



Cinema Therapy – Unique Psychotherapy Technique

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**Therapists are using
popular movies to help
clients achieve
breakthroughs. Can cinema
therapy be for 'reel'?**

Terry had a problem with rage. When she got angry, she tended to go way too far. It had cost her several longstanding friendships and had alienated co-workers. Now her marriage teetered on the brink of divorce. Regular therapy sessions had helped, but not enough. The fights with her husband Greg were getting worse. Then her therapist suggested cinema therapy – using a popular movie as a cathartic remedy.

After her therapist coached her on using a special conscious awareness approach to movie-viewing, Terry sat down one evening with Greg to watch **Changing Lanes**, a film about two revenge-obsessed men that deftly illustrates the damage that occurs when anger gets out of hand. During one of the first big scenes, at the climax of a nasty argument between the two protagonists, she and Greg started to get into a nasty fight themselves, each taking sides with one of the characters. The situation could have ended badly.

But before things got out of hand, Terry remembered her therapist's tips on using the movie to gain distance and perspective on her own situation. She had just witnessed on screen the very behaviour pattern she was now experiencing in real life. That momentary realization helped her take a step back. Instead of escalating their fight, Terry turned off the DVD and they talked about the process of their argument instead of its content. It also helped that the scene in the movie

gave them a common reference point, a common language. Terry told Greg how she was always making the same mistake the characters were making. Suddenly her rage of a moment ago seemed absurd. For Greg, hearing Terry talk so openly about her struggle with her anger was a revelation; it gave him hope that their marriage might be salvaged. The evening turned into a minor break-through. With continued therapy, Terry gradually learned to control her rage.

"That first session with Terry, immediately following this experience, was pivotal," says Birgit Wolz PhD, Terry's therapist. "Being well prepared, having the conscious awareness mindset going, and then watching a prescribed movie was an excellent tool for her. She really got it on a deep level." After a few more sessions, Terry had pretty much solved her problem with rage, and they moved on to other issues, Wolz says.

Cinema Therapy is Becoming more Widely Accepted

The technique Terry and Wolz used is called cinema therapy. And though not all cinema therapy scenarios have such happy endings, its use is spreading. There are now six locations in the US teaching cinema therapy courses or workshops. At least ten books about cinema therapy are now in print or recently went out of print. And a growing number of cinema therapy websites, online discussion

groups and at least one trade journal litter the internet.

The term is also making its way into popular culture. Women's Entertainment Channel airs a weekly movie show called 'Cinematherapy'. There's a popular series of humorous 'cinematherapy' books by Beverly West and Nancy Peske that have sold 270,000 copies. And hardly a month goes by without an article on the topic appearing in some newspaper. Even Hollywood is getting into the act. Last fall, during the hubbub surrounding the release of the bad-girl morality flick *Thirteen*, director Catherine Hardwicke frequently used the term cinema therapy to describe her hopes that the controversial film might spur parent-child communication.

Movies as Models

The basic idea behind cinema therapy is simple: characters in stories struggle with the same issues as we do. By watching their successes and failures, we can learn new approaches to solving our problems – a process psychologists call modelling. Cinema therapy copies a practice called bibliotherapy that has been in use since the 1930s. In bibliotherapy, therapists prescribe books for modelling purposes.

Using movies for the same purpose is a no-brainer. But where books communicate mainly through one text-based narrative channel, movies have the advantage of using pictures, sound effects and music, too. The synergistic combination of all four

channels gives cinema greater power over our emotions than books, which makes them ideal for therapeutic modelling. "The music channel and sound effects are much more directly connected to our emotional centre," Wolz says. "And the editing, the cuts, the pacing-all – that vastly increases film's emotional impact. Some people have a better, more visual imagination – their ability to see the scenes described in books. But most people don't. Cinema's greater power to affect the emotions makes it a better tool for therapeutic work."

