodies caused by rape, incest, sexual abuse, or surgery. The rest are, perhaps, like you and me – ordinary women who have been spared trauma, but not the reality of aging or having expectations of being more perfect.

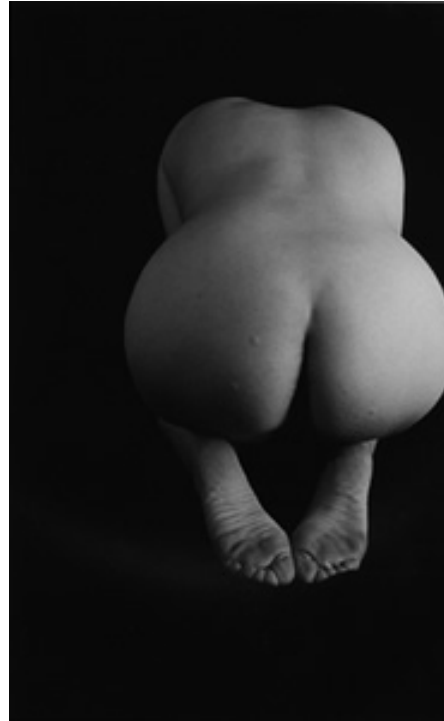
During the past ten years, I have worked with over 100 women and have seen my use of photography transform their self-image and the way they perceive their bodies. It has also empowered their lives. I've seen them change their way of dressing, their friends, their partners, their jobs. The photography seems to jump start their lives.

I photograph women as works of art. I see ordinary women as divinely inspired. They choose where they'll be photographed and in what position. Many of them are nude. That vulnerability makes their sessions more powerful. They're given contact sheets with 36 pictures on a page and are asked to keep journals of the experience of being photographed, of looking at their photographs, and their thoughts about these experiences. Through this process, they are able - many for the very first time in their lives - to experience their beauty as well as a sense of their potential, strength, individuality, and uniqueness. The 'gaze' is now used by the 'Object'. Instead of comparing themselves with the cultural standard, they see themselves, their uniqueness. They are now the one doing the gazing. They are now the source of what's beautiful.

None of these women are movie stars. All are ordinary women, photographed as works of art. We are what we believe we are.

Anna's story

"This is how I remember it: I am lying on my parent's bed next to my father and he is asleep. I am five years old and I'm happy, only I have no reference for it because happy is all I've ever been, all I've ever known. I am playing quietly when I feel something irrevocably shift in the room. I make a motion to leave when I hear my father say to me in Spanish, "If you move, I'll kill you." I turn to look at him. My father, for reasons I will never figure out, has turned into the bogeyman. I look down and he is masturbating, angrily in my memory of it. The rest is fragmented: I remember unimaginable pain and two of his fingers inside my vagina; Him on top of me, his sweat and hair rubbing against my face; Feeling suffocated and powerless; The smell of him, like that of old, mildewed wet towels; Numbness between my legs; His hand around my throat as he begins to squeeze; Not being able to breathe; Indescribable terror; Panic; Then nothing."



"I wonder what my parents will say. I haven't confronted them with the sexual abuse memories I've been having. Shit, I've been remembering the time when you dear daddy of mine tried to fuck me. When you couldn't penetrate, you got angry and frustrated and tried to strangle me nearly to death."

Phototherapy significantly changed Anna's path. She is no longer bulimic. She is now able to trust and is now able to be with a special person. She's also completing a college degree. After we worked together she went back to acting and landed the role of permanent understudy in *Le Miz*. For years Ana extended herself, reassuring me how important the photography and journals were in her journey toward wellbeing. She was willing to talk to press and came with me occasionally when I presented slides to different groups.

"I am so scared to want someone, to have someone love me. Eventually they would catch on and see wounds, warts, gangrene and cancers. And disgust they would look at me with eyes that once the illusion that I was beautiful. Then they would leave."

Jean's story

Jean contacted me, having seen an interview on one of the television talk shows. She flew to New York from her home in Texas. She was in between jobs, having been laid off from her work as a computer assistant.

When I was photographing Jean I watched her become increasingly comfortable in front of the camera. She was nude and I thought that I shouldn't judge which scarf she choose or where she wanted to sit. I told myself not to say anything and not to show any judgment on my face. As a woman and as a photographer I battle not inflicting myself onto the person I'm photographing.

