

Why are we attracted to sad movies?

1) Why do we choose to go to sad movies? Why do we choose this kind of emotional manipulation?

1. Sad movies make us feel alive because of catharsis.

"Films trigger emotions and open doors that might otherwise be closed." - John W. Hesley & Jan G. Hesley

"The best movies transport us beyond time. We hitch a ride on the emotional roller coaster of the main character's quest."- Cathie Glenn Sturdevant

Painful emotions can do more than produce tears by watching sad films; they have also been proven to create stress chemicals in our bodies. Catharsis helps to counter these by releasing buried feelings. Nature has provided us natural cathartic processes like laughing crying to move us through and beyond our pain.

Sometimes tears flow over a sentimental film but not in real life, especially under duress. Watching and empathizing with a movie character who experiences tragedy can stimulate the desired emotional release. This release usually lifts a client's spirits for a little while as the overwhelming emotion diminishes. Energy that was drained by depression can reemerge, at least temporarily. Often this "break" allows a depressed person to start exploring and healing the underlying issues that caused the depression originally. Grief can be processed more easily too.

2. We intuitively sense that sad movies help us to work through, and possibly overcome, old unresolved grief and trauma.

"One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."- C. G. Jung

Aristotle theorized, "Tragic plays have the capacity to purify the spirit and aid us in coping with aspects of life that cannot be reconciled by rational thought." He insisted on the cathartic power of tragedy because it "cleanses disordered emotions and heals trauma." (Murnaghan, 1951)

What makes sad movies so "enjoyable" is this: they allow us to confront very real and deeply sad feelings in a safe and protected environment. They allow us to confront real issues by experiencing "reality" in a safe distance on the screen because our emotional

responses feel real. Movies draw us into the viewing experience, but at the same time - often more easily than in real life - afford a unique opportunity to retain a perspective outside the experience, the observer's view.

“Movies offer an unusually safe, enjoyable way to peek at all we’ve denied-our dark sides and our light.”- Marsha Sinetar

3. Certain sad movies help us to connect with our inner strength to overcome adversity through identification with certain movie characters.

“It may be much easier to understand how to resolve a movie character’s dilemma than your own situation. Then you can evaluate how those solutions might apply to your challenge.” - Cathie Glenn Sturdevant.

“Through our intense, sometimes inexplicable feelings or reactions to a character plot, we can recover our own powers - for both good and evil.” - Marsha Sinetar

Because many films transmit ideas through emotion rather than intellect, they can neutralize the instinct to suppress feelings and trigger emotional release. By eliciting emotions, watching movies can open doors that otherwise might stay closed. For many of my clients it is safer and therefore easier to let go of their defenses while watching a movie than it is in real life with real people. By identifying with certain characters and their predicaments, they can experience emotions that lie hidden from their awareness.

4. Certain sad movies help us develop coping mechanisms.

From my e-mail contacts with people who are interested in my Web site I learned the following: One person told me that being confronted with sad situations through the movie helped her contemplate solutions for similar situations in her own life and prepare her to deal with these, as they came up later.

2.) What are some of the great sad movies -- are there any that you'd recommend in your practice? In what circumstance?

Our cultural preference for processing emotions cognitively instead of feeling them in our bodies tends to maintain and prolong distress. (Nichols & Zax, 1977) Emotions are stored in the body, not only the mind. Cathartic therapeutic techniques, which use sad movies, allow therapists to help clients to access these stored emotions and release them. These methods are based on the assumption that the more catharsis clients experience, the faster they move through the healing process. (Nichols & Bierenbaum, 1978)

Movies that trigger sadness also help clients become more conscious of these emotions, if they have been repressed. In work with grief and psychological trauma some treatment methods help clients to process trauma within a so-called "therapeutic window". Interventions are done within this "window", when they create enough therapeutic challenge but don't lead to an overwhelming internal experience. Emotional overwhelm needs to be avoided because it can create an avoidance response, like dissociation, etc.

Certain films, even those with some sad or depressing elements - used carefully and creatively - can help clients get in touch with unresolved grief or trauma and therefore serve as an intervention that provides sufficient therapeutic challenge to enter the "therapeutic window". A thorough assessment is required before assigning this kind of film. In order to assess correctly clients should be asked how they responded to certain movies before.

For example, I have used *Affliction* (1997 with Nick Nolte in the main role) a movie about alcoholism, childhood abuse and the serious consequences on the life of the survivors of this kind of trauma. After watching this film a client of mine was able to acknowledge the impact of his fathers alcoholism and physical abuse on his emotional development for the first time. The movie, in combination with client-centered therapeutic work, helped him to break through his denial safely, and he started working on his recovery. With another client I began using EMDR after the movie brought up memories of abuse.

Films that some people might consider depressive should be used carefully too. For example the new movie *The Hours* (2003 with Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore and Nicole Kidman) is very intense in terms of dealing with issues of depression and suicide. In this film some characters choose "Life over death", and in that sense there is an element of hope. Others end up committing suicide. The depth of despair and depression that the main characters face is extremely potent and it is possible that this film could, perhaps, reinforce the negative beliefs of a seriously depressed or even suicidal person.

On the other hand, I have noticed that sad or depressive films, which usually portrait depressed characters (like *The Hours*), can - almost like support groups - help clients feel less alone and isolated with their experience. Sad and depressive films can also help normalize depression, especially if it results from grief, or serve as a psycho-educational tool in cognitive work with depression.

This reminds me of my work at a suicide hotline as an intern years ago. We had more critical calls in a sunny Spring month than during a rainy Winter month because depressed callers felt more isolated, when everybody else seemed to be happy outside. The same can apply to movies. "Happy" films don't have an uplifting effect on everyone.

A fellow movie therapist shared with me that he found a movie that can be used relatively safely with clients. The 1986 film, *Duet for One* in which Julie Andrews portrays a one of the world's greatest violinist, Stephanie Anderson, ending up with Multiple Sclerosis in the middle of her career. She is forced to stop playing and seeks the help of a psychiatrist, Dr Lois Feldman, depicted by Max Von Sydow who has his own fears. Alan Bates is her conductor/composer husband having an affair with his secretary and leaves her! He feels insecure in his wife's shadow and is incapable of coping with her illness. As her disease progresses, she will have to redefine every one of her relationships. In one scene she takes a junk collector, played by Liam Neeson, to her bed for raw, unapologetic sex – sex that she finds is an affirmation of her passion and the fact that she still lives and feels. Progressive crippling forces Stephanie to OD. At this point we see the films most mystical and effective scene. She visually hallucinates of her old late mentor who tried to encourage her to live. She was accidentally found by a cleaning woman, taken to the hospital and saved. We see her, at the end of the movie, still crippled and anguished but accepted what had happened, found peace with herself as well as everybody around her. The movie can give hope to depressed clients as the heroine ends up valuing of her life in spite of her condition.