

A Night at the Movies-
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A Night at the Movies

Movies represent a form of relaxation and entertainment that caters to all ages. We may laugh and cry in the same 90 minutes. This ritual is centuries old; the Greek's loved tragic drama and the Elizabethan theatre was a thriving, often rowdy source of entertainment. Even though viewing a piece of drama might allow us to escape from our stresses and strains, it is not always that which keeps us hooked. "*You can map your life through your favorite movies*"- Mary Schmich says it succinctly.

Everyone at some point in their lives has felt the six basic emotions of happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, disgust and anger. Over 600 words in the English language describe them and 42 muscles in our face are used to express them, no wonder Hollywood reaches for Botox! Movies reach inside, touching something deep within, offering us a faithfully reflection our own internal experience. We are given a chance to revisit and perhaps connect more deeply to our emotions and ourselves. Thus the best stories are about the human condition and the human connection.

How does it work? Part of the answer lies in how our brain functions. The brain holds both the memories together with its emotional content. In fact, our memories and emotions are so intricately linked that the stronger the emotional experience, the stronger the memory. Firstly, hearing the dialogue and viewing the characters helps us initially connect and represents a safe way begin addressing a particular issue instead of confronting our own experience directly. So we gain by feeling vicariously. Then as the content and the characters sink in, we start to identify with what is happening. Our own

memories and emotions can become triggered at this stage. As the movie continues and we develop a sense of connectedness to the characters, our internal experience starts to resonate with theirs. At this point, we are no longer feeling vicariously, we start connecting to our own internal experience and selves. Our own feelings push through into reality, our defenses drop for a while making room for a cathartic experience. And that's not all, ever noticed in the movies how your heart beats faster, respiration quickens and how your muscles tense up as you try to remain in your seat? That's because your whole body responds. Emotions are linked to the cardiovascular, immune, endocrine and gastrointestinal systems. In fact, it's a whole body workout!

Cinema therapy is a good self help tool that can be used as a forerunner to deeper therapy work. Many movies can be divided up into themes such as depression, grief and loss, abuse and trauma, relationships, aging, self esteem, mental disorders and many more. To begin, you will want to choose a movie that reflects an issue that you are wanting help with. For example, if you are looking to understand your blocks with courage, you may wish to view a movie such as Billy Elliot or Whale Rider or Rocky III. Before viewing the movie, sit quietly for some time to focus the mind, try to relax. Now focus your attention to the movie. After watching, the following questions may help you problems solve and dig deeper in to your own internal movie: What overall feelings are present for you at the end of movie? Is there a message in the movie that you can personally relate to? What did you like or hate about the movie? Who did you love? Who did you hate? Was there any part of the movie that was hard to watch? If so why? How did you see the main character change? Can you identify the challenges he or she had to overcome? What

are your residual feelings a couple of days later? You may also wish to generate your own list of questions, see what stirs! Books such as ‘Rent Two Films and Let’s Talk in the Morning: Using Popular Movies in Psychotherapy’ by John W. Hesley & Jan Hesley as well as ‘The Cinema Therapy Workbook: A Self-Help Guide to Using Movies for Healing and Growth’ by Birgit Wolz, PhD are good starting places for using movies to address particular issues and offers many sample questions similar to the above.

Of course, although Cinema therapy can be self administered, the healing power of human connectedness may mean that sharing your experience with another is what helps you understand yourself more deeply. One of my most favorite quotes comes from Steve Martin – *“You know what your problem is, it’s that you haven’t seen enough movies - all of life’s riddles are answered in the movies”*.aaaand action!

S. Fenella Das Gupta, Intern IMF #52805, has a Marriage and Family psychotherapy practice in Petaluma under the supervision of Margie Jamin MFT, MFC #34363. She works with children, adults, couples and families. Fenella uses Cinema therapy in her practice with both children and adults alike and finds that this evocative medium is often a good spring board to delving into difficult issues. You may wish to visit her website at www.innermirror.com