Movies as Evocative and Cathartic Tools

Most therapists who use movies focus almost exclusively on using them for modelling. But a few therapists also use movies in other ways: for instance, to evoke hidden aspects of their client's emotional world. This approach is very similar to the way therapists have traditionally used dreams to plumb the depths of the psyche. Movies are also naturally cathartic. By provoking tears and laughter, they help cleanse the body of toxic chemicals brought on by stress and pain, while giving us an opportunity to shift our mood and providing us a needed break from depression. They can reduce anxiety, fear, bottled up anger. Many people find that it's safer to release deeply blocked emotions whilst experiencing 'reel life' than it is in their real life.

Cinema Self-Help

Though much of cinema therapy currently involves working with a professional therapist, a self-help form of the technique is beginning to emerge. Wolz says the key to gaining the most from self-administered cinema therapy is preparation before the movie and follow-up work after. She warns against expecting healing results simply by cranking up the DVD player. "It's essential to use a set of guidelines," she says. "Let's say you play tennis, but you never bothered to get any formal coaching. Most people are going to have a tougher time succeeding. But even without taking classes or having a coach, those who at least read a tennis instruction book or watch a video will increase their odds. It's no different with cinema therapy."

Several popular books and websites contain guidelines. Most are simply lists of film titles sorted into categories of psychological problems they model or illustrate. Films like **Ordinary People** and **Terms of Endearment** are typical of titles listed under headings like 'Grief and Bereavement'. **Days of Wine and Roses** and **Leaving Las Vegas** are often suggested for dealing with alcoholism.

A few websites offer more detailed guidelines on how to select films, techniques for watching films, and suggestions on how to process the emotional insights you discover in them.

Guidelines

Descriptions of how to properly prepare for your cinema therapy session sound a lot like a short course in meditation. You are urged to sit comfortably, tune into your body and breath, identify where you might be holding tension and then let it go. A particularly effective way to let go of tension is to 'breathe into it', creating in your mind the image of your breath blowing through the tense area in your body. The idea here is that by tuning into your body, you slow your mind, moving from thoughts and feelings about the past and future into the present moment. Whenever you notice judgmental thoughts, you are to let them go and return to the present moment.

Having achieved a calm, relaxed, centred state of mind, pick up your remote and click to start the movie. While watching the film, maintain a 'compassionate witness' state of mind. Keep an eye out especially for ways in which the movie's images, ideas, conversations and characters affect your physical sensations, especially the breath. Watch those responses with interested, curious detachment. Stay present and alert.

If you experience uncomfortable emotions, try to notice any physical sensations associated with them, such as a quickening of the pulse or a knot in the stomach. Later, these indicators can be a helpful key to unlocking a deeper understanding of your issues. Some exceptions

might be if a particular scene reminds you of a traumatic personal experience or if your emotions verge on becoming overwhelming. In that case, be gentle with yourself, possibly turn off the movie or walk out of the theatre. After the movie, reflect on your experience. Write down your answers to the following questions:

- Do you remember your feelings and sensations, or whether your breathing changed throughout the movie? In all likelihood, what affects you in the film is similar to whatever influences you in your daily life.
- Notice what you liked and what you did not like or even hated about the movie. Which characters or actions seemed especially attractive or unattractive to you?
- Did you identify with one or several characters?
- Were there one or several characters in the movie that modelled behaviour that you would like to emulate? Did they develop certain strengths or other capacities that you would like to develop as well?
- Notice whether any aspect of the film was especially hard to watch. Could this be related to something that you might have repressed?
- Did you experience something that connected or re-connected you with certain values, virtues, capacities, inner wisdom or your higher self as you watched the film or immediately after?
- Did anything in this movie touch you? The fact that a character or a scene moved you might indicate that your subconscious

mind is revealing information that might guide you toward healing and wholeness. What might this guiding 'message' be?

As you examine your reaction to the film, try to avoid focusing on the artistic merits of the film or even the story. Usually when people discuss films it's with respect to their value as entertainment and the focus is on the filmmaker, the story or the actors. In cinema therapy, it is you, the film viewer, who should remain at the centre of attention.

Resources

www.cinematherapy.com;
www.ed.uab.edu/cinematherapy;
www.members.tripod.com/cinematherapy;
www.koti.mbnet.fi/plehto/movie.html;
www.movietx.yourmd.com.