

Divorce Rate Cut in Half for Couples Who Discussed Relationship Movies

January 31, 2014

Contact: Susan Hagen susan.hagen@rochester.edu (mailto:susan.hagen@rochester.edu)
585.276.4061

A new study finds that watching and discussing movies about relationships is as effective in lowering divorce rates as other, more intensive early marriage counseling programs.



Discussing five movies about relationships over a month could cut the three-year divorce rate for newlyweds in half, researchers report. The [study \(http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/ccp/81/6/949/\)](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/ccp/81/6/949/), involving 174 couples, is the first long-term investigation to compare different types of early marriage intervention programs.

The findings show that an inexpensive, fun, and relatively simple movie-and-talk approach can be just as effective as other more intensive therapist-led methods—reducing the divorce or separation rate from 24 to 11 percent after three years.

[En español: La tasa de divorcio se reduce a la mitad entre recién casados que comentaron cinco películas sobre relaciones de pareja \(../la-tasa-de-divorcio-se-reduce-a-la-mitad-entre-recien-casados-que-comentaron-cinco-peliculas-sobre-relaciones-de-pareja/index.html\)](http://www.courses.rochester.edu/news/divorce-rate-cut-in-half-for-couples-who-discussed-relatio...)

"We thought the movie treatment would help, but not nearly as much as the other programs in which we were teaching all of these state-of-the-art skills," said **Ronald Rogge** (<http://www.courses.rochester.edu/surveys/funk/>), associate professor of psychology at the University of Rochester and lead author of the study. "The results suggest that husbands and wives have a pretty good sense of what they might be doing right and wrong in their relationships. Thus, you might not need to teach them a whole lot of skills to cut the divorce rate. You might just need to get them to think about how they are currently behaving. And for five movies to give us a benefit over three years—that is awesome."

Perhaps most exciting, added Rogge, is that this self-help exercise could open new possibilities for nurturing nuptial ties on a broad scale. "It's incredibly portable. There are really great marriage intervention programs available now but most require trained therapists to administer them. If couples can do this on their own, it makes it so much easier to help them," he said.

Rogge and a team of researchers including co-author **Thomas Bradbury** (http://www.psych.ucla.edu/faculty/faculty_page?id=22&area=2), a professor of psychology and co-director of the Relationship Institute at UCLA, published the findings in the December issue of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Religious groups have long-standing traditions of offering marriage preparation classes, but with roughly half of all marriages in the United State ending in divorce, secular institutions are now joining the effort. For example, Fairfax County, Va. offers free "compassion training" to newlyweds, the U.S. military has an "oxygen for your relationships" program, and Oklahoma, home to the nation's highest divorce rate, has poured millions into its "marriage initiative."

An underpinning of many of these programs, backed by earlier research, is that couples will weather the friction of living together better if they can master certain relationship skills. "When we started

Ronald Rogge, associate professor of psychology

Making Headlines

New York Times

[Movie Date Night Can](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/date-night-can-double-as-therapy/)

[Double as Therapy](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/date-night-can-double-as-therapy/)

[\(http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/date-night-can-double-as-therapy/\)](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/date-night-can-double-as-therapy/)

(February 10, 2014)

USA Today

[Party of Four? A Double](http://www.usatoday.com/story/research-double-date/5289181/)

[Date Can Rev Up Your](http://www.usatoday.com/story/research-double-date/5289181/)

[Romance](http://www.usatoday.com/story/research-double-date/5289181/)

[\(http://www.usatoday.com/story/research-double-date/5289181/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/research-double-date/5289181/)

(February 10, 2014)

ABC News (Good Morning America)

[Can RomComs Save a](http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/romantic-comedies-save-relationship-22356998/)

[Marriage?](http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/romantic-comedies-save-relationship-22356998/)

[\(http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/romantic-comedies-save-relationship-22356998\)](http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/romantic-comedies-save-relationship-22356998/)

(February 4, 2014)

England Telegraph

[Rom coms could save](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/moms-could-save-your-marriage.html)

[your marriage](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/moms-could-save-your-marriage.html)

[\(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/moms-could-save-your-marriage.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/moms-could-save-your-marriage.html)

(February 2, 2014)

this study, the



prevailing wisdom was that the best way to keep relationships healthy and strong was to help couples manage difficult, potentially divisive conversations," explained Bradbury.

