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**MOVIES**

## Need some therapy? See a film

### A good cry releases neurotransmitters

December 3, 2002

**BY CASSANDRA BRAUN**

KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

It's no mystery; we self-medicate with movies to fit our mood. But by applying the techniques of cinema therapy, California 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.

### A laughing matter

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 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 are "Groundhog Day," "Annie Hall," "Babe," "The Brothers McMullen," "Fried Green Tomatoes," "A Fish Called Wanda," and "Four Weddings and a Funeral."

**VIEWING TIPS**

Here are some suggestions for using cinema therapy at home:

- Prepare your viewing area. Clear things away and make sure you're comfortable.
- To help you focus, observe your body and your breathing. Without forcing it, notice areas of tension and try to release them through your breath.
- Try to turn off your inner critic. Warning: This may a tough one. 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

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## Crying rivers

Sometimes the prescription calls for a good cry. Watching a movie that makes 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 pain-relieving opiates -- and prolactin, released by the pituitary gland during stress.

Some good bawlers are "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 life.

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

Some inspiring movies: "Forrest Gump," "Chariots of Fire," "Do the Right Thing," "Field of Dreams," "Gandhi," "The Shawshank Redemption" and "Erin Brockovich."

## Half-empty thinking

Sometimes it's difficult to see the silver lining even if you're trapped in a silver-plated mine, as is the case of Bill Murray's character in "Groundhog Day." Or maybe you feel like Groucho Marx, who "would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member."

Wolz suggests watching films where characters

finished, ask yourself some questions. Did your breathing change during 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, these books may be helpful: "Reel Power: Spiritual Growth Through Film," by Marsha Sinetar, (Ligouri Publications, \$38) and "Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning," (Wiley & Sons, \$39.95) 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." (Dell, \$12.55).

overcome personal doubt and external obstacles to accomplish some goal.

Movies include: "Dead Poets Society," "My Left Foot," "Erin Brockovich," "Philadelphia" and "Welcome to the Dollhouse."

### **Let's talk**

Eh? What did you 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 our egos block us from hearing what they say. In any case, Wolz says, many times the message breaks down 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."

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