

Movie therapy: Do you believe in the healing power of film?

Having a mid-life crisis? Overburdened with guilt? Unable to form healthy relationships? The answer to these problems could be as simple as sitting down to watch your favourite DVD.

By Kate Corr

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At least, that is what the psychotherapist and film buff Bernie Wooder believes. He is so passionate about the healing power of films that he is pioneering the use of so-called 'movie therapy' in Britain, and has just written a book explaining how it works.

The therapy - described by the august Royal College of Psychiatrists as a 'useful aid to counselling' involves 'prescribing' a particular film suited to someone's problem, then discussing the feelings it stirs up.



Bernie Wooder believes in the healing power of film Photo: JOHN DOWNING

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"Movie therapy is so powerful because it accesses feelings and emotions quickly, bringing them to the surface like a magnet," explains Wooder. "Films provide role models, clarify relationship issues, identify problems and solutions, inspire and motivate. And because you watch from a third person perspective, your defences are down, so the film can act as a springboard for self discovery."

Wooder, 68, has prescribed films as diverse as *Rocky* (to help a businessman overcome his insecurity) and *Ghost* (to come to terms with bereavement). One of Wooder's patients who responded particularly well to film therapy was Bette (not her real name), an intelligent, outwardly successful woman in her thirties who, despite holding down a high-powered job in the City, lived in a 'permanent fog' of depression.

Bette was weighed down by feelings of inferiority that she couldn't understand or shake off. Hoping to discover why happiness eluded her, she approached Wooder. He advised her to rent a DVD of Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 psychological thriller *Rebecca* - and report back how the film made her feel.

Based on the Daphne du Maurier novel, Hitchcock's film tells the story of a shy, young woman who marries a wealthy, sophisticated man (Maxim de Winter) and finds herself living in the shadows of his first wife the

beautiful, vivacious Rebecca. The second Mrs de Winter feels increasingly lonely, unattractive and out of her depth, in a world she doesn't understand.

After several viewings (once is not usually enough to digest a film's full therapeutic benefits) Bette was able to understand where her current inadequacies, and subsequent depression, came from. She realised she had always felt second best – first to her blonde, younger sister, and more recently to her husband's first wife. "She totally identified with the second Mrs de Winter."

Added to that, another life-changing character in the film was Rebecca's former housekeeper Mrs Danvers. Her withering contempt for the second Mrs de Winter summed up Bette's relationship with her mother-in-law. Bette persuaded her husband to watch the film with her in order to show him how she felt.

"She couldn't just say: 'Your mother is like that terrifying housekeeper Mrs Danvers', because of course her husband would leap to his mother's defence," says Wooder. "But watching a film together is far less confrontational....Bette's husband was finally able to see her point of view without the need for a stand-up row. They were really able to communicate."

Cue lights, music and happy ending? Bette's recovery wasn't quite as fast-paced as the average Hollywood blockbuster. But with her new-found insight, she was able to start repairing her damaged self-esteem and emerge from therapy far more confident and contented. She also gave up her City job and became a nurse.

"By the end, she was a different person," adds Wooder, who claims to have seen many similar transformations in the 14 years he's been practising. He lectures trainee therapists at Guy's Hospital in London, runs regular seminars and workshops for everyone from film industry insiders to monks and nuns and has two psychotherapy practices in north London (one near Elstree Studios).

"One client told me Watership Down saved his life. He came to it himself, I would never have suggested he watched it because I don't really like cartoons. But it summed up his relationship with an abusive, bullying father. It spoke to him."

Others do use the principles, even if Wooder remains the only movie therapist in Britain. Paula Hall, a psychotherapist with Relate, explains: "The important thing for any therapist is to speak the client's language - and films speak to an awful lot of people."

But Phillip Hodson, Fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is more sceptical. "Movie therapy is an interesting idea, but I can't see it becoming mainstream because it doesn't have enough impetus," he says. "For example, if you've been seriously bereaved you don't want to go to a therapist and be told to watch a film...do you?"

But Wooder doesn't see why not - and recalls the 2006 BAFTA speech by Lord David Puttman in which he admitted that *The Sixth Sense* (1999) had helped him grieve for his father. "We're only at the beginning of what movie therapy can really do," Wooder adds. "It could be used on everyone from hardened criminals in prisons to patients in hospital."

But which films should you watch? "Old black and whites are very good at calming people down because they conjure up nostalgia and innocence," says Wooder. And it's not just about the feel-good factor. "That ends when the film is over," says Wooder. "It's what the film leaves you with that counts."

• To order *Movie Therapy: How It Changes Lives* by Bernie Wooder (£10), visit www.themovietherapist.com

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