To test this theory, the team randomly assigned

newlyweds to one of three groups: conflict management, compassion and acceptance training, and relationship awareness through film. They chose to concentrate on the first three years of marriage, because "relationship dissolution is front-ended," said Bradbury; one in four ends in divorce.

The conflict management group learned a technique for discussing heated issues that slows down the pace of the exchange and helps individuals focus on what their partner is saying instead of rushing to respond. Sometimes called active listening or the speaker-listener technique, the practice requires one spouse to listen and then paraphrase back to the partner what they have heard to ensure the message has been properly understood. Earlier studies on this technique have shown it to be effective at promoting happier and more satisfying relationships over three to five years.

The compassion and acceptance training cohort participated in an intervention designed by Rogge and his collaborators aimed at helping couples work together as a team and find common ground around their similarities. Couples were encouraged through a series of lectures and exercises to approach their relationships with more compassion and empathy by doing things like listening as a friend, practicing random acts of kindness and affection, and using the language of acceptance.

Both programs involved weekly lectures, supervised practice sessions, and homework assignments over the course of a month, for a total investment of roughly 20 hours, all but two of which were with a therapist.

"It's incredibly portable. There are really great marriage intervention programs available now but most require trained therapists to administer them. If couples can do this on their own,

By contrast, the movie-and-talk group devoted half as much time to their assignments and all but four hours took place in their own homes. Participants first attended a 10-minute lecture on the importance of relationship awareness and how watching couples in movies could help spouses pay attention to their own behavior, both constructive and destructive.

it makes it so much easier to help them."
—Ronald Rogge

They then watched *Two for the Road*, a 1967 romantic comedy about the joys and strains of young love, infidelity, and professional pressures across 12 years of a marriage. Afterward, each couple met separately to discuss a **[list of 12 questions \(http://www.wdev.rochester.edu/news/divorce-rate-cut-in-half-for-couples-who-discussed-relationship-movies/movie-list-and-questions.pdf\)](http://www.wdev.rochester.edu/news/divorce-rate-cut-in-half-for-couples-who-discussed-relationship-movies/movie-list-and-questions.pdf)** about the screen couple's interactions. One question, for example, asked how the movie partners handled arguments: "Were they able to open up and tell each other how they really felt, or did they tend to just snap at each other with anger? Did they try using humor to keep things from getting nasty?" The couple was asked to consider in what way the movie relationship was "similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?"

Study participants were sent home with a list of **[47 movies \(http://www.wdev.rochester.edu/news/divorce-rate-cut-in-half-for-couples-who-discussed-relationship-movies/movie-list-and-questions.pdf\)](http://www.wdev.rochester.edu/news/divorce-rate-cut-in-half-for-couples-who-discussed-relationship-movies/movie-list-and-questions.pdf)** with intimate relationships as a major plot focus and asked to watch one a week for the next month, followed by the same guided discussion for about 45 minutes.

Which approach proved most effective? To the surprise of the researchers, all worked equally well. All three methods halved the divorce-and-separation rate to 11 percent compared to the 24 percent rate among the couples in the control group. Partners in the control group received no training or instructions but were otherwise similar in age, education, ethnicity, relationship satisfaction, and other dimensions.

Discussing relationship movies, it turns out, was just as effective as more intensive skills-building programs. The results suggest that many couples already possess relationship skills, they just need reminders to put these into practice, the authors conclude. "And that's an amazingly fertile idea. It's more sensible and it's cheaper," said Bradbury.

Since people watch movies all the time, what exactly makes this intervention so magic? "I think it's the couples reinvesting in their relationship and taking a cold hard look at their own behavior that makes the difference," explained Rogge. "The sad truth is that when life knocks you down, you come home and the people you are most likely to lash out at in frustration are the ones you love the most. For these couples to stop and look and say, 'You know, I have yelled at you like that before. I have called you names before and that's not nice. That's not what I want to do to the person I love the most.' Just that insight alone, is likely what makes this intervention work."

For couples who are uncomfortable with relationship workshops and group interventions, the movie-and-talk approach can be an alternative. "You might not be able to get your husband into a couples group, especially when you are happy," said Rogge. "But watching a movie together and having a discussion, that's not so scary. It's less pathologizing, less stigmatizing."

