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## Therapist uses movies to help people learn to cope

By Barry Caine - STAFF WRITER

Birgit Wolz has tossed out the old "take two pills and call me in the morning" and come up with a new prescription: Watch a movie, then see how you feel the next day.

Not that the psychotherapist advocates moviegoing as a cure for long-standing psychological problems.

On the contrary, she views films as a way to ease the journey to inner peace, spark an emotional release, and, perhaps, give you the gumption to stop wallowing and do something constructive.

"I recommend people go to the movies to be inspired," the psychotherapist says. "And if they view movies in a more conscious way than just entertainment, they can learn a lot about themselves."

The process works a lot like learning from dreams, she says. "Similar mechanisms are at work." Both use imagery as metaphors for understanding emotional issues, stimulating new ways of thinking and, ideally, expanding imagination and creativity.

"Your choice of movie and the way you watch it can have therapeutic effects," Wolz says from her office in Oakland.

Film's such as "Erin Brockovich" and "The Shawshank Redemption" can provide lessons in courage and endurance. "byline-making you laugh and cry, "Sleepless in Seattle" can temporarily clear out the emotional quagmire and let you look at what's fazing you with a new perspective.

A marriage and family therapist with a master's degree in counseling

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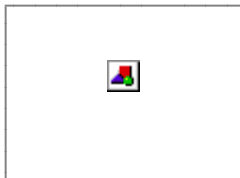
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psychology, Wolz applies her ideas in what her brochure advertises as a "Cinema Therapy Group: for personal and spiritual growth - using movies to help yourself through life's changes."

Participants meet once a week, at \$35 a session, to discuss a film assigned by Wolz, and to examine movies, characters and scenes that have moved them throughout the years. Among other things, they learn to use characters as models for overcoming obstacles, dealing with communication snafus and working through negative beliefs.

Combined with a variety of exercises, participants learn to find ways "to gain hope and encouragement, to re-access strength," says the 48-year-old MDULMDNM, who has also devised a short-hand version of her program that people can do at home.

The modeling, by characters who discover unexpected strength in the worst kinds of crises, can help viewers overcome their own crises, Wolz explains. "And some people forget that ... they have prevailed over these kinds of challenges in the past. The movies help remind them of this and that they have strength."

Wolz needed reminders about 14 years ago, when, while visiting her native Germany, she suffered a near-fatal stroke. Using imagery and other techniques, some of which she now employs in her practice, Wolz recovered. Only her left arm remains partially paralyzed.

The experience left her feeling more compassion for others. "I had more patience, more understanding," she says, her words carrying a German accent. "By overcoming all this, I believe people have the capacity to overcome their obstacles. So I don't buy into their perceived weakness as much."

After the stroke, she decided to change careers. She eschewed her Ph.D. in economics in favor of an marriage and family therapist license.

Her areas of expertise include depression, anxiety, grieving and loss, terminal illness and life changes. A big movie fan, Wolz came up with the idea for her cinematherapy group after attending a workshop that explored using films and myths in psychology.

"I became fascinated with the idea of using metaphors from movies to understand emotional issues, explore new options and evoke personal qualities that we might desire, especially in phases of life transition," she says.

Her personal favorite is "Sliding Doors." The story shows what might have happened if the lead character, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, had made a different split-second decision from the one she chose.

"It helps me more to accept the changes in life and to trust that things will move forward," Wolz says. "It's more about acceptance and tolerance and patience for the changes in life. I find that premise about the split-second of possibilities going in different directions very inspirational. Every moment is very important. I appreciate the reminder, and that there is a potential for a whole different future in every moment."

For more information call (510) 336-0915 or visit Wolz on the Web at [www.bwolz.com](http://www.bwolz.com)

You can e-mail Barry Caine at [bcaine@angnewspapers.com](mailto:bcaine@angnewspapers.com) or call (925) 416-4806.

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