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## FILM THERAPY

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Grab your remote control, a bag of microwave popcorn and prepare to come face to face with your problems onscreen.

Hollywood has long been acknowledged as the last place to escape when the world is falling to pieces. But now, Bill Murray, Jack Nicholson and the Wizard of Oz are helping redefine the role of the couch as an increasing number of therapists prescribe films to help patients explore the murky depths of their tortured psyches from the safety and comfort of their own sofas.

Insecure and lacking self-confidence? Try watching struggling single mother ``Erin Brokovich'' turn into an empowered toxics avenger. Struggling with your difficult teen-ager? Rent ``Boyz 'N the Hood,'' and take note of Laurence Fishburn as a strong role model in a difficult situation. Tormented by loss and wondering why you were spared and a loved one was not? A dose of ``Bounce'' might help. Feeling stuck in old patterns? Slip ``Groundhog Day'' into the DVD player and watch curmudgeonly TV weatherman Bill Murray eventually change his attitude and break free of the everlasting doom of reliving the same lousy assignment.

While a few therapists have actually gone so far as to package their practices around ``film **therapy**,'' movies more commonly are simply becoming one more acceptable tool to help some patients reach insights into their own self-defeating behaviors and bad relationships.

A raft of books, from ``Rent Two Movies and Let's Talk in the Morning,'' by Texas psychologist John W. Hensley and ``Movie **Therapy**, Moving **Therapy**,'' by Dr. F. Ulus, to the self-help "Cinematherapy: The Girls' Guide to Movies for Every Mood" by Nancy Peske and Beverly West, are making people look at movies as more than light entertainment or something to do on a date.

Therapists say people who have trouble acknowledging their own demons may more easily recognize them in a character on screen.

``It's a way of opening up topic areas. It allows a person to talk about something that might be touchy for them to talk about otherwise,'' said Corte Madera psychiatrist Dr. Woodrow Donovan.

``It's a way of getting to sensitive material by doing it one step away."''

A way to ease into topics

Nancy Feehan, a marriage and family therapist in Santa Rosa, said sometimes she's found it easier to initiate discussions about delicate topics by invoking a movie character rather than directly confronting the client.

``For those people who aren't used to tuning in to their own thoughts or feelings,'' she said, ``the movies accelerate that process, or at least open the door for it."''

Film **therapy** is a natural extension of bibliotherapy, the use of reading to facilitate healing, popularized by William and Karl Menninger at the Menninger Clinic in the 1930s. But in an accelerated age of video entertainment, watching a film is a shortcut to the same insights.

``In our culture,'' said Feehan, ``it would be easier to watch five movies on adolescence than it would be send somebody home to read 'Catcher in the Rye.' It's not that I prefer movies over books. But movies are more likely going to be what people are doing anyway. The best thing I can do is use what will work for the client."''

The use of film in **therapy** has grown to such a degree that the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute now issues its annual ``Shrinkies,'' a top-10 list of psychological films of the year. Workshops and seminars on the topic are cropping up at conferences and are an accepted part of professional development.

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Since 1999, counseling professionals have flocked to workshops run by Film TX, a continuing-education seminar provider in Novato. Nurses, psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers earn credits exploring topics of sex and intimacy, anger and grief or professional ethics by watching film clips.

Gil Mansergh, a Sebastopol-based film buff with graduate level training in developmental psychology, parlays his expertise in both areas to lead workshops for Film TX.

Movies as modern myths

Movies, he said, are myths for the modern age.

“You used to hear about Greek myths and Norse myths and Chinese myths, but it's not part of the educational curriculum today,” said Mansergh, who reviews movies for small newspapers in Sonoma County and on radio station KSRH.

“We don't have that universal story. Movies are providing that.”

Film TX founder Patti Nolan, a licensed clinical social worker and practicing psychotherapist, said films are now so ubiquitous in our culture that they provide a common language between counselors and clients. Clients frequently bring up movies themselves in counseling sessions, although therapists are also just as apt to prescribe a movie as homework.

Nolan recalled one set of clients whose son was diagnosed with manic depression, a condition that leads to wild mood swings from deep depression to euphoria.

“I suggested they take a look at ‘Mr. Jones’ with Richard Gere (who plays a manic depressive). It allowed them to see what it's like to be a patient and to see the issue from that one angle. In the film, Richard Gere talks about why he doesn't always take his medication ... to feel the exhilaration and let his creativity really take off. And yet it caused severe problems,” Nolan said.

Nolan has also used the film “As Good as it Gets,” in which Jack Nicholson plays a nasty man controlled by his compulsions -- who won't step on cracks and wipes the silverware before eating, to give patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder a sense of how their behavior might be affecting the people around them.

Use with caution

Sonoma County therapist Doris Sami, who also has used film in **therapy**, has learned to be cautious about which films she chooses to show to which clients.

A specialist in anxiety-related disorders, she tried “As Good as it Gets” with some of her OCD clients. But she found it backfired in some cases, with clients protesting strongly that Nicholson's portrayal was unrealistic.

Other clients, she said, were offended by the comedy “What About Bob?,” in which Bill Murray plays a therapist's nightmare patient, so unable to detach from his therapist that he follows him on vacation.

“The ones who were not able to laugh about their illness yet found it objectionable,” said Sami, who was hoping they would see “that normalcy is a strange concept.”

“All of us have a little craziness in us. Anxiety is not something we can completely eliminate, but we can learn to live with it.”

