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Stressed? Go see a movie

By Christine Ratliff
Special correspondent
Posted February 27 2005

E-Motion Picture Magic: A Movie Lover's Guide to Healing and Transformation. Birgit Wolz, Ph.D. Glenbridge Publishing Ltd. \$23.95. 230 pp.

German-born psychotherapist Birgit Wolz believes you can use movies as a therapeutic program for dealing with life's difficulties.

"Have you ever found yourself watching a movie that seemed as if it were a scene from your own life?" Wolz asks in her first book, *E-Motion Picture Magic*. "Or have you become so deeply involved with a film that after the end credits rolled and the lights came up you had to struggle to make the mental transition back to everyday reality? We have become so accustomed to watching movies that it is easy to take for granted the amazing power films can exert over us. It is also easy to forget that it is we who actively endow them with that power."

Wolz's love of film began when her grandfather took her to her first movie. "I was absolutely fascinated," she writes. "For the first time, I experienced being engrossed in a bigger-than-life experience -- the colors, the sounds and the story of a big-screen motion picture."

This passion sustained Wolz throughout her youth, eventually spilling into her professional life as well. "That personal interest turned professional after I began my career as a psychotherapist and first learned about the technique of using movies as a tool for psychological healing and personal growth."

Later, Wolz faced several significant losses, including a serious, disabling illness. "All possibility of reaching the goals to which I had previously aspired seemed to evaporate. Relationships changed dramatically. My future suddenly appeared a complete blank."

She turned to movies. Certain kinds of movies proved "amazingly" helpful, even "transformative." She noticed with surprise she started crying at every sad scene. She began going to the movies alone, sitting in the last row. "In the protective darkness of this environment all the blocked-up tears started flowing in response to watching the characters' pain."

Wolz has several theories why movies have the ability to heal and

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transform us, and how they can serve as catalysts for communication when words fail. She draws on Howard Gardner's concept of "multiple intelligences," several of which -- vision, music, language -- are simultaneously engaged when we watch a picture.

Likewise, Wolz uses Carl Jung's idea of "the shadow," a term identifying parts of ourselves we learn to repress or deny, to explain the therapeutic effectiveness of film. Through the years, Wolz explains, our shadow becomes deeply buried in our subconscious mind, sometimes causing us to behave in ways we don't understand. But Jung also believed that the shadow contains a wellspring of strength, power and creative energy. He believed that if we could access our shadow, we could live more fully.

The detachment inherent in watching a movie -- we are observers only -- can coax the shadow safely into the light by allowing us to experience scary feelings. "As you become aware of a physical sensation that is triggered by emotions during a movie experience, you increase your capacity to tolerate unwanted emotions without needing to suppress, them, to numb out, act out, or release them in other unhealthy ways," Wolz writes.

Christine Ratliff is the editor of MSFocus, the national, quarterly magazine of the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation. She lives in Fort Lauderdale.

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