

Theory and guidelines for therapists

Theory

Watching a movie with conscious awareness can be similar to experiencing a guided visualization. The therapeutic effect and the theoretical basis for both modalities are therefore closely related. In fact, the use of films in therapy allows us to draw from and can be integrated into a range of psychotherapeutic orientations, from depth psychotherapy to cognitive-behavior therapy to systems oriented therapy.

Since films are metaphors, the depth psychologist can utilize movies in therapy similar to the way in which we utilize stories, myths, fables and dreams. The unconscious communicates its content to the conscious mind mostly in symbolic images. We can become aware of this "communication" through dreams and active imagination, which are "windows" to the unconscious: both convert the invisible forms of the unconscious into images that are perceptible to the conscious mind. Since films are consecutive images, feeling touched by a movie scene with pleasant or unpleasant emotions shows client and therapist that this scene symbolically reflects relevant unconscious material. Just as with dreams, emotionally charged material becomes accessible to consciousness. The therapist is interested in learning about unconscious material because it often is in conflict with a client's conscious ideas, intentions and goals. Exploring the effect of a film can break down the barriers between the two levels of the psyche and set up a genuine flow of communication between them. This helps the client to resolve neurotic conflicts with the unconscious, and thus to learn more about who they really are as authentic human beings. Negative reactions to a movie, a scene or a character can illuminate "shadow" material. By getting inspired, the client can learn to respond to life's challenges and changes more successfully from a more present and authentic inner place instead of reacting from old dysfunctional emotional and behavior patterns.

Therapists who use cognitive-behavior therapy can utilize movies in combination with the established modalities of their field. Films can provide a supportive device for understanding maladaptive core beliefs and for cognitive restructuring. Cognitive insights tell clients what to do but affective insights give them the motivation to follow through. In addition films galvanize feelings, which increase the probability that clients will carry out new and desired behaviors. Suggestions for appropriate films can be found on the page [Film recommendations](#), especially in the section, "Questioning negative beliefs about yourself and rediscovering your strength". Watching movies at home serves as a bridge between therapy and life. Like any homework, this helps clinicians achieve better continuity of care and leads to greater self-reliance.

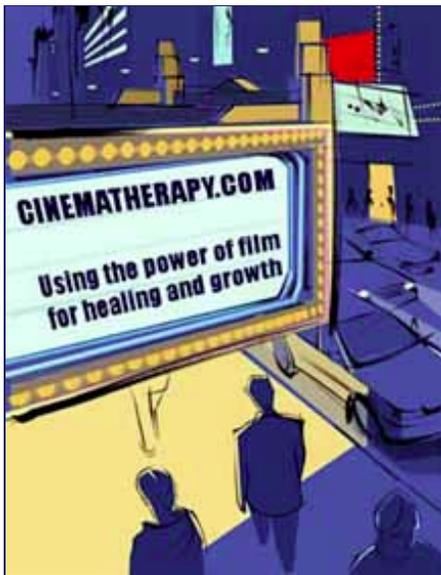
Systems oriented therapists can find support for their approach by choosing movies, which communicate unfamiliar concepts of family or organizational systems and their dynamics as well as communication patterns. By utilizing readily grasped images, a film can introduce understanding, often better than can mere words. Suggestions for appropriate films can be found on the page [Film recommendations](#), especially in the section, "Improving communications with your partner or friend."

Guidelines

- Start with a film that your client has already seen and that supports your treatment goal. If no appropriate movie comes to mind familiarize yourself with [Guidelines to choosing films](#).
- Choose a film from [Film recommendations](#) or books (see [A cinema therapy bibliography](#))
- Clarify intent when assigning a film in which a client might mistake the role identification.
- Familiarize yourself with [Guidelines for watching films](#) and discuss guidelines with client.
- Discuss positive or negative reactions to film.
- Use material according to your theoretical orientation.
- Some evocative questions can be: "If the film had a unique message for you, what was it?" or
- "What new ideas for new behaviors did you have?" or
- "What other films can you identify that might take the discussion a step further?"

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