Since some of the newlyweds in the study had been together for as many as seven years, Rogge speculated that the movie method would be helpful for long-term marriages as well. "Taking time to sit down and take an objective look at your relationship with your partner is going to be helpful for any couple at any stage. They can make it a yearly thing they do around their anniversary—watch a movie together and talk about it. That would be a fantastic thing to do and a great present to give themselves each year."

For couples interested in trying the film discussions for themselves, Rogge's lab website (www.couples-research.com (<http://www.courses.rochester.edu/surveys/funk/>)) offers interactive tools to help with the process, including lists of movies and the discussion questions used. Couples can also sign up to participate in a follow-up online study of the movie-and-talk intervention at the site.

Rebecca Cobb from Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada, Erika Lawrence from the University of Iowa, and Matthew Johnson from Binghamton University also contributed to this study. The research was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation awarded to Bradbury.

The Movies

 screenshot of PDF says What Is Your Love Story?

The movies used in this study are listed below, followed by a list of newer movies that can also be used in this exercise.

[Download and print the movie lists and guided discussion questions \(movie-list-and-questions.pdf\)](#)

[Sign up to become a participant in the study \(http://www.courses.rochester.edu/surveys/funk/\)](http://www.courses.rochester.edu/surveys/funk/)

Movies from the study

[A Star Is Born \(1954\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047522/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047522/)

Judy Garland and James Mason

[Adam's Rib \(1949\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041090/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041090/)

Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn

[Anna Karenina \(2012\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1781769/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1781769/)

Keira Knightley and Jude Law

[As Good as It Gets \(1997\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119822/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119822/)

Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt

[Barefoot in the Park \(1967\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061385/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061385/)

Robert Redford and Jane Fonda

[Children of a Lesser God \(1986\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090830/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090830/)

William Hurt and Marlee Matlin

[Days of Wine and Roses \(1962\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055895/)

Jack Lemmon and Lee Remick

[Desk Set \(1957\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050307/)

Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn

[Dying Young \(1991\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101787/)

Julia Roberts and Campbell Scott

[Fools Rush In \(1997\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119141/)

Matthew Perry and Salma Hayek

[Forget Paris \(1995\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113097/)

Billy Crystal and Debra Winger

[French Twist \(1995\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113149/)

Patrick Aubrée and Josiane Balasko

[Funny Girl \(1968\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062994/)

Barbra Streisand and Omar Sharif

[Gone With the Wind \(1939\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031381/)

Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh

[Guess Who's Coming to Dinner \(1967\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061735/)

Spencer Tracy and Sidney Poitier

[Hanover Street \(1979\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079268/)

Harrison Ford and Lesley-Anne Down

[Husbands and Wives \(1992\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104466/)

Woody Allen and Mia Farrow

[Indecent Proposal \(1993\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107211/)

Robert Redford and Demi Moore

[Jungle Fever \(1991\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102175/)

Wesley Snipes and Anna Sciorra

[Love Jones \(1997\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119572/)

Larenz Tate and Nia Long

[Love Story \(1970\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066011/)

Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal

[Made for Each Other \(1939\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031602/)

Carole Lombard and James Stewart

[Mississippi Masala \(1991\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102456/)

Denzel Washington and Sarita Choudhury

[Move Over, Darling \(1963\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057329/)

Doris Day and James Garner

[Mr. Blandings Builds his Dreamhouse \(1948\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040613/)

Cary Grant and Myrna Loy

[My Favorite Wife \(1940\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0029284/)

Irene Dunne and Cary Grant

[Nina Takes a Lover \(1994\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110671/)

Laura San Giacomo and Paul Rhys

[Nine Months \(1995\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113986/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113986/)

Hugh Grant and Julianne Moore

[On Golden Pond \(1981\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082846/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082846/)

Katharine Hepburn and Henry Fonda

[Pat and Mike \(1952\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045012/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045012/)

Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn

[Penny Serenade \(1941\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034012/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034012/)

Cary Grant and Irene Dunne

[Phfft \[Pfft!\] \(1954\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047349/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047349/)

Judy Holliday and Jack Lemmon

[Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker \(1994\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110769/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110769/)

Jing Ning and Gang Wu

[She's Having a Baby \(1988\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096094/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096094/)

Kevin Bacon and Elizabeth McGovern

[Steel Magnolias \(1989\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098384/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098384/)

Shirley MacLaine and Olympia Dukakis

[Terms of Endearment \(1983\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086425/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086425/)

Shirley MacLaine and Debra Winger

[The Devil's Advocate \(1997\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118971/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118971/)

