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Why a Christmas movie can make us feel good

If you're settling down with Christmas movies this festive season, this could be doing you a lot of good. Taking time to chill out in front of the screen may seem like an indulgence, but it can give your mental health a boost and even help you to open up to others. With help from a movie therapist, we explore why.

Escape with a Christmas movie

Being fully engaged in a movie can mean we zone out and become lost in the story. As well as being enjoyable, this sensation of becoming absorbed in the film is almost like hypnosis. By switching off the chatter of our conscious mind, we tap into the subconscious, even if we don't realise it.

Movie therapist Lynn Anderton says: "Sometimes people go into a trancelike state when watching a movie. They are able to get away from reality and engage with underlying emotions."

The plot

While we may enjoy taking in a TV series or shorter programmes during the festive season, movies are particularly helpful as they take us through the different stages of a story, coming to a resolution.

"A movie usually has three parts that look like this," explains Anderton. "It starts with a crisis or something that needs to be changed. The middle part is where the character is learning how to make this change, and the end has the protagonist take some action in order to resolve the crisis. It's a process, taking the viewer through a range of emotions."

This makes movies particularly useful when it comes to giving our mental health a boost – as we are not left with troubling questions or confusing plotlines. We are able to go through the experience with the characters and enjoy the outcome, which is often happy.

Old movies, old friends

Christmas is often a time when we tune in to movies we've watched and loved over a long period of time. Many of us find ourselves revisiting our old favourites, from "Home Alone" and "The Santa Clause", to "It's a Wonderful Life!" and "A Christmas Carol".

This makes festive movies great for reflection – we may recall how we felt when we first watched the movie, or realise we are viewing the film in a new way, perhaps identifying with a different character than before.

"Coming towards the end of the year is a good time for reflection," says Anderton. "Watching a familiar film can help us to tune into that sense of time passing, and think about the year gone by."

"Christmas movies can be more complex than we imagine," the therapist adds. "Sometimes we may watch them once and it might make us feel good. Other times, we explore different themes or character journeys, or notice something new when watching the movie again."

Emotional release

When we're really engaged in a movie, we often experience some of the main character's emotions – whether it's fear, anger or joy. This can enable some of us – especially those who find it difficult to tap into their emotions – to identify our own feelings, or release built up tension.

"Going through an emotion while watching a film can take away the difficulty of confronting an emotion within ourselves," says Anderton. "Some films can have a huge impact on people, especially those who find it hard to open up. They are able to release some of their emotions."

"In addition, seeing a character going through certain relatable trauma can make some feel less alone."

More than just festive fun

It's easy to imagine Christmas movies as frivolous or silly. While those elements definitely exist, even the most light-hearted plots often contain deeper messages and ask us to explore a range of emotions.

Anderton explains: "While many Christmas films are light-hearted, they also have dark elements. Christmas is one of those times of year when lots of emotions may surface. Movies such as "It's a Wonderful Life" or "A Christmas Carol" can be quite dark in places, but there is resolution by the end of the film. This creates the perfect opportunity for reflection."

It's good to talk

If you really want to maximise the mental health boost of watching a favourite Christmas movie – yes, even "Die Hard" – then take a moment to talk with others after the film.

Doing this will enable you to engage with them and their emotions, without being too direct or personal, and may help you to understand more about your friends and family and how they feel.

"It can be useful to talk about it afterwards," agrees Anderton. "Everyone will have had a different take. Everyone will be coming at the film from a different angle."

Mental health boost

If you find Christmas movies an enjoyable and restful activity this December, you can consider this a form of self-care that does your mental health a lot of good. Setting this time aside is especially important if you're experiencing [Christmas burnout](#) or feeling [the financial pressures](#) of the season.

"You are creating and experiencing emotions you may have put aside in real life," says Anderton. "You're giving yourself the opportunity for reflection, and a chance to connect with others. You may identify with a character and come to a better understanding of how you feel and why."

Remember, self-care is a great use of your time, so enjoy your festive viewing.

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