She told me, while we were photographing, that she hadn't been with a man for years but that her sister had many men and was also overweight, so obviously having boyfriends had nothing to do with weight. She realized that what we think about our bodies affects our sexuality. I knew she was right – fitting into cultural norms doesn't make for acceptance or happiness.



"I'm the granddaughter of a former Miss America."
"Initially I was afraid to be photographed."



"Then I enjoyed it. We started to play. I saw the sheets and started to cry. I saw I was beautiful. My grandmother said I could never be beautiful."

LYNN'S STORY

Dr. Ira Sacker called me to tell me that he had a patient who was interested in being photographed nude. She'd been anorexic for the last ten years. Before that, she'd swung between obesity and anorexia since she was 17. Her name is Lynn.

Lynn and I talked briefly by phone then set up a time for me to take the train out to her home on the eastern tip of Long Island. Her husband helped me make the arrangements.

I took the train out to Ronkonkoma on a bleak December day. It was 1999, a few days short of my younger son's thirtieth birthday and I thought about the turns in my life. Here I was, schlepping a video camera, tripod and still camera by subway and train to 'try out' a hunch. It was cold, a near winter gray day. The trip out was close to 2 hours. Ronkonkoma is charming. It's exurban-beyond the suburbs where the houses and roads are neat and orderly. There's airspace for people to see while everyone moves around in compact cars and sports utility vans. Few people walk.

Eddy picked me up at the train. He's been Lynn's husband forever and before that her teenage boyfriend. They grew up together in Great Neck. They have one son, 15, the age they were when they first met. He told me he was there for her, that they were getting on in years now; that they were no longer young. She needed to 'handle it.' She'd been so thin for years now. She eats next to nothing. She could eat, he told me. She could eat more than he could. She could 'put away' two 16 ounce steaks in one sitting! She used to.

She later confirmed what he'd said. That was the problem she added. If she ate, she couldn't control herself. Years before she was heavy, up to 160 pounds. She hadn't been heavy for ten years. She'd been anorexic for the past ten years.

Eddy drove me to their home, a new house, painted light gray like the winter light, with white birch in front. He'd built it himself; had never built a house but contracted the building himself. He was proud of his accomplishment and resigned to his anger with Lynn.

It was warm in the house. Eddy had set up separate heating for each of the rooms in the house because Lynn suffered from Raynaud's Disease. Years of suffering from an eating disorder affected her circulation. Raynaud's causes the body's extremities – the hands, feet – to be perpetually cold. She greeted me in the kitchen, was no nonsense, cared little for small talk but just led me upstairs saying, "O.K. E. Let's do it!" While she led the way up the stairs to her bedroom she shared with me the reason she was willing to try this kind of photography was because her legs were hurting her. With all the years of self starving, her legs had never hurt her. She was in pain now. She liked to walk an hour every day and now it hurt her to walk. She could hardly climb the stairs up to her bedroom. The pain made her cry.

I set up my video camera, intending to get Lynn's take on Lynn's eating disorder. "I'm the kind of person who tells it like it is," she said, appearing sure about herself. I learned that she was interested in movies, plays and books, that she liked to read the Sunday Times cover to cover, and plan out what she'd rent in video or get to see in Manhattan theaters four times a year if Eddy would take her. I learned that she was awake half the night reading one of three books a week, one for pleasure, one to 'expand her mind' and one to grow spiritually. Afterward, she'd watch 5 or more movies late each night. She'd rise the next day after 12. I learned that she didn't eat breakfast until 4, only coffee. She ate her lunch when most people eat dinner. She ate her dinner close to midnight. She ate the same food daily with the same allotment. She'd never taken the train by herself, she had never driven into Manhattan alone and she was afraid to eat anything other than what she'd limited herself to for fear she'd be out of control. She told me all of this before we photographed. We sat, she on her bed, me on a chair, with the video camera between us.

