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Super Grief and Loss: The Presence (and Absence) of Therapy in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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ABSTRACT

Grief and loss are frequently viewed with dread and are subject to denial in Western culture. In comic books and superhero movies, happy endings and the "retcon," or narrative erasure of the demise of characters, render death not-so-final and infinitely more deniable. Further, loss serves as a cinematic trope to move the plot line forward. This article explores the way that grief, and therapy, are and are not represented in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and focuses on two notable exceptions, a support group in *Avengers: Endgame*, and relationship therapy in the series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Through a feminist lens, the authors investigate the ways in which relational therapy is portrayed in the MCU with superheroes struggling with grief and loss up on the screen and how this translates to viewers here in the real world. Therapeutic use of curated video clips depicting superheroes' struggles in order to facilitate clients' processing of grief and loss as well as a training tool for clinicians is discussed.

KEYWORDS

Grief; loss; cinematherapy; representation of therapy; marvel cinematic universe

"What is grief, if not love persevering?"
– Vision, WandaVision (Feige et al., 2021, Ep. 8, 24:48)

Introduction

As systemic therapists, firm believers in the notion that therapy can change the world in 50-minute intervals, and as viewers (and *super*fans) of all the movies and TV series in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), we explore in this article the near absence of therapy in that universe. Though devastating and life-changing traumatic loss is often portrayed as the crucible that forges superheroes across the franchise, therapy – and especially relational therapy – as an opportunity to heal is rarely seen. We examine two notable exceptions to this generalization: the support group scene in *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019) and the relationship therapy session in the TV series, *The Falcon*

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The authors would also like to forewarn readers that there are spoilers across the MCU franchise discussed in this article.

and the Winter Soldier (Skogland, 2021). Using a feminist lens, the authors investigate the ways in which therapy could be beneficial to MCU characters struggling with grief and loss as well as for viewers in the real world. These clips can be used both as a training tool for clinicians (Killian, 2019b) and as an opportunity to facilitate the processing of grief and loss in therapy.

Marvel is a popular cultural phenomenon – superhero shirts, Halloween costumes, and movie quotes – with a global reach to fans of every age. An estimated 82% of US adults between the ages of 18 to 34 have seen at least one Marvel film (Drezner, 2023), and 56% between 18% and 34% and 48% between the ages of 35 and 54 have watched at least one *Avengers* movie (Statista Research Department, 2021). Further, *Variety Magazine* reported that this is the first franchise to exceed $30 billion in earnings at the box office (Rubin, 2024). The actions and relationships portrayed in the MCU can be utilized to role-model healthy (and dysfunctional) behaviors and interactions for viewers, including those working through their own traumas and identity development. In an interview, Amy Aquino, who plays the therapist Dr. Raynor in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* and is the only therapist portrayed throughout the MCU, states, "Whatever Marvel does, because of its popularity . . . [is] going to have an enormous impact" (Emberwing, 2021, para. 3). With the ongoing stigma around mental health, especially for men (Schermer, 2011; Sharp et al., 2022), the representation of men – a.k.a. superheroes-one participating in relational and emotional work as represented by a support group, and two men not only attending therapy, but relational therapy, focusing on improving their personal and professional partnership, carries immense potential impact. These films also challenge the dominant narrative of toxic masculinity, which often impedes men from processing, or even identifying, their emotions.

Theoretical frameworks

Feminist family therapists seek to create space for emotions such as grief and loss; reconnecting clients to the experience of these powerful feelings is seen as a goal and resource for growth and change. "This reconnecting occurs across several steps in the therapy process, but likely begins with helping our clients develop an awareness of the cultural forces that shape their internalized beliefs around the role that emotions *should* play in their life" (Jones, 2022, p. 200). Utilizing the feminist lens, a focus on power dynamics and gender can guide the therapy. The use of movies (i.e., cinematherapy) across the MCU franchise can be used to connect the viewer to the presented emotions. Further, the feminist approach invites the reader – therapists (and students) and clients – to see the normalization of emotional expressions by superheroes and by men. These interventions seek to challenge the cultural context that dictates what defines (and genders) the experiences of grief and loss. This entails pushing

back against the cultural (and clinical) processes that make certain "negative" emotions targets of treatment outcomes. Instead, therapeutic goals gravitate toward the positive expression of all emotions across genders.

