



Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

December 10, 2002

Section: FAMILY

Edition: ONE-THREE

Page: 1E

ANALYZE THESE

GROUP TREATMENT GOES HOLLYWOOD AS PATIENTS APPLY FILMS' LESSONS TO THEIR OWN PROBLEMS

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What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same and nothing that you did mattered?" pleads Bill Murray's character, Phil, in "Groundhog Day." Birgit **Wolz** asks the same question of her patients, but she adds an instructive spin by urging them to imagine how they would enrich their lives if they were "stuck" like Phil. It's one way the Piedmont, Calif.-based psychologist is using movies as therapy in the latest trend of the psychiatry world, cinema therapy. **Wolz** is introducing East Bay residents to the avant-garde methods with her Cinema Therapy Group.

Movies like "American Beauty," "Annie Hall" and "Dead Poets Society" provide material for the eight-member group, which meets weekly for three months to discuss how the movies relate to issues in their lives.

Participants talk about why certain movie characters leave strong impressions, good or bad, and what that might say about their values and hopes. Movies can help clarify these questions, **Wolz** says, which can then be used as an impetus for personal growth - or at least an awareness.

It may be big in California, but it's not widely practiced in Charlotte, some area therapists said. "I don't know anyone who does cinema therapy (here)," said Dr. Mark D. Worthen, a Charlotte psychologist.

Wolz, who's been a practicing psychologist for 10 years, was introduced to the therapy last year at a workshop, "Movies and Mythic Imagination: Using Films in Depth Psychology," at the Center for Symbol and Stories. It's a professional psychology training group based in California.

"I was very inspired because I always use imagination in therapy," **Wolz** says. "Movies are images that can be used in the same ways as dreams."

As in dream interpretation, cinematic images can be seen as symbols that represent deep, unconscious expectations and anxieties, **Wolz** says. But she's careful to point out that the counseling group is not appropriate for people with serious disorders.

A movie fan herself, **Wolz** is well aware how important these flickering images can be in a person's life. In fact, **Wolz's** favorite movie, "Sliding Doors," was a powerful reminder to her of the diverse directions life can take.

The 1998 film stars Gwyneth Paltrow and plays with the "what if?" question, exploring the alternative path Paltrow's character would have taken had she made a different last-minute decision.

If that film opened the door for a new future for **Wolz**, the classic baseball film "Field of Dreams" propelled her to act on it.

"`Field of Dreams' reminded me that it's really important to follow your inner guidance, as opposed to your fears. It gave me encouragement to pursue my dreams," says the German native, who

switched careers from economist to psychotherapist after recovering from a stroke.

"Sometimes we lose hope or worry how things are going to continue. A movie like that reminds us to really follow these dreams."

Some critics might argue that we do this already when we grab a rental copy of "Terms of Endearment" or "Erin Brockovich."

True, says **Wolz**, but cinema therapy requires the movie viewer to take a more active role and consciously observe how the "reel" life reflects the "real" life.

Take "Groundhog Day," again. On the surface, the 1993 film is an absurdist romp with Murray's sarcastic character, Phil, trapped in the same endless day.

Phil is initially bitter and negative. As one token parochial character puts it, referring to his half-finished glass of beer, "I bet you he is a 'the glass is half-empty' kind of guy. Am I right?"

"First he was his old self, hitting the wall, and then something shifted and he tried to use it in a way that benefits him," **Wolz** says. "Then finally, he surrenders and tries to make the best of it and discovers his true self."

When **Wolz** asked members what they would do to enrich their lives if they were "stuck" like Phil, one participant used it as way to make a change in her repetitive daily schedule.

Wolz admits that not everyone is ready for "action" but, at the very least, the therapy gets people thinking and talking.

"I've used movies in individual settings, but for me the inspiration came when I led groups," **Wolz** says. "When we discover things about ourselves with witnesses, it is very powerful. People inspire each other in the group. It can deepen the experience."

But with more witnesses come more tastes, and, as they say, everyone's a critic. So what happens when someone simply dislikes a particular film?

"That's always a case," says **Wolz**. "One person didn't like 'Forrest Gump.' It's more about being moved. That can also be in a negative way."