I videotaped her, looking for a way to know her, to develop some rapport, so that I could carry the relationship into the photographing. It was tough. I try to create a bond with each woman I photograph, because I'm asking each woman to undress in front of my camera. I also believe that if she 'gets comfortable,' and most women do eventually, she'll start to show my camera who she is. Otherwise the camera records the discomfort more than the person. I believe that it is those frames, when a woman is her authentic self, that can be healing when she sees them afterward. They reveal who she actually is.

I replayed her video for her. Lynn wasn't surprised. She told me she knew everything on the tape already.

We began photographing. "Let's do it." She took her clothes off except for her panties and asked where I would like her to stand. "Anywhere you're comfortable," I replied. Lynn was uncomfortable about disrobing in front of the camera, but she trusted Dr. Sacker and just 'did it.' She let me know she didn't like it, saying, "Let's just get it over." I could feel her terror, and see her body clenching, tightening. She trusted him. She didn't need to trust me.



"I've always seen myself as a humongous whale. No matter how thin I was I only saw fat. I looked at the contacts the first time then I put them back. A few days later I looked at them with my husband. He pointed out the ones he thought showed the most severe anorexic condition, but I really didn't see what he was seeing."

I had photographed women who had suffered from anorexia or bulimia before but never anyone as thin as Lynn. I have worked as a radio reporter and know as a photographer that it is crucial to get the photograph and not dwell on my reactions. Otherwise I'll lose the photograph, lose the moment. When I first saw Lynn's frail body I intentionally shelved my shock.

I had to keep soothing myself, calming my voice so that she would be eased and so that I wouldn't alarm her by reacting to her emaciated body..

I was alarmed. I had photographed women suffering from bulimia, women with anorexic tendencies but not women who had starved themselves like this for most of their lives.

We shot four rolls of film, finished up, me with my equipment and Lynn with her clothes, and walked downstairs together. Lynn said little more to me. She only asked Eddy about the train schedule.

I felt like I'd come into a woman's life, 'handled' something so personal, and didn't adequately (for me) get to know her, or she get to know me. I left uneasy that I was 'stealing away' with her private information without the right to really have it. Ordinarily I form a relationship with each woman I photograph, make both of us comfortable so that they can have what feels to me a rich and meaningful of experience being photographed. When I took the train back to Manhattan, then pulled my cart with the video camera along the street, feeling so lonely, feeling like I'd just walked through a long cold tunnel, wondering if I was imagining I could bring help with a method as implausible as nude photography to a woman who'd starved herself on and off for thirty six years.

I'd never seen anyone as thin as Lynn. She told me she didn't see what everyone else saw, that she looked at herself and always herself as fat. I saw hanging skin, with bones showing through. Only her buttocks and breasts retained what they might have been, had she not so rigidly measured and defined what she would eat all these years. I saw a body ravaged by an illness. What made it all the more horrible was that her hair was coifed, her nails manicured and her wrists were covered with jewelry. Concentration camp inmates do not wear gold jewelry. Nor is their hair died and cut stylishly.

I walk a thin road, a narrow bridge, when I photograph women nude. I don't want to judge each woman. I want to have her comfortable with me so that she will show me who she is, so that I can capture her uniqueness on film for her to see in the contact sheets. That's the premise behind PhotoTherapy.

I have asked women which frames made a difference as to how they later see themselves. It is those frames that reflect the Cartier Bresson's 'the decisive moment,' the moment when the woman allows herself to be captured as she genuinely *is* that changes how women see themselves.

With Lynn, it was not about capturing her beautiful face or the angle or light on a part of her body so she would like herself, but rather about seeing what she had become. She needed to see her bones and hanging flesh. I thought it was easier with Lynn than with other women. All she had to do was to see herself! It was not easier. She had had a lifetime of mis-seeing herself as fat.

I sent her the contact sheets. My photography lab had never seen images like that, except newspaper images of starving people in 'third world' countries. Eastern Suffolk County is not the third world.

I asked Lynn to keep a journal about how she saw the contact sheets. I asked her to look at them each day, then write down what she thought.

I called her and asked if she had any insights.

None.

I called again.

No insights. In fact, "Ellen," she said, "I'm not writing any more. I just don't see anything."

I called and called.

She said she'd call me.

Three weeks later she called.

She told me she looked in the mirror one day and saw she was thin, just like Eddy had been saying, just like a concentration camp victim. She took out the contact sheets and they confirmed what she was seeing in the mirror.

