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Releasing Negative Beliefs through the Transformational Power of Film

by **Birgit Wolz, PhD, MFT**

When we watch a film, we all know that we are seeing a highly edited version of reality. The film's creators have selectively chosen to highlight some events and leave out others in order to evoke certain feelings and focus our attention on certain themes. They create an illusion of reality and we make a decision to accept it as real. In a similar way, each of us looks at our everyday reality through a highly personal lens. We may think and feel as if we are seeing an objective reality but, in fact, we choose to edit out certain information and experiences and focus on others. We see life through the filter of our own personal histories, beliefs, and blind spots. As with a movie, we make a decision to believe in our perspective on reality. Unlike a movie, our decision is generally an unconscious one.

In this article I describe how I use this movie analogy as a tool to help clients become conscious of, question, and eventually release negative views about themselves and life.

Misleading Beliefs and the Inner Movie

Our beliefs can help us or they can mislead us. I explain to clients that our beliefs are usually formed in childhood as an adaptive response to our reality at that time. Later in life these beliefs about ourselves and about people are often not accurate reflections of the current reality. In other words, they are cognitive distortions. Cognitive distortions can prevent us from developing healthy self-esteem and realizing our goals in life. I teach my clients that what they take to be real is, in fact, a highly edited, thoroughly filtered version of reality. I encourage them to think of it as their personal myth of reality.

The following metaphor is useful in helping clients understand how questioning their perceptions can lead to growth and healing:

Our eyes and ears can be likened to a camera and microphone, through which we see and hear the world.¹ Instead of actually witnessing reality directly, we watch what I call an inner movie, on a screen inside our heads. And this screen, it turns out, is often unreliable.

Our inner movie plays the story that we tell ourselves about the world around us and about who we are. The "plot" of our inner movie often tells a story about the world and ourselves that is based on early life experiences. Several factors can determine what shows up on our screen: Habits and coping mechanisms, emotional states, previous emotionally traumatic experiences, personal philosophies, prejudices, values, etc.

Not only are our inner movies impacted by these mental, physical, and emotional factors, but our inner movies themselves, in turn, affect our perception of ourselves, the world and, subsequently, our behavior. Undesired inner movies can produce a chain reaction: Undesired inner movie => negative belief => undesired feeling => undesired behavior => further undesired feelings, and so on.

Case Example

My client, Thelma, was frequently criticized by her father when she was young. This created a psychological imprint that I call her undesired inner movie. Projecting this childhood "movie" on today's reality, she struggled with the conviction that there was something wrong with her, that she was not good

enough and that therefore she did not have a right to speak up and express her needs — negative belief. Thelma often felt depressed and anxious — undesired feelings.

Because Thelma believed that expressing her desires could potentially lead to conflict, she often kept quiet and complied whenever a conflict arose —undesired behavior. As a result of her undesired behavior, Thelma then felt resentful toward any person to whom she surrendered, especially her husband, and did not even know why — more undesired feelings.

Like many of my clients, Thelma loved movies. So she was very open to movie metaphors and excited about my suggestion to view a film. I used her movie experience in conjunction with a cognitive approach and reflections about her childhood influences. Morty Lefkoe's Decision Maker Process² offers a concise and well-structured technique, from which I drew the following four-step intervention:

Step 1: Identifying an "Old Home Movie"

I asked Thelma to close her eyes and said: "In your mind's eye, imagine sitting in front of your television at home and watching a film on a video. You are watching an old home movie, a scene that shows your father criticizing you."

Step 2: Examining the "Old Home Movie"

When she saw the "scene" I continued: "Now imagine that you take your remote control and rewind your old home movie and play it again. This time, look specifically at the events that led to your negative belief. Try to watch as an objective observer. Is it possible there could be a second interpretation? Perhaps, instead of the cause being 'There's something wrong with me,' is it possible that your father's behavior might have a number of different meanings, each as valid as your original interpretation? For example: 'My father thought that being critical would motivate me to excel' or 'My father had inadequate parenting skills,' ... (I mentioned several others.)

After Thelma opened her eyes she understood that each of these meanings was as valid as the one she had chosen as a child. This intervention opened a door to a different story about herself and her father, and thus a different inner movie.

Step 3: Playing a Different Inner Movie

Now I asked Thelma to select a movie from a list that I provided: Fried Green Tomatoes (1991), The Full Monty (1997), Muriel's Wedding (1994), My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002), Places in the Heart (1984), and Where the Heart Is (2000)). In these films one or several characters achieve the self-respect and self-acceptance that I wanted Thelma to internalize. I also gave Thelma David Burn's list of cognitive distortions.³

Thelma chose to watch My Big Fat Greek Wedding at home. During the prior session I asked her to notice which kind of cognitive distortion the main character, Toula, displays in the early part of the film, whether Thelma recognizes her own struggle with similar distortions and how Toula changed. Then the movie did its "magic." By watching Toula's transformation, Thelma "copied" the character's healing experience into her own inner movie screen and at the same time "erased" her old, undesired inner film. The newly superimposed wholesome movie started a healthy chain reaction and helped break the negative one: Wholesome inner movie => healthy beliefs => desired feelings.

Step 4: Recording the Healthy Belief

I instructed Thelma to write her new, healthy belief on several pieces of paper or cards, and to place these notes at prominent places in her house so that she could see them frequently throughout the day. This way the new "copy" of Thelma's healthier inner movie could sink more deeply into her unconscious.

Within a few weeks Thelma developed a positive self-image that led to increased autonomy in her relationships and success at work.

The lessons many clients gain from motion pictures can deepen and strengthen their efforts to change themselves. Because movies speak directly to the heart and spirit, they bypass the resistance we put up in our conscious mind. Clients intuitively understand the meaning that is inherent in the story of a film.

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