Watching movies could be good for your mental health

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Many of us enjoy sitting down to watch a good film because of the way movies can make us feel. A sad film might help us release our emotions or a comedy might lift our mood. Movies can also offer a chance to connect with and explore our emotions in a safe way.

Because of the effect that films can have, there's growing interest in using them as a therapeutic tool. Although this field is still very new, my review of the research so far shows that film therapy can be effective at helping people process difficult emotions—which may help improve mental health.

I found that film engages people emotionally in ways that can be therapeutic. Talking about movie characters can feel more comfortable than discussing issues directly as it gives the person some emotional distance from what they're going through. Films can also help people learn life skills from how movie characters deal with their challenges.

My review also found that film therapy reduced conflict between parents and teenagers, increased empathy and dialogue between them and helped improve communication skills. It's also shown to reduce anxiety and make therapy more appealing.

Film therapy was also shown to be particularly beneficial to certain groups of people. For example, research showed film therapy can help young autistic people identify their positive strengths and build resilience. It can also help psychiatric patients express their thoughts and feelings. Another study also found that watching and discussing superhero movies allowed young people diagnosed with schizophrenia to find strength and meaning in the difficulties they face.

But as research in this field has just begun, it will be important for continued research in this field to explore how people engage with movies to support their well-being and who most benefits from film therapy.

How movies can help

Aristotle noted that audiences of Greek tragedies seemed to go through a

beneficial process of emotional purging (or catharsis) through empathy with characters. Watching movies and TV works in a similar way, offering a safe space to feel and express emotions without experiencing real-world implications.

Film brings together [images, story, metaphor and music](#)—all of which are shown to have therapeutic benefits. Movies and TV are also accessible and can offer something familiar and easy to talk about as a basis of therapy conversations.

But while research shows film therapy can be beneficial, there has been little guidance on how best to use films in therapy. So after conducting my review, I developed a method that draws together current research and practice to create a series of steps for reflecting on movies that can be used in therapy or on your own.

I called it the "[Movie method](#)", which stands for mindful engagement, observing responses, voicing experience, identifying personal relevance and exploring new possibilities. While working with a therapist is recommended if you're experiencing [mental health](#) difficulties, anyone can use the Movie method to connect more mindfully with the films and TV shows they watch.

The first step of the Movie method involves a mindful check to consider how you're feeling—and if this is a good day for you to engage with the movie you've chosen. Consider the effect watching or reflecting on the movie could have.

If it feels okay to go ahead, mindfully observe and notice your thoughts, feelings and physical responses as you watch. Step back from your feelings without judging them rather than getting swept along with them.

After watching the movie, voice or name any emotions you're feeling.

Writing these down can be useful. Be curious about your feelings, noticing if you have a physical sense of certain emotions in your body—such as tension or relaxation. Sometimes when we notice a feeling, it may change. You can also think about what the feeling needs (for example kindness or understanding) and imagine receiving this.

Next, identify what the movie means to you. Notice who you identified with and how the character's journey might remind you of your own challenges and achievements. While movies can offer insight into the lives of different groups and cultures, just be sure to think critically about how these characters or issues are portrayed. This can help prevent reinforcing stereotypes or inaccurate representations.

Consider how the movie can help you to explore new possibilities and strategies for growth. Think about how movie characters solved problems and anything you can learn from this. Notice links between the movie story and your personal story and if you would change the story or write a sequel. Reflect on learning from the activity that you may take forward.

The next time you sit down to watch a movie, think about how you can make the most of the experience. Applying film therapy methods may help you engage more mindfully with what you're watching, and may help you learn new things about yourself as a result.

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