> For feminist therapists, this push to create social change that invites the full emotional experience of individuals back to the table remains a crucial task in our professional work – work that will require us continuing [to make] use of a strengths-based approach with our clients that places our view of psychological distress in the appropriate cultural context. (Jones, 2022, p. 200)

Representation in the MCU can bring the experiences of grief and loss into the therapy room in a less threatening and tangible way. Cinematherapy, the use of film for therapeutic and educational purposes (Dantzler, 2015; Turns & Macey, 2015) provides an opportunity to "externalize presenting problems . . . providing an effective vehicle for expressing thoughts and feelings in a safe way." (Ballard, 2012, p. 146)

In addition to being used directly with clients, popular media can also be used in the training of clinicians. Trainers and instructors utilize pop-cultural media to portray emotions and diagnoses to students who will view them as "clients," improving recognition and understanding of both symptom and dysfunction. Movies are carefully selected to inspire "identifications with heroic protagonists who personify the best of human beings" (Geller, 2020, p. 1428). Seeing characters' struggles with issues such as trauma and grief, students can apply their learning to role-played clients engaging in a dialogue with the goal of processing their own challenges around featured themes.

The transformative potential of cinematherapy can be linked theoretically back to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which held that the majority of human behavior is learned observationally through modeling (Geller, 2020). We borrow from Eppler and Hutchings (2020), who focused primarily on the use of cinematherapy to promote systemic resilience, a strength and process valued by therapists (Walsh, 2016, 2020). Resilience permits us to face and survive physical and psychological traumas that could, if given the chance, utterly devastate our senses of safety, security, and self-efficacy (Smith et al., 2015) and our ability to trust in the now and hope for an unseen future.

Prologue

With some exceptions (e.g., Jazz funerals in New Orleans, The Day of the Dead ceremonies, the Ngaben ceremony in Bali, the Obon festival in Japan, etc.), death and dying are not causes for celebration, especially in Western culture. Further, in the West, death and the grieving process are rarely examined (Killian 2019a, 2019b). The worlds of the living and the dead were not viewed so dichotomously prior to the last century (Becvar, 2003), but for a variety of reasons, death is frequently viewed today with dread and subject to denial. In

Hollywood, comic books, and superhero movies, happy endings in general and the "retcon" or narrative erasure of the demise of characters specifically render death as not-so-final and infinitely more deniable. And so, when half the known universe, and many beloved characters (spoiler warning) are simultaneously snuffed out by a super villain, the impact is profound, but hope springs eternal that it can be "fixed." The gut punch of seeing major characters, who are also parents, partners, siblings, children, family members, and friends, eliminated in one fell swoop elicited a kind of virtual and collective grief in viewers who had connected with those fictional people. Hope was eventually rewarded in a sequel, but viewers of the original film release of *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, (2018) had to wait. Its ending was sufficiently impactful that one of the authors (KDK), preoccupied with having just seen his favorite superhero crumble to ash, stumbled out of the theater at midnight and narrowly averted being jumped by three men across from a city park. Many of us turned to social media as a kind of cinematic support group. But where, or to whom, could the survivors up on the screen turn?

Comic book movies have struggled to portray the emotions of male and female characters, with feminist critiques pointing out that female characters have historically been represented in a hypersexualized, objectifying manner and via a male gaze (Killian, 2023) in service to furthering the narrative of *male* characters (Jones, 2022). In a world where heroes and heroines, "super" powered or otherwise, are beginning to be allowed space to express sadness or grief, it would also be welcome if all characters could be portrayed in ways that valued their physical and *emotional* strengths, allowing room for expression beyond simple anger and glib, flippant quips of schadenfreude (i.e., reveling in another's misery), and plans for revenge as the only path to healing on the screen.