Keanu Reeves and Al Pacino

[The Egg and I \(1947\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039349/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039349/)

Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray

[The Male Animal \(1942\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035020/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035020/)

Henry Fonda and Olivia de Havilland

[The Out of Towners \(1999\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0129280/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0129280/)

Steve Martin and Goldie Hawn

[The Thin Man \(1934\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025878/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025878/)

William Powell and Myrna Loy

[The Way We Were \(1973\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070903/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070903/)

Barbara Streisand and Robert Redford

[Untamed Heart \(1993\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108451/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108451/)

Christian Slater and Marisa Tomei

[When a Man Loves a Woman \(1994\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111693/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111693/)

Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia

[Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? \(1966\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061184/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061184/)

Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton

[With Six You Get Eggroll \(1968\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0063821/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0063821/)

Doris Day and Brian Keith

[Yours, Mine and Ours \(2005\) \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443295/\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443295/)

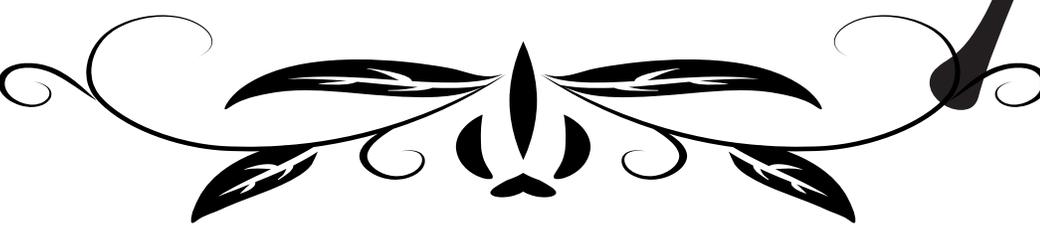
Dennis Quaid and Renne Russo

[Complete list of movies, with new movies to try \(movie-list.html\)](#)



What's Your

Love Story?



INSTRUCTIONS

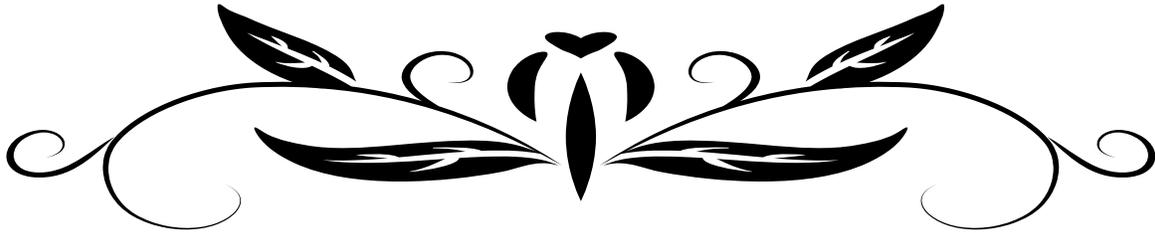
Each of these movies features intimate relationships as a major plot focus. Watch one movie a week together then discuss the 11 movie discussion questions as a couple for about 45 minutes.

Movies used in the study

A Star Is Born	Husbands and Wives	Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker
Adam's Rib	Indecent Proposal	She's Having a Baby
Anna Karenina	Jungle Fever	Steel Magnolias
As Good As It Gets	Love Jones	Terms of Endearment
Barefoot in the Park	Love Story	The Devil's Advocate
Children of a Lesser God	Made for Each Other	The Egg and I
Days of Wine and Roses	Mississippi Masala	The Male Animal
Desk Set	Move Over, Darling	The Out of Towners
Dying Young	Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse	The Thin Man
Fools Rush In	My Favorite Wife	The Way We Were
Forget Paris	Nina Takes a Lover	Untamed Heart
French Twist	Nine Months	When a Man Loves a Woman
Funny Girl	On Golden Pond	Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf
Gone with the Wind	Pat and Mike	With Six You Get Eggroll
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner	Penny Serenade	Yours, Mine and Ours
Hanover Street	Pfft!	

