Cue the celluloid therapist

Watching movies can elicit emotions often related to psychological truths

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If your family drives you nuts this Christmas, you might seek a little mental medicine from Jimmy Stewart.

Popping It's a Wonderful Life into the VCR, psychologists say, can do more than bring a few hours of peace to the close quarters of the holiday scene: Together with some careful reflection from the chesterfield, they suggest, the travails of Mr. Stewart can actually work as celluloid therapist, getting at those old family tensions. At the very least, you'll feel temporarily warm and fuzzy about humanity.

Such is the therapeutic value of even a Hollywood story, says Stuart Fischoff, a professor of psychology at Cal State in Los Angeles. "What makes [movies] such a powerful tool is that it's a non-intellectual experience," he said. "That lump is in your throat and you can't walk away from it. You're crying and you don't know where it came from."

Movies, it seems, are not just for watching any more. In a culture where people rent videos before they'll crack a book, the characters of the big screen are popping up in medical schools and as prescriptions from the therapist's couch, cast as moving pictures with the power to heal or teach.

So Nicolas Cage does his best portrait of angst, playing a paramedic in Bringing out the Dead,and the psychiatry students at the University of British Columbia get a take on posttraumatic stress. In group therapy in Oakland, Calif., the female patient of therapist Birgit Wolz watches Gwyneth Paltrow rush though two lives in Sliding Doors and accepts you can be strong even when you feel weak.

A male patient of Dr. Fischoff, who was attracted only to women with schizophrenia, learns from Benny and Joon that he has idealized a romantic fantasy.

"The movie opens a door that you have to walk through," said Dr. Fischoff, pointing out that films are still only one part of therapy. "It isn't dangerous if you talk about it."

There's not much research on the benefits of movies in therapy or education -- whether the emotional discoveries are lasting, for instance -- but people such as Dr. Wolz and Dr. Fischoff say that they often serve as short cuts to open up real discussion in therapy.

Dr. Fischoff recalls a woman he once treated who dreamed repeatedly of flying, and believed it was a sign she was trying to flee her current relationship. Dr. Fischoff sent her home to watch Birdie,a movie about a young man trying to escape a bad family situation by imagining he could fly. "It was like throwing cold water on her face," he said. She returned ready to talk about her abusive childhood. "The message comes through much more quickly than if you have to trudge through talking about it."

The use of movies is the modern evolution of bibliotherapy, a long-standing practice of using art and literature to get at the root of troublesome things. But movies aren't a cure-all for mental ills, despite the proliferation of books on the subject, and even a show on the cable channel Women's Entertainment called Cinematherapy. (Its tag line: "Movies are more than just entertainment. Movies are self-medication.")

Dr. Fischoff points out that movies don't work in all situations and that therapists need to suggest them with care. But he says most people don't realize how their emotional reactions to movies are often tied to truths in their psyche. He conducts a regular survey, analyzing why people pick certain movies as their favourites; almost always, he has found, it is something deeper, even subconscious, that resonates with the person, rather than specific plot or character.

Movies work for the healers as well as the ones who need healing. More and more medical schools show movies to help educate future doctors and psychiatrists -- to show a more human side to medicine, start a debate on different treatment techniques, even as a tool to help students recognize

certain ailments. The New York University medical school maintains a database of movies for this purpose.

Harry Karlinsky, director of continuing education at the University of British Columbia's department of psychiatry, would like to see this practice become more common. He already uses movie clips in his classes, and he recently organized the monthly Mental Health Film Series, in Vancouver, which is attended by medical students and professionals and members of the public. For one movie, they watched Completely Cuckoo,a documentary about the making of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,which was filmed inside an Oregon psychiatric institute. Dean Brook, who played his real-life role as the facility's psychiatrist, was one of the guest speakers.

More study needs to be done on the long-term benefits of using movies to heal or teach, Dr. Karlinsky suggested. "But people are taking it more seriously," he said. "Films have replaced books. They're the more comfortable frame of reference."