

# REEL THERAPY

FAST-FORWARD A LOW MOOD, OR BRING FRESH, CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO OLD PROBLEMS—ALL WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM THE FLICKS

by PAULA ROBINSON

**“NO ART PASSES OUR CONSCIENCE IN THE WAY FILM DOES, AND GOES DIRECTLY TO OUR FEELINGS.”**

—Ingmar Bergman, Swedish filmmaker

Last week, my family and I moved house. Research suggests that moving is the second most stressful event (after losing a loved one) that can happen in your life—a finding I can totally relate to! In an effort to forget about our domestic chaos of unpacked boxes, we went to the movies. We agreed that an uplifting film would put us in a better frame of mind, so we chose *The Blind Side* starring Sandra Bullock. The whole family came out of the cinema feeling good; on our way home, we discussed the flood of positive human characteristics that leapt from the screen: the leading lady’s kindness and creativity, the footy-playing protagonist’s determination and sincerity. I was struck by just how much the film refreshed us.

It reminded me that cinema has such potential to change the way we think, feel and deal with life’s ups and downs.

In a simple way, movies can show us we’re not alone—that others experience tough times and still triumph. Psychologists Ryan M Niemiec and Danny Wedding, authors of *Positive Psychology at the Movies* (\$84.99; Hogrefe & Huber), argue that the language of film is universal: it transcends barriers and differences and unveils new solutions to stale problems.

Take a marriage that’s hit a roadblock, for instance. My client, John, came to see me when he and his wife of 20 years were struggling to move forward together. A few years earlier, he’d admitted to having an affair. Though the infidelity was long over, John’s wife was still wrestling with forgiveness, unable to see how they could make things work.

To give them a stronger sense of hope, I suggested they watch *A Walk on the Moon* starring Diane Lane as Pearl and Liev Schreiber as Marty. The couple endures an affair, yet the characters succeed at repairing their damaged relationship. In the movie’s final scene, they dance on the porch to Marty’s favourite tunes. In the middle of the dance, he changes the music to Pearl’s favourites. Here, he acknowledges that Pearl can, in fact, influence him, and the film as a whole demonstrates that couples *can* find ways to work through their difficulties.

If you’re facing similar circumstances, it’s worth noting that Pearl and Marty

## WHY WE CRY AT THE MOVIES

When you watch a film, your body releases the ‘bonding chemical’ oxytocin, which creates an emotional connection between you, the story and its characters. This occurs because your brain may not realise it’s ‘just’ a movie, suggests research from Claremont University in the US. So, when devastating events or happy endings unfold so that emotions run high for the characters, you’re right there with them.





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recapture their romance with a caring approach that includes intimacy, togetherness and compromise. After the credits rolled, my client and his wife felt elated; the film made them more optimistic about their future as a couple.

Though movies can't replace therapy, they can inspire you to take action in your own life or to help those around you. Realistically, you may not experience this every time you see a movie, but after a particularly moving film, ask yourself: did it provide avenues for meaning I could apply to my own life? Did it help me reflect on my own strengths and how I could use them more often? And what could I now do differently? **D**

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## MOOD-CHANGING MOVIES

### 1. FEELING SAD

» **FILM FIX:** Choose a comedy. Stanford University researchers found that laughing triggers the release of dopamine, a natural opiate that makes you feel happier and less wound-up in your own thoughts. See *Burn After Reading* or *Kenny*.

### 2. FEELING HOPELESS

» **FILM FIX:** Look for a tale of hope rising out of adversity. Optimistic thoughts improve your level of wellbeing. Choose *Sideways*, *Patch Adams* or *The Power of One*. Afterwards, make a list of activities you've always wanted to try, then book one in. Simply having something to look forward to lifts your spirits.

### 3. FEELING ANGRY

» **FILM FIX:** When you manage anger in a controlled way, you get more from your relationships. This doesn't mean suppressing angry feelings—just dealing with them assertively. *Milk* and *Forrest Gump* illustrate how logical thought and emotional control can conquer angry outbursts.

### 4. FEELING ANXIOUS

» **FILM FIX:** If you're frightened about the future, consider how you could 'borrow' a little inner courage. Likely suspects are *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Departures* and *Erin Brockovich*. When you're in a bad headspace, stories such as these remind us that you never know what might happen tomorrow.