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Movie Therapy: Using Movies for Mental Health

Therapists recommend movies to help change the way we think and feel.

By [Denise Mann](#)
WebMD Feature

Reviewed By [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#)

Can *Mystic River* teach you to let go of the past? Can *Something's Gotta Give* allow you to finally forgive your father? Will the trials of *Seabiscuit* teach you to persevere?

Proponents of cinema therapy say that, in addition to getting award nods, these and other movies can and will change the way we think, feel, and ultimately deal with life's ups and downs.

An increasing number of therapists prescribe movies to help their patients explore their psyches. And while few therapists have actually gone so far as to package their practices around cinema therapy, movies -- like art, books, and music -- are becoming one more tool to help those in therapy achieve their goals and overcome their hurdles.

And books with such titles as *Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning* and *Cinematherapy for Lovers: The Girl's Guide to Finding True Love One Movie at a Time* are finding their own niche in the self-help sections of many bookstores.

"Cinema therapy is the process of using movies made for the big screen or television for therapeutic purposes," says Gary Solomon, PhD, MPH, MSW, author of *The Motion Picture Prescription* and *Reel Therapy*.

"It can have a positive effect on most people except those suffering from psychotic disorders," says Solomon, a professor of psychology at the Community College of Southern Nevada.

In fact, Solomon often lectures at prisons to help inmates learn to use movies as therapy to see what they have done to get them into their current predicament and, hopefully, to learn from it.

Cue up your DVD player because "cinema therapy is something that is self-administered," he says. "That's not to say therapy on a one-to-one basis is bad, but this is an opportunity to do interventional work by yourself."

The idea, says Solomon, is to choose movies with themes that mirror your current problem or situation. For example, if you or a loved has a substance abuse problem, he suggests *Clean and Sober* or *When a Man Loves a Woman*, or if you are coping with the loss -- or serious illness -- of a loved one, he may suggest *Steel Magnolias* or *Beaches*.

When watching such movies as a form of therapy, he says to look for the therapeutic context such as addiction, death/dying, abandonment or abuse, the ability to reach out and touch the viewer, and the overall content or subject matter.

Many Faces and Forms of Cinema Therapy

But "there's not one definition of cinema therapy," says Oakland, Calif.-based cinema therapist Birgit Wolz, PhD, author of *The Cinema Therapy Workbook: A Self-Help Guide to Using Movies for Healing and Growth*.

There's "popcorn cinema therapy," which can include watching a movie for a needed emotional

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release. According to Wolz, popcorn cinema therapy is rather heavy on cinema and rather light on therapy.

In what she dubs as "evocative cinema therapy," Wolz prefers to use movies as therapy to help others learn about themselves in more profound ways based on how they respond to different characters and scenes.

It works like this, she says: "First, I ask about their personal situation and get a sense of where they are at in their lives, and then I will recommend movies that may speak to them on certain levels."

For example, the movie *Big Fish* is "very powerful and can evoke a lot of material on the father-son relationship," she says.

There's also cathartic cinema therapy involving laughing or crying, Wolz says. "This is also effective if it's done right as a precursor or a first stage of psychotherapy," she says. Say a person is in the midst of a depression; a movie that helps them to cry can open up different levels of their psyche, she explains to WebMD.

When watching movies, Wolz recommends sitting comfortably and among other things, noticing what you liked and didn't like about the movie and which characters or actions seemed especially attractive or unattractive.

She also suggests asking yourself whether there were any characters in the movie who modeled behavior that you would like to emulate.

It helps to write down your answers, she says.

Make-Your-Own Movie Therapy

In what may be the Sundance festival of the cinema therapy world, the Chicago Institute for the Moving Image (CIMI) helps people seeking therapy for depression or other serious psychiatric illnesses, including schizophrenia or amnesia, to write, produce, and direct their own movies.

"We work with patients who tend to have personal interests in making a movie or a screenplay and are already working with a therapist," says Joshua Flanders, CIMI's executive director.

"We will be brought in as a consultant to work with the patient and therapist to edit screenplays, rehearse scenes, and try out people," he says.

"The process of filmmaking provides a certain amount of therapy, organization, and order that people with psychological diseases need, and it helps the therapist see what the conflicts are within their patients' lives," Flanders explains.

In a sense, making a movie or creating a screenplay enables the therapist or loved ones to see the world through this person's eyes.

In the past, Flanders has seen people make "enormous breakthroughs" with this form of cinema therapy.

A Word of Caution

But patients should not cancel their next therapy session to catch a matinee, cautions Bruce Skalarew, MD, a Chevy Chase, Md.-based psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and the co-chairman for the Forum for Psychoanalytic Study of Film.

Movies are often used in therapy or analysis, Skalarew tells WebMD.

"People will bring up a movie or a book, and the selection process of what they hone in on can be a clue to some obvious -- or not so obvious -- conflict that they are working with," he says.

If the therapist is familiar with the movie, he or she can see distortions or anything the viewer may have emphasized, de-emphasized, or left out for deeper insights into their personal issues and struggles.

That said, Skalarew cautions that he is not advocating cinema therapy or movies as a prime means of therapy. "Like art therapy, dance therapy, and music, you can bring it into a traditional form of therapy, and as an accessory it can be very useful."

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SOURCES: Gary Solomon, MPH, MSW, PhD, author, *The Motion Picture Prescription and Reel Therapy*; professor of psychology, Community College of Southern Nevada. Joshua Flanders, executive director, Chicago Institute for the Moving Image. Birgit Wolz, PhD, author, *The Cinema Therapy Workbook: A Self-Help Guide to Using Movies for Healing and Growth*.

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