

[Mental Health at the Movies](#)

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The quiet days following Thanksgiving invite us to slow down a bit. In New York, it is dark by 5 PM, so all the more reason to curl up on the sofa to watch a movie or two. After the Charlie Brown special, what's worth watching?



[Photo Credit](#)

From feature films to documentaries to shorts, cinema helps tell the personal and common mental health stories of many people and diverse communities. Here are some great movies that I have watched recently that inspired me and got me thinking.

1. Chasing Childhood. Recently premiering online at the 2020 DOC NYC film festival, this 80-minute documentary can be screened [here](#) through November 30th. [Chasing Childhood](#) is a rally cry for letting kids be kids. Focusing on three diverse communities, the film highlights the mental health costs of paradoxically overprotecting and over-stressing kids today. Children are not allowed to ride the bus by themselves or go out to play without supervision, but they are expected to have a full program of music lessons, team sports and after-school activities - all scheduled, and all assets on college applications. I have written about the value of making time for [boredom](#) and [play](#). There's no doubt that its evaporation from everyday life has real consequences in terms of [increased mental health problems for young people today](#). My only quibble with the film is the overly nostalgic depiction of "the way things were."

2. The Best Years of Our Lives. Released in 1946, this Academy Award-winning film directed by William Wyler tells the story of three World War II veterans who struggle with various mental health issues when they return to their small Midwestern town and attempt to reintegrate into civilian life. After my [Five on Friday on veterans and trauma](#), several readers recommended this movie to me, including award winning filmmaker Sandra Luckow who says it is one of the best films of all time. Thank you! Ahead of its time, [The Best Years of Our Lives](#) illustrates struggles wrought by what we call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder today. In the spirit of great storytelling, this film delivers on the core mission of fiction. It tells the truth. It captures exquisitely the challenges experienced by generations of returning veterans, including the trauma of combat and its persistent injury to the psychological health and well-being of its sufferers.

3. It's Kind of A Funny Story. Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, [this feature film](#) tells the story of an over-stressed, over-achieving 16-year old (see [Chasing Childhood](#) above) who voluntarily checks himself into the psychiatric ward of a hospital after experiencing suicidal thoughts. The adolescent unit is closed for renovation so he has to spend his mandated five-day stay on the adult unit. This comedic twist lands him on a ward with Bobby (played by Zach Galifianakis), who becomes a mentor to him and another teen, Noelle (Emma Roberts), who becomes a love interest. The film is big hearted and funny. Most importantly, and most beautifully, the film captures the extraordinary healing that occurs when pretenses are left at the door and people discover they can trust each other, share their truth without judgment, and be loved for who they are.

4. Bedlam. Written and directed by psychiatrist Kenneth Paul Rosenberg, MD, [Bedlam](#) is a great read and a great documentary. An Official Selection of the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, [Bedlam](#) explores the inextricable link between the current mental health crisis and the penitentiary system of the United States. The three largest jails in the country are NYC Riker's Island, LA County Twin Towers, and Chicago Cook County. They are also the nation's three largest psychiatric treatment facilities. Shot over five years, the film follows the lives of three patients whose experiences expose the failings of this arrangement. Rosenberg adds his own family's story of how the system failed his late sister, Merle, who suffered from schizophrenia. It is a sobering call for reform and a hopeful vision for a better system.

5. Ernie & Joe (Crisis Cops). Director Jenifer McShane filmed this documentary by following Ernie Stevens and Joe Smarro, two members of the San Antonio Police Department's ten-person mental health unit. With a vision of a different kind of police response that recognizes the significance of mental health, Ernie and Joe employ a 'compassionate approach' to policing. Guided by the principle that mental illness is not a criminal offense, they work to get people to treatment rather than send them to jail. Across the country, police departments are striving to develop teams that are better educated and more fully prepared to humanely and effectively address mental health needs in their community. Success will depend on ensuring that good community alternatives exist for supporting individuals with serious mental health needs. [Ernie & Joe](#) shares great insights for us all.

In addition to these films that you can watch from your sofa this weekend, I want to share a shout out for the [New York City Mental Health Film Festival](#) that will be held online next week - Tuesday (Dec 1), Thursday (Dec 3) and Saturday (Dec 5). Established in 2005, the NYC Mental Health Film Festival is the oldest and largest festival of its kind in the United States. This free, virtual event features a line-up of 20 short-form films directed by a diverse and talented group of filmmakers.

Pop some corn, pick your flick, it's time for mental health at the movies.