

# Photography-based therapy offers new approach to healing for sexual assault survivors

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Abigail Rolbiecki, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Missouri School of Medicine. Credit: MU Health

One out of every six American women has experienced a sexual assault

or an attempted sexual assault or rape in her lifetime, according to the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While more than half of female survivors of rape report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), previous research has found that not all survivors respond to traditional treatments for PTSD, causing their symptoms to resurface over time. Abigail Rolbiecki, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Missouri School of Medicine, says that photovoice interventions, where participants express their thoughts and feelings through photos, combined with traditional PTSD treatments, could result in a more complete recovery for survivors of sexual assault.

"Photovoice gives vulnerable populations an alternative way to express themselves, allowing survivors to use photographs to help convey their thoughts and feelings," Rolbiecki said. "Participants took photos that represented their strengths, weaknesses, triggers and their processes of obtaining justice. The intervention allowed participants to gently expose themselves to their triggers and discuss their thoughts and feelings about their experience in a safe and supportive environment."

Rolbiecki said that current PTSD treatments are designed to help survivors manage their anxiety when confronting triggers, but offer little support at addressing the powerlessness survivors may feel as a result of their experience.

"The typical approaches to treating PTSD are not specifically designed to foster post traumatic growth and empowerment for survivors," Rolbiecki said. "These approaches rarely provide an opportunity for survivors to rewrite their story and make meaning of their experiences, which is important and necessary for growth."

In the study, Rolbiecki recruited nine women who had experienced a sexual assault at any time in their lives. Each woman was given a camera

and instructed to take photos that captured her experience with sexual assault and recovery. The women met weekly as group to discuss their pictures. After group discussions were complete, the participants worked together to plan an invitation-only photography exhibit to educate others about sexual assault and [sexual assault](#) policies. Rolbiecki interviewed each participant after the exhibits to further discuss their experience with photovoice as a therapeutic intervention.

Rolbiecki said that after the intervention was complete, the participants reported decreases in PTSD symptoms and self-blame, and increases in their post traumatic growth, particularly with their personal strength.

"Survivors of sexual assaults are often identified by society as victims," Rolbiecki said. "Photovoice allows [participants](#) to redefine themselves despite their victimization. Through this tool, [survivors](#) can share their story with complete control of how it is told; allowing them to re-enter the world with a story solely authored by themselves."

Rolbiecki said that results from her study show that photovoice has therapeutic implications, especially in terms of treating trauma through creating and critically discussing photo narratives.

Rolbiecki is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Family and Community Medicine. She previously worked at the University of Missouri's Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center.

Rolbiecki's study, "Waiting for the Cold to End:' Using Photovoice as a Narrative Intervention for Survivors of Sexual Assault," recently was published in *Traumatology*, an international journal for health professionals who study and treat people exposed to highly stressful and traumatic events.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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