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Tuesday, Feb 17, 2004

Movies

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Posted on Tue, Feb. 17, 2004

Popcorn psychology

Name some movies that affected you deeply. Easy to do, isn't it?

Katherine Spitz
Beacon Journal

A growing number of mental health experts believe that when a person is moved by a particular film, there is something about the characters, the setting or the type of challenges depicted that is self-revealing. When a film hits home, thinking about it in a structured way, with a therapist's help, can help a person cope with various issues.

That, in a popcorn box, explains the idea behind cinema therapy, or the use of films to help a person gain better self-awareness and insight into solving problems.

Using films in a mental health setting has become increasingly popular in the past five years -- some experts believe it coincides with the explosion of the home video market, which makes it easy and cheap to access films. Cinema therapy is an offshoot of bibliotherapy, or the "prescribing" of books to help patients who are also in talk therapy, a practice that began in the 1960s.

Until recently, mainstream psychology dismissed the concept of cinema therapy as pop psychology, but it is increasingly gaining credibility, said Dr. Lawrence Tyson, Ph.D., an associate professor of counselor education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Therapists across the country report using cinema therapy, a few graduate schools are introducing it into the curriculum, and academics are starting to research the topic.

Tyson, who developed an interest in cinematherapy about three years ago and does research on it, said he now expects his graduate students to develop a list of films that they can use in a therapy session.

"It's not the end all or be all, but I think it has a strong place. It's a tool and a technique that should not be overlooked," said Tyson.

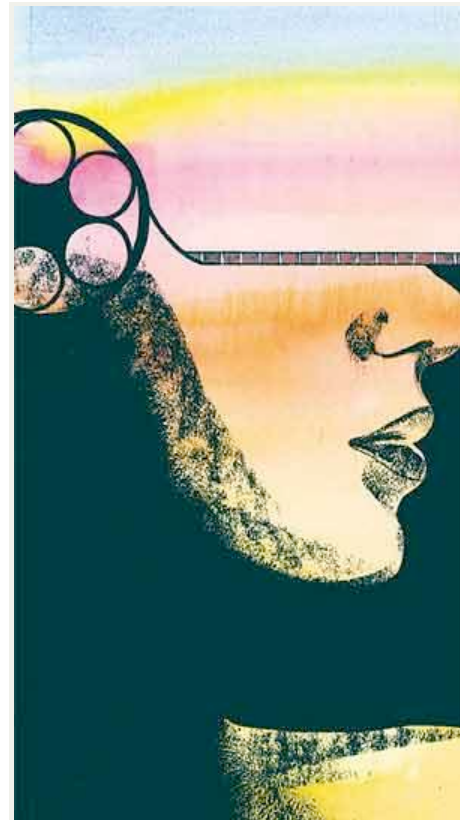
Watching a film can help a person start to talk about feelings. Often, experts say, a person will talk to a counselor about a character in a movie -- only to gradually realize that they are talking about themselves.

Many therapists say they "prescribe" films for their clients to watch between sessions. Tyson, however, said he insists on watching parts of films with his client during a counseling session.

"I like to watch body language," he said.

Sometimes, a film will portray a powerful but erroneous belief, Tyson said. During those times, a counselor can use the film as a teaching tool.

Tyson, who often works with children in therapy settings, said the *The Lion King* contains a potent



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scene, in which the evil character, Scar, tells his nephew, Simba, that Simba is to blame for the death of his father.

``Usually, when a parent dies, little people -- and some adults for that matter -- think, `If only I had done something different,' " Tyson said. ``I have to be able to intervene as a therapist."

While cinema therapy is generally used on an individual basis, Birgit Wolz, an Oakland, Calif., marriage and family therapist has created a popular cinema therapy group, in which clients of varied backgrounds meet weekly to discuss their reactions to a film.

The group doesn't review the movie for quality, but rather, looks at the issues presented, said Wolz, who also holds a Ph.D. in economics.

``Last week, we watched, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, said Wolz, in a phone interview last week. ``Codependency issues, family secrets, eating disorders."

Wolz believes that it is especially therapeutic for clients in a group to talk about something they all have seen. ``Everybody has individual responses to these movies and shares them. Then people notice other people have similar responses or different ones."

This way, she said, people realize that in any given situation, there will be a normal range of human responses. Group members also can then learn to tolerate individual differences to the same situation.

That's a skill to maintain once the film ends and real life begins again.

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