CINEMA THERAPY:

USING FILM TO FACILITATE CHANGE THROUGH CBT

Pepper Humphrey

Graduate School of Education and Psychology,
Pepperdine University

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Dr. Rashida Ingram

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Introduction



- Trauma can disrupt emotional processing and expression
- Clients may struggle to verbalize internal experiences
- Distress may show up as resistance or feeling “stuck”
- Need for more engaging, experiential approaches
- Film offers a third-person perspective for reflection

Overview of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- Focuses on thoughts, emotions, and behaviors
- Identifies cognitive distortions
- Uses cognitive restructuring to promote change
- CBT is evidence-based and widely used



Image: Goodwill Hunting



Overview of Cinema Therapy

- Use of films or video clips in therapy
- Encourages reflection and insight
- Supports emotional processing through storytelling
- Creates distance from direct personal disclosure
- Film creates a “safe distance” to explore thoughts and emotions (third-person perspective)

Article Summary



- *Reviewed 38 studies using film or video interventions*
- *36 studies reported positive outcomes*
- *Increased emotional awareness and insight*
- *Improved coping skills and behavioral change*
- *Higher engagement in therapy*
- *Applied across diverse populations and conditions*
- *Limitation: lack of standardized methods*

Image: Lost in Yonkers

Key Findings



Image: Shrek 2

- Increased emotional recognition and labeling through character identification
- Cognitive restructuring supported by observing alternative thoughts and outcomes
- Behavioral rehearsal through modeled coping and decision-making
- Enhanced therapeutic engagement via shared narrative and reduced defensiveness

Mechanisms of Action

- Identification with characters
- Emotional catharsis
- Insight and reflection
- Development of new coping strategies



Film & TV in CBT

- Identify automatic thoughts through character experiences
- Recognize and challenge cognitive distortions
- Explore emotional responses in a safe, indirect way
- Practice cognitive restructuring and alternative thinking



Image: Inside Out

Examples of Film and TV Scenes

FILM	CBT CONCEPTS
Big Fish	Narrative processing; meaning-making and family reconciliation
Inside Out	Emotion identification and regulation
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind	Processing painful memories; cognitive reappraisal
The Skeleton Twins	Emotional expression; reducing avoidance and shame
Good Will Hunting	Core belief restructuring; trauma and attachment
In & Out	Identity exploration; challenging fear-based thinking
Ordinary People	Emotional processing; confronting avoidance and grief
Finding Nemo	Resilience; exposure and adaptive coping
Mary Poppins	Cognitive reframing; perspective shifting through imagination
Dead Poets Society	Identity development; challenging limiting beliefs
Hugo	Meaning-making & identity reconstruction



Benefits of Film-Based Interventions

- Increases engagement in therapy
- Builds rapport between client and therapist
- Provides concrete examples of abstract concepts
- Encourages active participation and reflection

Image: In Treatment



- Identify automatic thoughts through character experiences
- Pause scenes to explore emotional and physiological responses
- Analyze cognitive distortions in real time
- Practice cognitive restructuring using alternative perspectives
- Use role-play to rehearse new coping strategies
- Assign clips as structured homework with guided reflection

Clinical Applications

Image: A Beautiful Mind

Trauma Informed Considerations



- Ensure client choice and consent
- Avoid triggering or overwhelming content
- Use grounding and debriefing techniques
- Maintain emotional safety throughout

Image: Euphoria



Implications for Counseling Practice

- Rapid growth in cinematherapy and video-based interventions
- Methods are inconsistent; outcomes often subjective
- Need for more standardized protocols
- Opportunity to strengthen integration of film in clinical practice
- Film can model alternative beliefs and behaviors in relatable ways

Image: Little Miss Sunshine



Reflection

- Film reinforces adaptive beliefs like perseverance and self-efficacy
- Expanded understanding of CBT applications
- Importance of creativity in counseling
- Value of meeting clients where they are

Image: The Pursuit of Happyness



Conclusion

- Film enhances emotional processing by making internal experiences visible
- Supports emotional awareness, coping, and engagement in therapy (as reflected in the literature)
- CBT provides structure for insight, cognitive restructuring, and behavior change
- Trauma-informed care ensures emotional safety and client-centered pacing
- Most effective when used intentionally within a structured framework like CBT
- Film + CBT = emotional insight + structured change

Reflection Questions

- Think about a film or scene that has stayed with you, something that really stuck emotionally. What was it about that moment that made it meaningful?
- How do you think using film might shift the way clients engage in therapy, especially those who struggle with traditional talk-based approaches?
- And as future clinicians, what stands out to you in terms of how you might use this, or what you'd want to be mindful of, especially from a trauma-informed perspective?



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