

Doing Your Own PhotoVoice Project

A Guide

By Laura Lorenz, PhD and Barbara Webster

PhotoVoice is an activity that someone with a brain injury — or anyone — can do.

- On their own
- With a friend, family member, or rehabilitation service provider
- With a support group.

Basically, PhotoVoice involves the following activities:

- 1) Thinking of some questions you want to answer with your camera.
- 2) Taking pictures that answer your own questions, from your perspective.
- 3) Reflecting on your pictures by yourself, or talking about your pictures with someone else.
- 4) Writing captions for some of your photos — you choose which ones.

PhotoVoice can include the following optional activities:

- 1) Looking for themes in your photos and narratives and grouping them by theme.
- 2) Putting your photos and captions in a binder.
- 3) Sharing your binder with family, friends, and others — maybe a rehabilitation service provider.

The following pages will help you do your own PhotoVoice project:

- [Getting Started](#)
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Brain Injury X-Posed: The Survivor's View is a photographic exhibit created by eight members of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts Framingham support group. See this exhibit to get ideas for your own photovoice project.

<http://www.brainline.org/multimedia/photovoice.html>

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Getting Started

Here is a list of steps to get you started doing your own PhotoVoice project:

- 1) Choose your camera. Any type of camera is fine. Most important is a camera that is easy for you to use.
- 2) Develop some questions you want to answer with your project. Investigate strengths as well as weaknesses — positives as well as negatives. Click for [suggestions of questions](#).
- 3) Reflect on how you might answer your questions using a photo. Write down ideas of pictures you would like to take. This is where using a notebook is helpful.
- 4) Take some photos. Write notes about why you took the picture, if you like.
- 5) Look at your photos. Is there one that “speaks” to you? What do you see?
- 6) Write a caption for your chosen photo. Your caption can be short or long. Two or three sentences might be enough to tell your story.
- 7) Plan to take at least one more set of pictures. For most people, the first group of photos generates more ideas for photos. Learning how to illustrate your thoughts or feelings with photos and captions is an ongoing process!

PhotoVoice Tips

Keep these tips handy as you do your PhotoVoice project. Refer to them often.

No experience needed! Owning a camera or having experience taking photographs is not necessary. For the Framingham Support Group project, we used inexpensive disposable camera, but any camera will do.

Photo quality is not important. PhotoVoice is not about the quality of your photographs. It is about taking pictures that mean something to you as someone with a brain injury.

Keep a notebook. Write down ideas of photos in a notebook. Keep notes about why you took a picture.

Ask permission to take someone's photo. Always ask permission before you take someone's picture! If they say no, explain briefly what you are doing and why you want to take their picture. Your explanation can simply be: "I'm working on a photography project for people with disabilities/brain injuries, would you mind being in one of the photos?" If they still say no, take a picture of something or someone else instead

File your photos. Paste or glue each photo on a blank sheet of paper. Some people like to put two or three photos on one sheet. Remember to leave room for your caption, later. Place the sheets in a binder, for easy viewing and storing. **OPTIONAL:** Print two sets of photos and save the second set for future options.

Store your photo negatives or digital files where you can find them. Keep your photo negatives (or a CD of your images) in a safe place, for making more prints later.

Write captions from your heart. Write your captions as if you were talking to someone else about your photos. Speak from your heart. If writing is hard, dictate your captions to someone else to write down for you.

Photo-Taking Questions

These are the questions the Framingham Support Group used for their project. Feel free to use these questions, or develop new ones for yourself. Be sure to include questions that investigate strengths as well as weaknesses — positives as well as negatives.

- What is it like to live with brain injury?
- What in my life or community has helped me in my healing from brain injury?
- What in my life or community has slowed down my healing from brain injury?
- What do I want to tell other people about living with brain injury?
- How is my life different now from how it was before? What is better? What is worse?
- What are my hopes for the future? And what might help me get there?

Photo-Taking Tips

Tips for taking good photographs

- Try different angles
- Try different points of view
- Keep the sun to your back, or to the side
- Is your subject in the center of the photo?
- Does your subject fill the photo?

Tips for avoiding common mistakes

- Keep your finger away from the lens
- Don't cover the flash
- Stand about three to eight feet away from your subject
- Wind the film forward before you take another picture, if your camera does not do so automatically.
- To prevent blurry pictures, hold your elbows close to your sides, and hold your breath when you press the shutter (button).

Please note:

If you are using a film camera, you don't need to use the whole roll of film. Just take as many photos as you can or want to take.