Additional movies to try

American Beauty	Julie & Julia	The Bounty Hunter
Anger Management	Jumping the Broom	The Breakup
Autumn in New York	Just Married	The Campaign
Bee Season	Life as We Know It	The Door in the Floor
Before Sunset	Longtime Companion	The Good Girl
Blue Valentine	Love and Other Drugs	The Horse Whisperer
Coal Miner's Daughter	Marley and Me	The Marriage Chronicles
Couples Retreat	Meet the Fockers	The Mirror Has Two Faces
Crooklyn	Monster-in-Law	The Money Pit
Date Night	Mr. & Mrs. Smith	The Notebook
Deliver Us from Eva	Obsessed	The Story of Us
Devil Wears Prada	Something's Gotta Give	Think Like a Man
Family Man	Surviving Christmas	True Lies
Father of the Bride	Sweet Home Alabama	Unfaithful
Fool's Gold	Sweet November	Waiting to Exhale
Four Christmases	The Five-Year Engagement	Wanderlust
Her	The Backup Plan	Why Did I Get Married?
Hope Springs	The Big Wedding	You, Me and Dupree
It's Complicated		



Movie Discussion Questions

DIRECTIONS: Please use the following questions to discuss the relationships portrayed in the movie. Once you've discussed a specific question, write your joint answer in the space provided.

What movie did you watch? _____

1. What was the main relationship portrayed in the movie? This is the relationship that you will focus on in the following questions.
2. What main problem(s) did this couple face? Are any of these similar to the problems that the two of you have faced or might face as a couple?
3. Did this couple strive to understand each other? Did they tend to accept one another, even if they were very different? Or did the couple tend to attack each others' differences?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

4. Did the couple have a strong friendship with each other? Were they able to support each other through bad moods, stressful days, and hard times? Did they listen to each other like good friends? Did the couple in the movie do considerate or affectionate things for each other?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

Movie Discussion Questions

5. How did the couple handle arguments or differences of opinion? Were they able to open up and tell each other how they really felt, or did they tend to just snap at each other with anger? Did they try using humor to keep things from getting nasty? Did it feel like they were really trying to understand each other?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

6. If the couple got into arguments, did they tend to become heated? Did the couple ever start attacking each other, getting increasingly mean and hostile? Did they end up saying things they didn't really mean? Once this started happening, how did the arguments tend to end?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

7. When one of the partners brought up a problem, did he or she seem to do it in a constructive way (keeping things specific, explaining his or her feelings without attacking), or did it seem more like an attack? Did it seem like bringing up a problem became an assassination of the partner's character?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

8. How did the couple in the movie handle hurt feelings? Did they apologize to each other? Did the apologies seem sincere? Did they tend to jump to negative conclusions when their feelings got hurt, or did they tend to give each other the benefit of the doubt?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

Movie Discussion Questions

9. Did the partners seem to have similar expectations of their relationship? Where did their expectations differ? Did it seem like they were aware of their own expectations? Were their expectations reasonable? Did they share their expectations with each other?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

10. What other things happened in the movie that might lead you to think differently about your relationship/marriage?

11. What other comments do you have about this movie?

How relevant was this movie to your own relationship?

Not at all Somewhat Very Much

How entertaining was this movie?

Not at all Somewhat Very Much

How would you rate this movie's overall quality?

Very Poor Average Excellent

The Washington Post

PostEverything

I'm a therapist. Movies are the best tool I have to help my patients.

A well chosen film can help patients change their perspective and behavior.



By **Elisabeth LaMotte** February 19, 2015

Elisabeth LaMotte is a therapist and the founder of the DC Counseling and Psychotherapy Center.

When a shy client named Angie came in needing help, I recommended an unusual course of treatment: a movie screening.

Angie (whose name has been changed to protect her identity) grew up in an isolated, rural area with few friends and little exposure to life outside her family's farm. She was a gifted computer programmer but was uninterested in her physical appearance. Her hair and clothing often looked unwashed; she wore the same denim jacket week after week. Angie had never had a boyfriend, and longed for a romantic connection.

It took time and hard work, but Angie began taking better care of herself. She eventually met a down-to-earth, wonderful guy in her building, and they hit it off. When she ended therapy, I asked her to tell me what, if anything, was most helpful.

"Honestly," she said, "what helped the most was when you suggested that I watch 'Punch Drunk Love.'" This quirky love story starring Adam Sandler and Emily Watson looks at what falling in love looks like when one or both people struggle with intimacy. Angie explained:

Seeing these two awkward characters trying so hard to connect, and watching their imperfect but beautiful union, helped me feel less alone. The kissing scene was so much like my own experiences. And believe me, my personal kissing scenes are way different than the easy breezy fireworks that others describe. That movie showed me that I'm not

as much of a freak as I thought, and I promised myself that if Emily Watson's eccentric character could find love, so could I.

