

Research Supporting Experiential Therapies

ViewFinders is an innovative group that integrates art into the process of therapy to build participants' self-confidence and skills through photography. Scientific evidence has well established the benefit of talk therapy as a means to challenge unhealthy thought patterns, increase awareness of emotions, and engage differently in relationships. Though standard talk therapy can be quite helpful, ViewFinders operates, in part, using an experiential therapy approach. Experiential therapy approaches "share a set of core qualities, such as eliciting and exploring reflective experiences in-session, using empathy within the therapeutic relationship as a curative factor, and helping people to explore and make meaning of their own inner lives" (Mullings, 2017, p. 3).

In other words, experiential therapies utilize a particular experience as a mechanism to lead participants to think, feel, reflect, and engage. In ViewFinders, we work with photography (including aspects such as lighting and composition) to explore beliefs about ourselves and others. Each group session will consist of instruction and practice of photography skills, as well as therapeutic processing and debriefing related to those photography skills. Through these sessions, "[the] real relationship with the therapist provides the client with a new, emotionally-validating experience" (Elliott, et al., p. 3). Participants' interactions with leaders of the group, as well as other group members, can thus provide an experience that counters messages or fears that hinder the participant's knowledge of self. This process of "making sense of emotion in new ways ... helps to break cycles of maladaptive automatic emotions" (Elliott, et al., p. 20) and "... construct or reconstruct a meaning perspective on the emotional experience" (Elliott, et al., p. 31).

Mullings (2017) notes the "very high standard of evidence for the effectiveness of experiential psychotherapies" (p. 2), and states that experiential therapies have "led to positive outcomes in the treatment of mood disorders, anxiety, adjustment disorder, PTSD ... and ADHD" and that the "largest treatment effects were found in the treatment of children experiencing symptoms of distress related to adjustment reactions to stressful life events, trauma, and anxiety disorders" (p. 11). As well, Elliott, Greenberg, & Lietaer (2004) note that "The existing research is now more than sufficient to warrant a positive valuation of experiential therapy conclusion in four important areas: depression, anxiety disorders, trauma, and marital problems..." (p. 30).

The experiential approach of ViewFinders will help participants refresh their view of themselves and their life story, as well as develop a greater appreciation of the arts and new skills in photography.

Elliott, R., Greenberg, L., & Lietaer, G. (2004). Research on Experiential Psychotherapies. In M. J. Lambert (Ed.), *Bergin & Garfield's Handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change* (5th ed., pp. 493-539). New York: Wiley.

Mullings, B. (2017). *A literature review of the evidence for the effectiveness of experiential psychotherapies*. Melbourne: PACFA.