- Even just 1 or 2 photos is okay.
- Five or 6 is fine.
- Ten or 12 is a good number to start with if you can.

PhotoVoice Ethics: Safety and Respect

With PhotoVoice, we are visual researchers as we take pictures of our lives with brain injury and talk about them with others.

As a visual researcher, you must keep certain guidelines in mind:

Stay safe! Make sure you are “safe” when you take the picture. For example:

- ✓ Stand on a solid surface.
- ✓ Look before you step into or cross a street.
- ✓ Be aware of things around you, like traffic.

Ask permission. Always ask permission before taking people’s photos for this project. Ask them to sign a photo consent form.

If people can be recognized in a photo, ask permission before showing their picture outside your group.

Be respectful. If certain people don’t their photo taken, respect their feelings.

Be prepared. Be ready to explain about the project to family, friends, or strangers, if they ask what you are doing.

A simple explanation is: “I am part of a PhotoVoice project investigating what it is like to live with brain injury. We are taking photographs of our lives and talking about them with other people in our group. Thank you for letting me take your picture.”

When permission is not necessary. In a public place like a park, you can take someone’s photo without permission, especially if they are far away and can’t be recognized in the picture.

Respect the lives and safety of others. When you take photos for your project, think of people’s safety first, and be respectful of their lives. For example:

- ✓ If your friend is diabetic and the doctor told them not to eat sweets, avoid taking a picture of them eating cake.
- ✓ If your friend doesn’t have a driver’s license, avoid taking a picture of them driving a car down the street.

Photo Consent Form 1

I am part of a PhotoVoice project investigating what it is like to live with brain injury. We are taking photographs of our lives and talking about them with other people in our group.

Please sign this form if you agree to let me take your photograph for this project.

If you would like a copy of this photo, please write down your address.

I agree to have my photo taken for this PhotoVoice project:

Name

Signature

Date

Name of photographer

Photo Discussion Questions

Here are some suggestions of questions to get you started talking about your photo with others — or for reflecting on your own:

- What does this photo show?
- What do you want to say about it?
- How does this help or slow down your healing from brain injury?
- What can we do to support healing from brain injury?

Building on Your Project

Many people have found that doing PhotoVoice helps to build their self-confidence and inspires them to take action to achieve another goal.

Is there another project you have been wanting to do?

- Pursue a hobby?
- Take a class?
- Start a garden?
- Start volunteering?
- Look into part-time work opportunities?

Think about how you might use your PhotoVoice project to take action on your goal.

Building awareness about brain injury can become a goal. Your photos and captions might be the missing link to help people without brain injury to understand what it is like for you to live with a brain injury. Other brain injury survivors often feel validated in seeing your photos and caption, and having an opportunity to tell you their story in turn.

One way to build on your project is to share your photos and captions with others. Click here for ideas of [exhibit options](#).

Exhibit Options

An exhibit — for family, friends, or others — can be useful for telling your story. Be sure to include information about your project: what you did and why. Consider grouping your photos for display in categories or common themes.

Exhibit options can include:

- 1) Mount your photos and captions on a flip chart or a poster board.
- 2) Paste prints of your photos on colored paper along with their narratives. Laminate the pages for mounting on the wall or in a case, or for sharing in a group.
- 3) Frame some photos and hang them on a wall, with the captions in the frame or nearby.
- 4) Prepare a slide show of your photos and captions in PowerPoint (or another software program). Record yourself reading your captions or talking about your pictures, if you like.
- 5) Create a website of your photos and captions.

Locations that might be interested in knowing about your exhibit could include:

- 1) Your local public library
- 2) A coffee shop or bookstore that hosts exhibits of local artists
- 3) Your state Brain Injury Association affiliate
- 4) A medical center, rehabilitation center, or doctor's office
- 5) A local senior or community center
- 6) A local school.

Ask permission before including photos in an exhibit

If you are organizing an exhibit, obtain permission from the photographers before putting their photos in the exhibit. If any photographers do not want their photo(s) included, respect their wishes.

Click for [photo consent form 2](#).

Photo Consent Form 2

I have been taking photographs of my experience living with brain injury. With this form I give — or refuse — permission for my photos and captions to be used in a public display.

- Yes, I am willing to have my photographs and captions used in public displays about living with brain injury.
- No, I do not want my photographs and captions used in public displays about living with brain injury.

I also need to give — or refuse — permission for my name to be listed as the photographer.

- I want my FULL NAME listed as the photographer.
- I want only my FIRST NAME listed as the photographer.
- I DO NOT want my name listed at all.

Please list any concerns or comments:

Name

Signature

Date