

**CREATIVE: ID# 98457**

**Title:**

The Art of Empowerment: The Role of Photography in Trauma, Healing, and Self-Perception

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*Operating Room, Overlook Medical Center, Summit, NJ, USA*

**ACCEPTED**

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**Session Title:**

Creative Arts in Nursing Posters (Saturday/Sunday, 16 & 17 November)

**Slot:**

CA PST1: Sunday, 17 November 2019: 11:45 AM-12:15 PM

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**Preferred Presentation Format:**

Poster

**Applicable Category:**

Clinical

**Keywords:**

Empowerment, Photography and Trauma

**References:**

No references.

**Abstract Summary:**

My work with women who have endured trauma is meant to empower them through honest portraiture. I aim to offer a transformative and healing experience that allows women the space to creatively process and express their most challenging experiences, ultimately generating photographs that embody difficulty, self-love, and triumph.

**Content Outline:**

1. Introduction
  1. Who I am and my background as an artist and trauma survivor
  2. Why this work is important to me and why I think it matters to others

## 2. Body

1. Different types of trauma that I have encountered
  1. How they present emotionally and physically
  2. Their effect on the women I've worked with
2. How photographs can help us heal and process trauma and grief
  1. My process for using photography to help heal myself
  2. Process of using creative outlets to help symbolize and actualizing healing for others
  3. Building a trusting relationship where the client feels comfortable expressing themselves
3. The process of making the art and embodying the emotions
  1. Finding a creative vision together that speaks to their story
  2. What happens during the session
  3. Cultivating and delivering a meaningful narrative
  4. Their response to the images

## 3. Conclusion

1. Summary of my work and how it helps people

### **Topic Selection:**

Creative Arts in Nursing Posters (Saturday/Sunday, 16 & 17 November) (25747)

### **Abstract:**

Traumas are deeply distressing experiences that can be either psychological or physical in origin. In my own life, I have experienced a wide array of traumas, including sexual, emotional, and physical. Photographs and their ability to freeze time, preserving moments and memories forever, have always fascinated me. But it was not until I began studying photography in college that I discovered the true value of portraiture. Very early on, self-portraits began to hugely challenge and transform my self-perception. Soon after, I began recruiting others to step in front of my lens. Curiously seeking to understand and integrate others' experiences with trauma, I gravitated towards the survivors; those who were either literally or figuratively scarred. Over the past fifteen years, this work has allowed me the honor of photographing women who have endured rape, cancer, eating disorders, self-harm, burn deformities, scoliosis, postpartum depression, and the traumatic loss of a child, parent or sibling.

After graduating from art school and gaining employment as a photographer's assistant, I was badly injured during a shoot just a couple short months later. This caused me to lose my job, but ultimately led me to my second career in nursing. Once I had secured my education and a few years of experience as a RN, my passion for using photography as a tool to help heal people, was fiercely rekindled. Currently I

serve as a volunteer for the Magic Hour Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to offering free portrait sessions to cancer patients or survivors and their families. Additionally, I've continued working with women who have experienced trauma on a one-on-one basis, to tell their stories in a meaningful and honest way.

My work with these amazing women is meant to assist them in creatively processing and expressing their deepest struggles, ultimately generating photographs that embody difficulty, self-love, and triumph. I connect with each woman emotionally when they first share their stories with me and artistically as we collectively plan our vision for the session. The goal is to reveal and celebrate who she is while representing her journey through trauma with integrity, striving to include as much vulnerability as strength. It is an opportunity for her to put forth her beauty, pain, and courage. Whether she is being photographed alone or with her family, the session is a chance to acknowledge the darkness of trauma, which is often overlooked for many women, and also to shine the light of hope and love. This, in and of itself, is often incredibly liberating and inspiring. Moreover, integrating illness and trauma into her self-perception via photography offers a safe space and positive context where she can both express and view herself in a new light.

Images are a means with which a person can honor life, not only by savoring the moment captured, but by reflecting on the past and hoping for the future. After I deliver each woman's gallery of photographs, she is free to examine herself and her narrative in the comfort and privacy of her own space. From my own experience and the feedback I've gotten from those I've worked with, examining the images very much includes looking back on what had to be overcome to get to present day. It is at this point that I have seen women shift their perspectives and open up in marvelous ways. Many of them report feeling differently, more positive, about themselves or their bodies upon seeing their images. One woman who had severe scoliosis studied her images as a way to learn, process, and embrace the contours of her body and skeletal structure, which she had never fully seen before. Another woman who suffered for years with postpartum depression eventually shared her images on social media with a powerful accompanying post, where she boldly admitted for the first time that at one point she had battled suicidal thoughts. This year I worked with two separate women who were each undergoing treatment for aggressive cancer. They both felt that their sessions helped them to integrate their new sense of self and feel beautiful in their changing bodies, but also that the images are a reminder to cherish their families regardless of their tragic circumstances.

These "female embodiment sessions", as I have come to call them, are a dynamic way to illustrate and document women's stories of perseverance, peace and power. The impact of this work doesn't stop at the women I photograph, or at myself. Yes, it helps to heal and empower both of us. But as the images and narratives are shared, they spread awareness and destigmatize various traumas, providing examples of strength and demonstrating persistence to other people who may be battling similar issues.