Some films, like “Groundhog Day,” have become almost standard in the film **therapy** library.

“Yes we can go along with the routine of the days and weeks and years,” said Nolan, “or we can actually pay attention and create a shift that started from us to do something different.”

“Ordinary People,” in which a teen-age boy grappling with guilt and loss attempts suicide after his brother's death, holds up as an effective look at families dealing with loss.

Nolan said “The Wizard of Oz” affected her deeply as a child. She became attached to the Tin Man, who came to represent her alcoholic father.

“He didn't think he had a heart or a way to express his love. I've always been sort of fond of men like the Tin Man, trying to get in touch with their heart,” Nolan said. “As a little girl, that affected me in a hopeful way.”

Birgit Wolz, a marriage and family therapist in Oakland, facilitates group **cinema therapy**, assigning members to watch movies like “I

through poetry.

A healthy release

Some therapists point out that films can also simply provide a healthy emotional release. Wolz points to medical research that shows laughing can boost the immune system and decrease levels of stress hormones, while crying releases the neurotransmitters leucine-enkephaline, which relieves pain, and prolactin, released during stress.

So go ahead and practice some self-help **therapy**. Grab a box of Kleenex, turn on ``Terms of Endearment" and a have a good cry.

It could be good for you. DRAWING: by Loren Dopperberg / The Press Democrat:

**Infobox:** WATCH TWO MOVIES AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

FINDING **THERAPY** IN THE MOVIES

ETHICS, ENJOYMENT AND PSYCHOTHERAPY STEREOTYPES IN MOVIES

``A Beautiful Mind" (PG-13, 2002)

Director: Ron Howard

Cast: Russell Crowe, Jennifer Connelly.

``Good Will Hunting" (R, 1997)

Director: Gus Van Sant

Cast: Robin Williams, Matt Damon, Minnie Driver

``Lantana" (R, 2001)

Director: Ray Lawrence

Starring: Anthony Lapaglia, Barbara Hershey, Geoffrey Rush, Kerry Armstrong

``Ordinary People" (R, 1980)

Director: Robert Redford

Cast: Donald Sutherland, Mary Tyler Moore, Judd Hirsch.

``What About Bob?" (PG, 1997)

Director: Frank Oz

Cast: Bill Murray, Richard Dryfuss, Julie Hagerty

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HUMOR, JOY AND LAUGHTER

``Airplane" (PG-13, 1980)

Writers/Directors: Jim Abrams, David, Jerry Zucker

Cast: Julie Hagerty, Leslie Nielsen, Peter Graves

``Being John Malkovich" (R, 1999)

Director: Spike Jonze

Cast: John Cusack, Catherine Keener, Cameron Diaz, Orson Bean, John Malkovich

``Groundhog Day" (PG, 1993)

Director: Harold Ramis

Cast: Bill Murray, Andie McDowell, Chris Elliott

``Shrek" (PG, 2001)

Directors: Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson

Voices: Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy

``Smoke Signals" (PG-13, 1997)

Director: Chris Eyre

Cast: Adam Beach, Evan Adams, Irene Beard, Gary Farmer

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PARENTING TEENS

``Breaking Away" (PG, 1979)

Director: Peter Yates

Cast: Dennis Christopher, Dennis Quaid, Barbara Barrie, Daniel Stern, Paul Dooley, Jackie Earle Haley

``Boyz 'N the Hood" (R, 1991)

Director: John Singleton

Cast: Cuba Gooding, Jr., Morris Chestnut, Ice Cube

``Circle of Friends" (PG-13, 1995)

Director: Pat O'Connor

Cast: Chris O'Donnell, Minnie Driver, Geraldine O'Rawe, Saffron Burrows, Alan Cumming, Colin Firth

``Liberty Heights" (R, 1999)

Director: Barry Levinson

Cast: Adrien Brody, Ben Foster, Orlando Jones.

``A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries" (R, 1998)

Director: James Ivory

Cast: Kris Kristofferson, Barbara Hershey, Leelee Sobieski, Jesse Bradford, Anthony Roth Costanzo

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SEX, TRUST AND INTIMACY

``An Affair of Love" (R, 2000) Director: Frederic Fontyne

Cast: Nathalie Baye, Sergio Lopez

``Big Eden" (PG-13, 2001))

Director: Thomas Bezocha

Cast: Ayre Gross, Eric Schweig, Louise Fletcher

``Don Juan DeMarco" (PG-13, 1995)

Director: Jeremy Leven

Cast: Johnny Depp, Marlon Brando, Faye Dunaway

``The Thomas Crown Affair" (R, 1999)

Director: John McTiernan

Cast: Rene Russo, Pierce Brosnan

``Waiting to Exhale" (R, 1996)

Director: Forest Whitaker

Cast: Angela Bassett, Loretta Devine, Gregory Hines

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ANGER, GRIEF AND LOSS

``Bounce" (PG-13, 2000)

Director: Don Roos

Cast: Ben Affleck, Gwyneth Paltrow, Joe Morton.

``The Five Senses" (R, 1999)

Director: Jeremy Podeswa

Cast: Mary-Louise Parker, Philippe Volter.

``My Family (Mi Familia)" (R, 1995)

Director: Gregory Nava

Cast: Edward James Olmos, Esai Morales, Jimmy Smitts

``The Perfect Storm" (PG-13, 2000)

Director: Wolfgang Petersen

Cast: George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg, John C. Reilly

Source: Gil Mansergh, Film TX

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