Angie is far from unique.

Fifteen years of private psychotherapy practice has taught me that transformations have unexpected catalysts. Therapists are trained to help clients dig deep into their psyches, family histories and daily struggles. But to achieve real change, we need to help people gain space from their problems.

I've found that one of the most effective ways to achieve that space – and to ignite a dramatic psychological shift – is to kick back and watch the right film.

Recently, for example, I worked with a client in his late 20s who came to therapy humiliated by his live-in girlfriend's discovery of his online porn habit. Jeff (whose name has been changed) was raised Catholic and expressed tremendous guilt.

As Jeff and I explored his wish to be less drawn to porn, he opened up about the aspects in his relationship with Jen that felt unbalanced. Jen had chosen every meal, every joint activity and even Jeff's new job. He had been prohibited from hanging out with his high school and college buddies.

Through our work together, Jeff realized that Jen was the problem, not porn. He began dating women with whom he felt permission to be himself.

When we ended, Jeff also pointed to a film as the true catalyst for his transformation. He told me:

This may sound strange, but what made the biggest single difference was when you suggested that I watch the movie *Don Jon*. The film made me realize I'm not such a bad guy just because I watched some porn. I know we discussed this in our sessions. But watching that character felt more believable than anything you could say or do. The movie also pointed out that women like Jen obsess on other forms of fantasy that are just as messed up as too much porn. I don't need it anymore, and that movie changed my views about it anyway.

Why does this work? In my experience, clients who find movies helpful say that the experience of watching characters experience parallel adversity helps them feel less isolated.

Additionally, if a friend, family member, romantic partner — or even a therapist — intervenes with advice, this can come across as condescending. When an intervention feels patronizing or forced, the recipient of the advice may lash out.

But watching a film with a relevant character takes condescension out of the equation and allows the viewer to reflect on his behavior in a much less intimidating format. Cinema therapy gives permission for a client to organically pick and choose what pieces of the puzzle he feels ready to integrate in order to change. When a character in a film reflects a patient's flaws, it can help the patient absorb his or her role in conflicts.

In this mode, clinicians become less central to the therapy, but not irrelevant. They must select the right films. Furthermore, the film viewing is followed by clinician-structured, thoughtful discussions of the material, so that the viewer engages with the film.

I am so convinced that targeted film viewing accelerates positive therapy outcomes that I draft a quick review of any film I come across. I catalogue these reviews online, and clients can access the reviews and I reduce the likelihood that I will overlook or forget a film that could be beneficial.

Films must be chosen with caution so that clients are not re-traumatized over overstimulated. For example, the film "When a Man Loves a Woman" has helped some of my clients through substance abuse recovery, but a film as violent as "Leaving Las Vegas" could be too unsettling and might even trigger a relapse. Similarly, the film "Take This Waltz" can help someone navigate an attraction to someone other than their spouse. However, it is unwise for them to watch this film if their spouse is around, as the result could be explosive.

* * *

Although there are few studies on my particular brand of movie therapy, recent research suggests that films can play an important role in treatment.

A 2013 University of Rochester study asked couples to watch the 1967 film “Two for the Road,” about a husband and wife reflecting on the high and low points in their marriage. Afterward, study participants engaged in an hour-long, clinically guided conversation on marital themes such as conflict, stress and forgiveness. They were then sent home with a list of 47 films and instructed to watch one film together each week. They also were given discussion questions.

Three years later, couples with no intervention had a divorce rate at 24 percent. Couples who had watched the films had an 11 percent divorce rate.

“A movie is a nonthreatening way to get the conversation started,” lead researcher Ronald D. Rogge told [the New York Times](#). “It’s really exciting because it makes it so much easier to reach out to couples and help them strengthen their relationships on a wide scale.”

In [another 2014 study](#), researchers had patients hospitalized for mental health issues watch clinically relevant films. For example, patients with schizophrenia viewed the film “A Beautiful Mind.”

The study found that “movies can be an important, positive and productive means of treatment. . . . The movies served as extended metaphors in the therapy sessions. They thus helped to create a better understanding and to promote different ways of expressing thoughts. It seemed that the movies represented a mirror reflecting the inner world of the patients.”

Group Process and the Cinema: Generating Clinical Momentum and Facilitating Change

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