In *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo & Russo, 2018), everyone (and we do mean *everyone*) simultaneously experiences profound loss when Thanos, wearing the Infinity Gantlet, snaps his fingers and eliminates half of all life in the universe. In the MCU, the synchronous, sudden, and unpredictable loss of half of the population in your home, community, planet, and universe certainly qualifies as a collective trauma. Why does Thanos do this? The original source material elaborates on Thanos' *eros* toward Death and his goal of extinguishing half of all life everywhere because of overpopulation and scarcity of resources. As any megalomaniac supervillain is wont to do (he is known as the Mad Titan in the comics), Thanos chooses to impose his own idea of universal "order." Most beings in the MCU (and viewers here on Earth) do not share Thanos' commitment to his cause. In fact, they are greatly pained by the loss of loved ones and sometimes struggle to process grief that seems unmanageable and is not resolvable on a prescribed timetable.

With daily exposure to tragedies in our world, we can suffer chronic, collective losses that differ from single-loss grief (de St. Aubin, 2021)

because multiple losses over a brief period allow less processing time (Worden, 2018). Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction, and in a striking parallel here on the real Earth, the global pandemic of COVID-19 caused the death of millions, thereby precipitating significant and collective traumatic losses. In the real world, therapy is available to work through grief and loss, but up on the screen, what examples of therapeutic processing of crushing loss can be found?

Interlude: exceptions to the rule of "no therapy" in the MCU

As systemic therapists, we find that instances of therapy and relational therapy in particular, portrayed in pop culture, immediately grab our attention. As superfans of the superheroes of the MCU, we relish the opportunity to explore the portrayal of therapy across this franchise. Though we identified and presented two instances of relational (i.e., group and partner) therapy, these are not the sole representations of therapeutic work. Soon after Sam (The Falcon; Anthony Mackie) and Steve "Cap" Rogers (Captain America, played by Chris Evans) meet in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo & Russo, 2014), Cap visits him at the VA where Sam is leading a military veterans' support group (25:12) though all the audience hears is Sam's closing remarks, "Some stuff you leave there, other stuff you bring back. It's our job to figure out how to carry it. Is it going to be in a big suitcase? Or in a little man purse. It's up to you" (Russo & Russo, 2014, 25:39). Then, we witness Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) and his "therapeutic experiment" (i.e., hologram) in *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016, 13:02) attempting to work through his own grief of parental loss via technology as well as his "therapy" with Bruce Banner (played by Mark Ruffalo) in Iron Man 3 (Black, 2013, 2:09:04). The next instances of therapy presented in the MCU feature Dr. Christina Raynor (Amy Aquino), individual therapist for James "Bucky" Barnes (The Winter Soldier, played by Sebastian Stan) in episodes 1, 2, and 6 ("New World Order," "The Star-Spangled Man," and "One World, One People") in the series, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Skogland, 2021).

In the first scene that we explore in-depth in this article, Steve Rogers leads a survivors' grief support group in a scene from *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). Dr. Raynor, in her second appearance in "The Star-Spangled Man" (episode 2), engages in relational therapy with Bucky and Sam, and is the second scene we will highlight. Though grief and loss are commonly part of the MCU superhero's character arcs (e.g., Iron Man's loss of his parents, Black Widow's loss of her mother, and Wanda Maximoff's loss of her twin brother, Pietro, her partner Vision, and her sons), it is only in the two scenes presented here that viewers experience *relational* therapy in the MCU.

Scene 1: "five years later" support group

We see our first instance of a therapy moment in the MCU when Steve Rogers leads a grief group in *Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). Over a series of films, it has become clear that Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America or Cap, having served in the military and as a leader in the Avengers, has seen a lot of loss and has played a key role in helping others process their grief. Understanding how individuals' reactions to trauma can vary, Cap effectively communicates "empathy and hope, [helping] community members adjust to the losses they experienced while continuing to promote individual and collective resilience" (Martin et al., 2021, p. 184). After Thanos' "Snap," Cap recognizes that "to be effective in the face of such challenges, leaders must attend to their own personal grief through self-care, seeking the assistance of interpersonal support" (Martin et al., 2021, p. 184). Steve shares:

