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“Take a Spielberg and call me in the morning.”

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Sounds absurd, but watching a film may not be for entertainment alone. It can be a type of therapy that enables the viewer to explore and experience deeper layers of one's being by identifying with film character to develop mental strength and gain lost, forgotten or undeveloped inner resources.

Exposing a patient to a film in which the character suffers similar symptoms or situations may catalyze healing by allowing identification with the character and thus move toward resolving problems, said Allan Cooperstein, Ph.D., a clinical and forensic psychologist.

“Cinematherapy allows a person to gain awareness of deeper layers of themselves, to help them move toward a new perspective in their behavior as well as healing and integration of the total self. It's possible for the person to connect with the film's character to help resolve problems and to broaden the scope of meanings,” Cooperstein said.

Of the film-watching process, Cooperstein said, “Subconscious changes are intensified via the viewer's attention, physiology and cognitive processes and shaped by personal attitudes, goals and system of beliefs producing modifications in ordinary temporal and spatial orientation, meanings and emotional responsiveness.”

Told that the approach may seem odd or even crazy to recommend that a patient watch a movie, especially when the patient probably expected something totally different, Cooperstein remarked, “I've never been called crazy. But,” he insisted, “Cinematherapy can be an integral part of a beneficial formula for treatment.”

Before Cooperstein recommends watching a film, he performs structured and unstructured diagnostic interviews, psychology testing and treatment planning. Cinematherapy may be a part of treatment plan. Determining what picture to recommend arises during the course of regular therapy sessions.

Cooperstein said a film could be loosely considered a form of “recreational and treatment Rorschach” or a form of modern-day shamanism, in which a weave of cinematic mythology uses intellect, emotions and beliefs to enable viewers to find ways to their core being through the film's mental-emotional bridges.

Cinematherapy can be used for such things as developing coping skills for depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For example, Sol Nazerman, the lead character in the film *The Pawnbroker*, lost his family in a death camp and his character is without the redeeming qualities of empathy,

sympathy and hope – attributes that make people human. The film is a perfect example of a man with unresolved PTSD and hidden pain who, unlike Viktor Frankl (see *Man's Search for Meaning*) is trapped in horror of his past, Cooperstein explained.

A patient suffering similar symptoms might be able to identify with the film's character, empathize with him and, in watching, realize that he is undergoing similar symptoms never before made conscious or even denied.

Cooperstein, presently writing an article on *A Christmas Carol*, said Charles Dickens' 19th century offering provides an extraordinary example of how Cinematherapy works.

Taken on a tour through time by "spirits," Ebenezer Scrooge, a Victorian anti-hero, becomes an observer capable of seeing his past shortcomings and missed opportunities. Although taking place in fantasy, reverie or altered consciousness, it demonstrates Scrooge's reclamation through his experiential "mind movie" and leads to healing and a richer, happier life.

The theme of conversion is prevalent among Dickens' works, but nowhere is this more desired, welcome, beneficial and joyous than in this tale of a misbegotten life in which Scrooge's dream has the suggestion of a form of hypnotic psychotherapy, offered Cooperstein.

One of the benefits of Cinematherapy is to have a person watch a film that expresses the type of mental distress they are experiencing. "By watching a film that has something to do with you, subject-object barriers between you and the story begin to break down," Cooperstein suggests.

Another example is a person who is extremely depressed. A psychologist would ask the person to watch a film in which the character is suffering from the same illness and had success overcoming it. The character's road towards progress, while not necessarily the same as the patient's, can offer exemplars that may generate others better suited to the patient's life.

"The patient could model himself after some of the character's successes modify his own behavior but keep his own identity, allowing him to become the same individual who would be more effective ... while developing inner strength and coping skills."

It's very important, Cooperstein said, to bring back into therapy what a person has discovered or learned from watching the film. Cooperstein likens the process to a hypnotic state in some susceptible patients and has even coupled the process to biofeedback to enhance the effect.

During therapy, Cooperstein attempts to have the person model or try to implement some of the successes the character has demonstrated in the film.

Cinematherapy also can be used for patients who are mentally challenged (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*), or chronically ill (*Whose Life Is It Anyway?* and *Bigger Than Life*), or narcissistic (*Schindler's List*) or have poor

self-esteem (*The Color Purple*). It provides situations and role models to which they can relate, human constructs of which they may have not conceived before.

While somewhat outdated, *Rebel Without A Cause* still brings the same message of a troubled teen with ineffectual parents, as it did when James Dean burst into the public's eye portraying an adolescent plagued by the troubles of youth and how he goes about resolving those problems. The film could be used today for a youth suffering similar problems.

But, Cooperstein warned, although watching a film might help identify problems and potential solutions, they must be tailored to the individual's dynamics and do not, however, tell the person fully how to resolve their personal problems or situations.

"That's where nothing less than a comprehensive therapeutic approach comes into play."