

Photographic Treatment ©

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What is Photographic Treatment© and how should you use it?

Photographic Treatment© is a therapeutic treatment developed for people with dementia. All images in this series of photographs come from the photo database Sharing Images, which consists of generic, legible photographs selected by Laurence Aëgerter specifically for people suffering from dementia. Photographic Treatment© can also be used as a brain exercise for healthy people to improve their cognitive functions.

It is recommended to take three doses a week for a period of one month.

Out of Mind

Dementia is a widespread disease that affects one in eight people. Alzheimer's is its most common form. It usually begins to affect people in their mid-70s but can occur earlier. In 2016, nearly 44 million people worldwide suffer from Alzheimer's or a related dementia. During the course of the disease, proteins build up in the brain creating 'plaques' and 'tangles' leading to loss of activity of nerve cells, and eventually a loss of nerve cells. Alzheimer's is an irreversible, degenerative disease that gradually destroys all memory and intellectual capacity.

A lot of time and effort is being put into finding a cure. In the meantime, the question of care must be addressed with equal importance as many patients experience anxiety, loneliness and boredom and a third of people living with the disease suffer from depression. Conducted in collaboration with scientific experts in the field of neurology and gerontology, Laurence Aëgerter's research project, Photographic Treatment, explores how the photographic image can have a positive impact on patients and their carers.

Beyond the Brain

Harnessing the power of the image, Aëgerter uses photographs to overcome the dementia-related difficulties patients and their carers have when communicating. The artist investigates the possibilities of provoking empathy through photography in relation to the human mirror neuron system. When we see an expression on someone else's face, our brain activates our own biological motions to mirror these emotions. In short, a smile creates another smile.

Another dimension to her research considers the impact of looking at images that hold a positive association to one's life, such as favourite activities, food or places. Aëgerter's hypothesis is that the photographic image can function as a therapeutic tool to stimulate the brain. Moreover, if one or both images appeal to the viewer on an emotional level, the positive experience of the activity will be elevated.

Use it or Lose it

The positive impact of brain exercises on cognitive functions, and therefore its potential to enhance mental capacity and slow down mental deterioration, has been widely researched (3). Using the photographic image as a trigger, Photographic Treatment encourages participants to actively use their brains in a novel way by making connections between images.

Efficient Images

Under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Rose-Marie Dröes, VUmc Amsterdam (4), Aëgerter developed a scientific protocol to determine which kind of images were the most effective in stimulating a positive experience for the viewer. After a first phase of selecting the best photographs, the second phase consists of administering the treatment to a large group of people suffering from dementia. The group is shown the selection of images three times a week for half an hour sessions during a period of one month.

1+1=3

Building on Aristotle's idea that, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," the artist believes that the experience of an image is deepened when strategically paired with another image. Whether based on an interaction between form or content, the image pair offers the potential for a deeper perception of the photographs, stimulating brain activity to forge a connection between the two. Aëgerter is simultaneously exploring synesthesia, adding smell to images in order to provoke a wider sensory experience and therefore, a deeper impact.

Side effects and adverse effects of Photographic Treatment©

None.

1 2016, Alzheimer's Statistics, found at: <http://www.alzheimers.net/resources/alzheimers-statistics>

2 Dick Swaab, 'Wij Zijn Ons Brein' (We Are Our Brains), 2010, p.295

3 (Re-)activation of neurons in aging and dementia: lessons from the hypothalamus.

Swaab DF, Bao AM.

Exp Gerontol. 2011 Feb-Mar;46(2-3):178-84. doi: 10.1016/j.exger.2010.08.028. Epub 2010 Sep 15.

Review.

4 Professor of Psychosocial care for people with dementia at the department of General practice and Elderly care medicine of the VU University medical center

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