

Creative uses for Artificial Intelligence Image Creation as a Therapeutic Tool

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We live in a unique time. With on-going advancements in technology and the belief that we actually have access to the entire world at our fingertips, people seem more disconnected from each other than ever. This isn't new information but rather an acknowledgement that even with so much access to information and connectivity, some people continue to feel lost and alone while there are others that feel like they have found 'their people'. Within all of this, related or not (there are arguments for both sides this access and these advancements in technology, so too has the mental health struggles of our young people. But this is beyond the scope of this article. I am not here to explore how technology has or has not impacted mental health. Rather, I am going to explore how clinicians can utilize technology as a therapeutic aid; specifically, the use of the ever-evolving, still very uncharted world of Artificial Intelligence (AI) image creation. Using personal examples as a clinician while also drawing on theories of narrative therapy, solution focused therapy as well as phototherapy, my hope is that other clinicians will see the value in harnessing a variety of technologies in a way that can bring creative ideas into session while also helping you feel more comfortable and confident in exploring and experimenting with AI in a therapeutic environment.

I am sure many of you reading this article are familiar with the statistic that 1 and 5 Canadians experience mental illness in any given year (CAMH, Accessed April 10, 2024) and that according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, in 2020 "nearly 1 in 4 hospitalizations for children and youth aged 5 to 24 were for mental health conditions". In that same year, the Kids Help Phone reported twice as many contacts and there has been a 'steady increase in the use of mood and anxiety medication by children and youth...in the past 5 years". (Canadian Institute for Health Information, accessed April 10, 2024). Many of us also know, through personal experiences, through conversations with friends and family or even in our places of work, that COVID had a significant impact on the mental health of many people, kids, youth and adults. All this to say, that there are many people

out there struggling. Some of these people have and can access support while others, for a variety of reasons cannot. But again, this article is not about these larger, system concerns that do exist and are a reality in the work we do.

For myself, I have the privilege of having my foot in several professional roles; I am a School Social Worker, in Private Practice with a specific focus on grief and I am also a photographer and film maker using the combination of all of these skills in the creation of Legacy Films for individuals who have been diagnosed with as terminal illness. Within all these roles is the common thread of storytelling and attempts to find creative ways to draw out and draw on the stories people tell themselves and the stories they tell or want to tell others. Essentially this connects to the essence of Narrative Therapy, an approach in which we see the person as the expert, the problem is the problem not the person and through methods such as externalizing conversations, individuals can start to see themselves from a new perspective and to re-author the stories they have been telling themselves. When we can create a space in which a person sees the problem as distant and distinct from themselves, negative “truths” that have shaped pieces of their identity can start to unravel making it possible for new, alternative stories to emerge. These new stories can help a client to understand their situation from a different place and perspective (White, 2007). This is where creative approaches like AI can become a very interesting and powerful tool.

You may be familiar with the concept of ‘name it to tame it’ by Dan Siegel. It is the idea that giving our feelings a name allows us to make sense of that emotion. It is very similar to the idea of naming the problem within the narrative approach. Once a problem is named, people are often better able to recognize it, to talk about it as external to themselves and in turn to work with it differently. Part of the work I have been doing recently is taking these concepts along with ideas from Judy Weiser’s Phototherapy and bringing them into the world of AI Image creation. Below is an example of how this could work in session followed by an adapted real world example.

Goals

- To assist the client in creating an image that represents their struggle.
- To give name to the identified struggle.

Materials

- Access to an AI image generator (Canva, Mid-Journey, Adobe, Leonardo.ai, etc.)
- Prompts from the client
- Yours and the client's creativity!

Guidelines

The focus and goal of this conversation is to support the client in externalizing their identified struggle but visualizing what it looks like to them. Their words are inputted into the AI Image Generator (prompts) and together, in real time, you can see an AI generated digital image emerge. Sometimes the image that is created really fits for the client. At other times you may have to work at adapting the prompts. AI is by no means a perfect tool and there are times it misses key components the client is trying to show. This process is a variation of Weiser's Projective Process in which already created photographs are used to "elicit emotional responses" (Weiser, 1999). In the AI image creation process, we are using a client's emotional connection and meaning they have to the struggle and are giving them the opportunity to put descriptive words it. Not only do we learn from this process how they see the struggle but, they are providing more than just a name; they are creating a tangible item that they can speak to and about. Once this image has been created, there are many creative ways you can work with the client to better understand the struggle; to deconstruct it, to find possible alternative meanings, strategies, and ways to help the client work towards change.

Below is a sample of prompts used to describe worry and the subsequent image that was created:

Prompts: Big open field, the grass is green, it is dark and stormy, there are lightning bolts, heavy clouds.



