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The Healing Power of Hollywood

Cinematherapy is making its mark both in clinical psychology and in the self-help section of your local bookstore.

By Jill Glomstad

What's your favorite movie?

It's an innocuous question, but the answer can reveal a lot about you. Why do you like the movie? Who is your favorite character? What's your favorite scene?

"I've loved movies all my life," says Birgit Wolz, PhD, MFT, a marriage and family therapist from Oakland, CA, who uses movies in her practice. "When I watch [movies] they can have a powerful impact. Movies are very powerful in terms of influencing the psyche."

Wolz joined her love of movies with her therapy practice to offer cinematherapy, which uses the power films have to affect us as a tool for personal growth, exploration and healing. Wolz uses this relatively new technique with some of her counseling clients individually and holds a cinematherapy group that meets on a weekly basis.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a movie is something you can learn from on your own. "We really do watch movies to nurture ourselves and to learn and to grow," says Nancy Peske, co-author with her cousin Beverly West of the *Cinematherapy* series of books. She claims that she and West come from three generations of "rainy day matinee queens."

"Cinematherapy is taking time out of your busy day to feel your feelings, rather than run away or be embarrassed by them," Peske says. She and West have organized their books the way they would organize a video store: by mood. "We wouldn't have action adventure shelves, we would have mother-issues shelves, bad-hair day shelves, co-dependent movies. There are certain types of movies that are good for certain moods."

Their books are directed toward women, with subtitles like "The Girl's Guide to Movies for Every Mood" and "The Girl's Guide to Finding True Love One Movie at a Time." The books recommend and review movies based on moods and life issues. Chapter titles of Peske and West's original book, *Cinematherapy*, include "I Hate My Life, and I'm Moving to Bora Bora: Greener Pasture Movies" and "I'm Gonna Eat Some Worms: Martyr Syndrome Movies."

Wolz takes self-help cinematherapy a step farther with her own book, *E-Motion Picture Magic: A Movie Lover's Guide to Healing and Transformation*, due out later this year. She agrees that you don't need a therapist to use movies to make you feel better, but if you want to use movies to do some real self-examination, you need to view films with what she calls "conscious awareness" — being cognizant of your reactions, both emotional and physiological.

In the book, Wolz details 20 of what she considers the most common negative beliefs that she hears in her practice, such as "Being single is bad" or "I will never be successful." For each negative belief, she recommends several appropriate movies and what specifically you should pay attention to in each movie to help you overcome that belief.

She strongly recommends journaling in concert with your film viewing, writing down reflections on the movie, such as whether any characters exhibited behavior you would like to emulate, and if there were any parts of the film you found especially difficult to watch. The book includes these types of therapeutic guidelines and exercises, based on traditional therapeutic methods, to enhance the therapeutic benefit of viewing the movie.

In her practice, as in her book, Wolz emphasizes that movie watching isn't a substitute

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for therapy if you need it. "It doesn't help the underlying issues; that is why I use it as an adjunct to traditional therapeutic methods," says Wolz. "But it is more fun than traditional therapy."

It can also be psychologically safer, because when you watch a movie you "have an observer perspective," Wolz explains. "It is easier to talk about [the movie] than something in real life; the movie character is safer to project and then talk about. The entryway into your psyche is much easier."

Wolz compares the use of movies in therapy to the use of dreams in therapy. "Movies point to things in our unconscious," she adds. "Something may touch a person in a movie that I would have never thought of, and things will come up that we might never have talked about. Movies are the collective dreams of our times."

She uses two different methods of cinematherapy in her practice. In the evocative method, Wolz asks the client to choose one of several recommended movies in which a character is encountering an obstacle similar to that which the client is experiencing. During clinical sessions, Wolz and the client discuss what the movie has evoked about the client's own experience. This form of cinematherapy, Wolz adds, requires clients to take ownership of their problems—draw parallels between the movie and their own situations. Wolz won't use this form unless she is sure that the client is ready for it.

The prescriptive method of cinematherapy leaves a little more distance between the client and the movie, and is also more directed. Wolz will recommend the client watch a specific movie and even point out what aspects of the movie the client should attend to.

While cinematherapy is a relatively new tool for psychological exploration, using movies as relief, escape and even coping mechanism is something we often do without guidance from books or therapists. Take Peske's son, for example. Diagnosed with speech and fine-motor delays and sensory dysfunction at age two, he had a hard time adjusting to his special preschool. At home, Peske says, "all he wanted to do was eat comfort food and watch Jurassic Park." (She adds that Jurassic Park is generally not an appropriate movie for children this age.) As he watched the movie over and over, she realized it was a coping mechanism for him.

"He was working through his anxiety," she explains. "He knew what was going to happen so he had a certain amount of control over it. It is sometimes good for kids to watch movies that help them work through their anxieties, and sometimes scary movies can help kids do that. He stopped watching the movie when he started adjusting."

Her son's diagnosis also led Peske to write a different kind of book, one in conjunction with her son's early intervention therapist, Lindsey Biel, OTR/L. "I was confused about the fine motor delay; what difference did it make how a two-year-old holds a crayon?" Peske recalls. Her subsequent research led her to realize that parents needed more resources for understanding their children's sensory diagnoses. Peske and Biel's book, *Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Integration Issues*, will cover sensory issues and the typical developmental delays that accompany them. The pair has launched a Web site, www.sensorysmarts.com, to provide parents with information and resources until the book is published next spring.

Peske sees a role for movies in facilitating discussion between parents and children on issues that may trouble or affect the children. For example, she recently received a recommendation for a movie that might help her son deal with his speech delays. The movie, Polly, tells the story of a young girl with a stuttering problem who trained her parrot to speak for her. But Peske strongly recommends that parents screen any movie before allowing their child to watch it. "It is a good idea to check out the movie first," she says. "Sometimes the action can be too intense for one kid, while for another the emotions can be too intense."

Movies can even be a great tool for facilitating discussion or just building rapport with your OT clients. A question so simple as "Seen any good movies lately?" might tell you more about your client than you realize.

For more information on cinematherapy, visit Wolz's website at www.cinematherapy.com or Peske and West's site at www.cinematherapy.com.

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