



Erie psychiatrist uses movie therapy

Monday, June 23, 2003

By Dan Nephin, The Associated Press

ERIE -- When psychiatrist Fuat Ulus meets with patients, there's a chance Clint Eastwood will be there, too.

Not as a patient, but as a therapist of sorts.

For instance, Ulus has used Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" character to help patients address chronic anxiety.

After all, there probably aren't many more anxious situations than when Dirty Harry is confronted with a thug holding a gun to a human shield and threatening to shoot.

Of course, Ulus doesn't advise patients to deal with their anxiety by brandishing a .44-caliber Magnum and declaring, "Go ahead, make my day." But watching the scene can spark discussion on coping with anxiety.

He's also used "The Deer Hunter" to help Vietnam War veterans open up about post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ulus is among a handful of therapists who find movies or clips from movies helpful in treating patients.

"Patients are more receptive to discussing issues that are somewhat removed from them, played out by characters on a screen, rather than directly confronting those issues from their own lives," said Ulus, who has been using movie therapy for several years.

He's recently written "Movie Therapy, Moving Therapy!" -- a guidebook for therapists interested in using movies -- and is



Psychiatrist Fuat Ulus shows a videotape of "The Turning Point" during a training session for other mental health professionals in Erie. Click photo for larger image. (Keith Srakocic, Associated Press)

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developing a weekly movie therapy program in the Erie area that would be open to the public.

"Therapists have used movies for a long time, but in an informal way," said Birgit Wolz, an Oakland, Calif., therapist who's been using movies in group therapy sessions for nearly a decade.

In movie therapy, therapists don't simply tell depressed patients to rent, say, "It's a Wonderful Life."

"A good comedy is always nice when I don't feel good, but it's not going to have much therapeutic value," Ulus said.

The assumption that movies can be prescribed to treat a problem can backfire, Wolz said.

"If you're renting a happy movie when you're sad, it can have the opposite effect" and make a sad person more depressed, she said.



A group of mental health professionals are reflected in the television as they listen to psychiatrist Fuat Ulus during a training session in Erie. Click photo for larger image. (Keith Srakocic, Associated Press)

Instead, therapists might use a movie or segment that illustrates a situation or condition that a patient is experiencing -- whether the patient realizes it or not. The patient might find it easier to confront his own issue after seeing how someone in a movie handles a similar situation.

"The movies really go to the deeper layers of the consciousness," Wolz said. "The movies are a catalyst for the experiences people go through."

"You can talk about it sometimes easier if it's happening to someone else," said Dallas-Fort Worth area therapist John W. Hesley, who along with his wife, Jan G. Hesley, wrote the 1998 book, "Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning: Using Popular Movies in Psychotherapy."

While Ulus and Wolz say movie therapy is gaining in popularity, no one has concrete numbers on its use. A couple dozen people participate in Ulus' Internet mailing list on movie therapy.

Pam Willenz, a spokeswoman with the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C., said the association doesn't take positions on treatment types, but recognizes film's use in therapy. The association also doesn't track practitioners.

Therapists stress that movie therapy isn't a treatment in itself. Rather, they say, it's a tool that can be used with other treatments in individual and group settings.

"I've seen the outcome of this work, which is very, very serious and very helpful to people," said Bernie Wooder, a London psychotherapist who's been using movies for about seven years.

He's had patients who might have otherwise taken years to open up be able to confront an issue after seeing it onscreen.

Movies "are metaphors that have emotional truths for people," Wooder said.

The melding of movies and therapy was natural for Ulus, 60, a self-described movie buff who estimates he's seen thousands of films. He immigrated to America in 1971 from Turkey, where he said his mother would take him to see several movies a week when he was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and they helped him learn American culture.

In a given month, he might see 50 or 60 movies, some theater releases and others movies he's already seen but from which he hopes to glean a lesson.

While movie therapy may not be widely known, its roots can be traced to bibliotherapy, which uses books in much the same way and was developed in the early part of the 1900s.

"I think movie therapy is a little more colorful and fascinating than bibliotherapy," said Ulus.

There's another benefit, too.

"It's a whole lot easier to have a patient watch a movie than to read a book," said John Hesley.

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