As clinicians we have this incredibly powerful tool at our fingertips and a truly unique opportunity and way of working with people across all ages. For people who are more visual in how they think and see the world around them, we can try to harness this and help them communicate differently. For clients who we see value in accessing a more creative approach to the work but the act of creating seems to be a barrier, we have a new way to create with them reducing pressure or performance. And the original image that is created gives us countless possibilities for use with our clients. The next image was the starting point for how we expanded our work with the digital image.



Above, with the client, we were essentially mapping out the elements of the presenting struggle and with their guidance placing those elements at different points of on image as, in this exercise, it related to the intensity of the various elements found within the struggle. Not only does this help us as the therapist to understand the client's perspective both visually and in terms of the impact and intensity, but it can help guide next steps in the work. This, for me, links to the phototherapy belief that "people instinctively construct stories to explain to themselves why things are not proceeding as they were supposed to (Weiser, 1999). By mapping struggles in this way, it shows us the way the client has constructed the story. From here, I would use a combination of narrative and solution focused questions to explore an image further. Some possible questions I would ask (and at some point, in the work with this client may ask) might be:

- If you were to title the image, what would it be?
- What stands out to you most when you look at this image?
- Are there elements missing? If so, what is missing?
- What would you change in this photo to give the struggle less strength?
- If you were able to step into the image, what skills or qualities would you need to navigate this landscape?
- What is the story this image tells you right now?
- What is the story you want it to tell? What changes need to happen to this image for that story to emerge?
- What would feel different for you if those changes happened?
- Are there parts of this image where you find comfort?
- Are there moments you can remember when the storm was not as strong? What was different about those moments?
- How have you managed to keep the storm from getting worse?

Working with an image such as the example given here is when you as the therapist might need to move beyond AI and into other applications. For myself that means Photoshop. I do believe online applications like Canva (paid version) would allow to you do similar things such as adding words, placing them at different points on the image, etc. I know for me, there are other parts I would bring in to this that may require other programs. Below, is how the image was described if worry started to subside/was no longer trying to take control.



I hope that with the above sample images and possible questions has provided a good sense of some ways AI image creation can be creatively and effectively brought into the therapeutic space. I also hope that the way it has been presented has shown that it is an attainable method to explore and to use within anyone's practice. One part of my learning throughout this has been how fun, humorous, and forgiving clients can be during the image creation process. I have watched some pretty amusing photos emerge that do not, in any way, hit the mark of what the client had in mind. And that is okay! Just like it is okay to say to a client in session "you know what, I don't know..." it's okay to during this process to acknowledge when things just are not working because together you cannot find the right descriptive words or because the technology just has not advanced to a point in which it can translate those words into a meaningful image for the client.

There is one final aspect that I want to briefly address from my exploration and use of AI technology as a therapeutic aid and that is text-based AI programs; specifically, for me that has been ChatGPT. For those unfamiliar with this, ChatGPT is an open AI language-based platform in which a person can input certain prompts, questions, requests, etc. and answers and information are given back to you in real time. But how does this relate to therapy you ask? This is how I have used it:

I have been trained in Level I EMDR trauma processing and in the early stages of that work is the creation of a calm place/safe place with the client. I liken it to a personalized mindfulness Guided Visualization. While walking through the calm place script I take point form notes I then input into ChatGPT. I ask it to create a guided visualization script with the details provided. I also make the request there are moments where the client is prompted to take a deep breath, to pause or whatever other grounding technique feels appropriate. Once all this information has been provided, within seconds a script is created that can be given to the client but that I can also read to the client at the end of a trauma processing session. Having AI create the script is something that can be done directly with the client present or after a session. I have done it both ways. The other layer to this process that can be explored is taking the key elements of the calm place and using them to create a supplementary AI created digital image. It may not capture all the elements in the same way a written script can but, it can capture the overall theme, a beach for example, providing the client with a tangible visual to look at if/when they do not feel they can, on their own, connect with the calm place script.

There are many creative ways in which AI can be used as a therapeutic tool. This article is only scratching the surface of an ever-evolving technology. Each day there seems to be new applications and uses for AI: music creation, video creation and the list goes on. For clinicians who bring creativity into the work and are open to playing, learning and creating new possible techniques, this is an avenue to explore. And beyond the creative and practical applications of AI, the clinician has ability to apply it to various therapeutic modalities. It can be so rewarding finding new and unique ways to work with clients. I believe that over time we will see the applications of AI in therapy in a variety of ways! The

question is, will you explore, get creative and harness these technologies in your work with clients!

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