She looked again the next day and for the next week. It was the same. It wasn't her mind playing tricks on her. She was deathly thin. She told Eddy. She could now trust what she was seeing.

It became clearer as time passed following Lynn's experience of the photography that a first step in helping end anorexia is for an anorexic to see herself.

Lynn could now see herself.



But underneath Lynn's starving herself were a lifetime of behaviors and beliefs, fears and self criticism.

"One day I looked at myself naked in front of the mirror. I looked like a holocaust victim. In the past, I always saw myself as fat. All of a sudden, I saw that I was skinny. Before, the mirror just lied along with me. There was no way to check that my feelings were being exaggerated in the mirror. The pictures opened the doorway."

Lynn told me this by telephone:

A week or two after the realization of how skinny I was, it was then that coincidentally my body started manifesting the malnutrition, it was then that I started feeling the effects of malnutrition. What propelled me to try to eat more was the fact that physically I was feeling the effects of malnutrition on my legs. In the past I was able to physically function with no problem. But now anything that has to do with me going upstairs, putting any weight on my legs, be it Yoga, I've lost strength in my legs be it muscle mass, and therefore it scares me. Before I was never physically stopped-playing ball, standing on one foot and now I'm not able to do it.

She expanded her food intake minimally.

Whereas before I would only eat half an orange in the morning, I will take a whole orange now. Where I was only eating a half a piece of toast I'm now eating a whole piece of bread. I'm now eating 1/4 of a baked potato, whereas before I'd stopped eating a baked potato. I'm now eating a half an apple at night, whereas I had stopped eating apples at night. So this was progress."

"I still get on the scale once a week though and my weight has maintained a steady 81 pounds. I find that I'm still scared to break that barrier, even though I want to, I think."

Now the next big barrier to conquer is seeing the scale move up one pound without the immediate desire to starve myself the next day and lose it. On one hand I want to gain the weight, the fact that I got on the scale and was down to 81 and I choose to add one food has led me to want to weigh myself to see if I'm gaining any weight on the scale. I want to be able to control the weight gain and the food intake. But the next trick is to be able to watch the food intake and see the scale go up a little bit and not get frightened. I want to get to 82 and accept it and not freak out.

Lynn gained 3 pounds during the two years after we photographed. She wrote a 'fear list' and she's accomplishing what she'd been afraid of. The year after we photographed Eddy put Lynn on the Ronkonkoma train and I met her at Penn Station. Together we bought bus and subway maps of Manhattan and she's mastering getting around the city alone. We started conversations about eating at a restaurant. She's still considering it. Lynn acknowledged that she needed more power in her life. When I spoke with her last year she told me she'd reconciled with her father. He had told her at 15 that her thighs were fat. She believed him.

So how does PhotoTherapy work?

I see my camera as a way to make a bridge, to lend women my eyes so they can develop a relationship with their real selves. I think this invites and gives them permission to be free.

I am opening doorways they may not have known existed, or may have known but were afraid to even look through, much less enter. Then women can see what I see, so they can get past their pain and self-judgments and start to allow themselves to "be." The reason for the pain isn't important to me. It is only important that they see the reality of who they are today and live out

of that space, not out of their past. It helps them identify their innermost hidden issues when they see themselves as art.

Each woman chooses where she'll stand or sit and what she uses as a prop. I'm not just looking for a nice smile or beauty in the conventional sense. What I want is to capture the authentic and unique self in each woman. One woman experienced the photography this way. She wrote in her diary: "I felt as though I were joining myself – that I had been separated from myself most of my life."

A few days after the session, I give each woman her contact sheets. These are small frames of all the photographs taken, laid out together on 8 1/2 x 11 inch sheets. I deliberately use these small pictures first because I believe they force each person to look at and in her body, as well as at and in herself. I photograph their faces, not just their bodies. Invariably they comment on their faces. The expressions remind them of some emotion they were feeling when we photographed. That emotion reminds them of what they felt at some earlier time. At first they invariably see what is wrong, but as they keep looking they begin to see something that is lovely – something they like. If I point out what is attractive, it's not enough. They have to come to see it themselves. Then they can believe it and then those pictures become more important than the ones they didn't like.