Still, **Wolz** says she tries to steer the conversation away from critiques. At the first session she establishes guidelines that include a gentle reminder about respecting others' opinions.

But for those who don't work well with others, **Wolz** says, you can use similar methods from your own couch.

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Observer staff writer Mike Stobbe contributed to this article.

Setting

The Scene

Therapist Birgit **Wolz** has these suggestions for using cinema therapy at home.

PREPARE YOUR VIEWING AREA. Clear things away and make sure you're comfortable.

TO HELP YOU FOCUS ON THE PRESENT, observe your body and your breathing. Without forcing it, notice any areas of tension and try to release them through your breath.

TRY TO TURN OFF YOUR INNER CRITIC. Warning: This may a tough one for some. If you're struggling, don't fight it; just observe the voice.

ONCE YOU FEEL CALM AND CENTERED, start watching the film. Notice how the movie's images, ideas, conversations and characters affect your breathing. Remember, try to do this without the inner critic.

ONCE THE FILM IS FINISHED, reflect on it and ask yourself some questions. Did your breathing change at certain scenes? What part of the movie moved you? Did you identify with any of the characters? Was there any part of the film that was particularly hard to watch? Write down your answers.

FOR FURTHER POINTERS, **Wolz** found these books helpful: "Reel Power: Spiritual Growth Through Film," by Marsha Sinetar, and "Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning," by John W. Hesley and Jan G. Hesley. For a more playful read, try Nancy Peske and Beverly West's "Advanced Cinematherapy: The Girl's Guide to Finding Happiness One Movie at a Time."

It's no mystery; we self-medicate with movies to fit our mood. But by applying the techniques of cinema therapy, psychologist Birgit **Wolz** says we can gain much more. And it's a lot cheaper than going to a therapist. Here are a few quick ways to use movies as a catharsis.

Laughter is good medicine

Modern research confirms what we already know: Laughing makes us feel better. If you're feeling

depressed or anxious, choosing a comedy can be an emotional release.

Studies suggest that laughing has physical benefits, as well, like boosting the immune system and decreasing stress hormones. And if you're happy and you know it, **Wolz** says movies can enhance that feeling.

Some sunny films include "Groundhog Day," "Annie Hall," "Babe," "The Brothers McMullen," "Fried Green Tomatoes," "A Fish Called Wanda" and "Four Weddings and a Funeral."Cry me a river

Sometimes the prescription calls for a "good cry." Watching a movie that make us weep, **Wolz** says, has a way of releasing repressed emotion, whether it's stress or sadness.

Again, recent science has a physiological explanation. Researchers found that when people cry they release two important neurotransmitters: leucine-enkephaline - one of the brain's natural pain-relieving "opiates" - and prolactin, which is released by the pituitary gland at the first sign of stress. Some good "bawlers" include "An Affair To Remember," "Miracle on 34th Street," "The Color Purple," "Grand Canyon," "Terms of Endearment" and "Steel Magnolias."Looking for hope
If you're feeling a little helpless or discouraged, don't take it out on your local drive-through cashier. Live vicariously through cinematic heroes who have fought the odds, or use their example to gain the courage to change your own life.

Again, **Wolz** says, different people will identify with different characters, so find one that fits you.

Some inspiring movies: "Forrest Gump," "Chariots of Fire," "Do the Right Thing," "Field of Dreams," "Gandhi," "The Shawshank Redemption" and "Erin Brockovich."Let's talk
Eh? Whad'ya say? Sometimes we think our mates or friends should be mind readers. Or, we figure we're talking about a concept unfamiliar to them. Or, in many cases, our egos block us from hearing what they say. In any case, **Wolz** says, many times the message breaks down most often with the ones we love.

She suggests watching these movies as a couple, to jump-start a conversation: "About Last Night," "The Accidental Tourist," "The Brothers McMullen," "The Doctor," "He Said, She Said," "Out of Africa" and "When a Man Loves a Woman."

Illustration:Photo

SUSAN POLLARD - KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE PHOTO. Psychotherapist Birgit **Wolz** uses movies to help people through life's changes in her cinema therapy group in Oakland, Calif. Clients watch movies and then meet as a group to discuss their feelings and reactions to the films.