My work with women always uses personal and multiple image as a way of reflecting back the essence of who the person is. By using multiple images, women are forced to see past their tunnel-visioned, negative self. By seeing images they like and dislike printed on the same piece of photographic paper, they're forced – as in EMDR – to reconcile opposites. Women have told me that the images associated with negative feelings lose their impact when they're viewed on contact sheets. They explain why or how they still don't like them, but that they aren't as upsetting they tell me. I believe this is the beginning of self-acceptance.

I first discovered the power of photography as a therapeutic medium when a troubled woman I knew approached me with a request to photograph her. This woman had been raped by a male photographer while she was posing nude for him. Now she was worried that she would be afraid of the camera for life. She thought that if I were to photograph her, she might feel at ease in front of a camera again. I agreed to try. At that point in time I'd never photographed a nude.

Over the course of photographing that first woman, I started seeing a profound change in her. I began to wonder whether this method might help other women. Being nude clearly made this woman feel vulnerable, and because of the vulnerability she was much more deeply available for insights and change.

I placed an ad in a New York newspaper: "Female photographer looking for women to pose clothed to nude for quasi-psychological study, investigating self-esteem and body image." Several women responded, and my work with PhotoTherapy began.

When I first began using PhotoTherapy I was unaware that PhotoTherapy was an established psychotherapeutic technique. PhotoTherapy is ordinarily a technique used by mental health professionals to evoke feelings and memories in clients as part of their healing process. This is typically done by using personal and family photos from clients' own photo albums as catalysts.

My technique focuses on using the nude to evoke hidden feelings and to reflect back to each woman who she is authentically. I decided to use the body as a mirror, to reflect back each woman's authenticity and truth. It is that mirror that cracks through her self-criticisms, fears, and other defenses and opens a space for self acceptance.

One woman, looking at her contact prints, wrote,

Some people have to hit rock bottom before they can begin to heal. I was one of these. During the photo session, I felt my body transforming into the kinds of bodies I had seen in paintings. The more I started to like these photographs, the more I began to have positive conversations with myself. Now, rather than criticizing my body, I see a woman I value.

My work has gained recognition and respect over the years. I've worked with different hospitals to develop programs using photography as a therapeutic technique. With the Oncology Department at N.Y. University Hospital we developed a program using photography with female cancer patients. We wrote a procedure using documentary photography, journal writing and group therapy with female cancer patients.

I was recently interviewed for a television special on treatment of eating disorders. The host asked me for proof that PhotoTherapy works. She'd interviewed an expert who called it 'invasive.' I am convinced that the use of a woman's own image – as nude as she allows, as vulnerable as she allows, not judged, but photographed as if she were worthy of being a work of art, capturing the essence, the uniqueness of who she is, is a source for her empowerment and change. It is revolutionary because it redirects the journey. Instead of looking outside for our answers – to experts, therapists or the media – these brave women have the opportunity to see their own truth and power by looking within themselves. The photographs only reflect that internal map. The photographs allow them the opportunity to see who they are, as the person who is different than who they think they are. This is the doorway inside. Once it's opened they can choose to walk toward an expanded way of seeing themselves. I as the photographer need only be skilled and accepting, giving them the opportunity to become natural and at ease during the photographing. My camera needs to 'remother,' so that they'll trust the experience and show me the essence – some would say beauty – of who they are. This is what the woman described when she said she was joining herself. These women begin to see the self they'd forgotten, perhaps had never known. It is perfect, because it is their essence. Most women know this intuitively and they embrace it. It's their home. There is nothing more perfect than finding oneself.

Ellen Fisher-Turk has worked as a professional radio reporter, video documentary producer/director and photographer. She has won awards in all three media. Her work over the past ten years is two fold: As a play therapist and special education preschool teacher she works with 3-5 year old New York City special education children. She holds a Masters in special education, specializing in learning disabilities. Her therapeutic use of photography is known as PhotoTherapy. It uses black and white photography, from clothed to nude as a woman allows, coupled with journaling to shift body image and self-esteem. It has been written about and broadcast internationally. She regularly presents at universities and hospital grand rounds. Ellen Fisher-Turk is currently studying Modern Psychoanalysis through the Center Human Development.

Photo credit: Stephanie Badini



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