> And that's it. That's those little, brave baby steps we gotta take to try and come whole again and find purpose. I went in the ice in '45 right after I met the love of my life. I woke up 70 years later. You gotta move on . . . gotta move on. [The] world is in our hands. It's left to us, guys. We gotta do something with it. (Russo & Russo, 2019, 19:57)

The scene insinuates that Steve is the grief group leader. Upon second and third viewings, this scene of Captain America facilitating the grief group works on two levels. Steve is 1) speaking with genuineness, and 2) trying to model the process of what it is like to grapple with loss, with the mantra of putting one foot in front of the other.

But Evan's nuanced performance reveals that Cap has not moved on at all. When he says "gotta move on" for the second time, we hypothesize that he is saying it as much to himself as to the group. Major Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) remains the love of his life, and there will never be another for him. While he is putting on a brave front and suggesting the possibility that therapy group members can find a purpose to honor those they have lost, he is not yet there himself. Neither is he depicted as the *recipient* of therapy, even though he already lost nearly everyone he knew due to fighting in a world war and then being in suspended animation in arctic ice for 70 years. This portrayal is consistent with a "hero" who continually puts others' needs before his own. In this scene, not having had that dance with Peggy haunts him still. When deaths are experienced as traumatic, the bereaved may approach the remembering of those who have passed on with the additional challenge of triggering responses each time they attempt to revise the bond with that loved one. "Such traumatic losses can critically undermine one's sense of self-efficacy in the world and be predictive of more severe persistent grief symptoms" (de St. Aubin, 2021, p. 81).

While grief therapy demands intensive emotional investment and hard work, a courageous, even heroic, effort in this regard has not been

demonstrated on screen by any character heretofore in the MCU. This attempt to show Steve's "soft side" could serve to reinsert the "rule" of rugged individualism – that men should not struggle or need help. Further, this portrayal relegates Cap to the leader position rather than the recipient of help or assistance. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the other instance of relational therapy in the MCU comes after the loss of Captain Steve Rogers following his traveling to the past. Two of his closest companions and brothers in arms, veteran Sam Wilson and Bucky Barnes, are continually ruffling one another's feathers. Their constant conflict is negatively impacting their professional partnership and lands them in mandated relationship therapy.

Steve Rogers was their North Star and a hero most worthy (his lifting Thor's hammer confirmed this). Further, in the source material and up on screen, Cap embodies American identity, connecting "the political project of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy . . . presenting for readers a hero both of, and for, the nation" (Dittmer, 2005, p. 627). Notions of legacy, ledgers, and debts owed, and justice (both legal and social) sit heavily on Sam's and Bucky's shoulders. Questions on their minds might include: Are *they* worthy? Can they honor and live up to Steve's resolute commitment to leadership even at those times when all hope seemed lost? Can Sam, an African American man, take up the mantle of Captain America and serve his country in this new role when he loves the USA despite numerous occasions where he has felt that it has not loved him, his community, and the historically underserved back? Can Bucky atone for the people he murdered while he was a brainwashed, programmed assassin? Can he be forgiven, and can he forgive himself? And can they work together?

Scene 2: Sam Wilson's and Bucky Barnes' relational therapy

The series, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Skogland, 2021), joins the Marvel Cinematic Universe after Captain America literally and symbolically hands the shield over to the Falcon in *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo & Russo, 2019). This "passing of the torch" is supported by the Winter Soldier as he nods his approval to both from the background. As two of Steve's closest friends, Sam and Bucky have a rocky relationship of their own, as seen in *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016) when they sit uncomfortably (physically and otherwise) in a VW Bug while Steve collects belongings from Sharon Carter (Emily VanCamp) (Russo & Russo, 2016, 1:25:30). We first see Bucky who is sitting in the backseat ask Falcon to move his seat up, to which he declines. Their animosity and irritation with each other are tangible in that moment (and later on when one tells each other, both stuck to the floor in Spider-man's webbing, "I hate you"). Despite this, they manage to find common ground in their response to seeing Steve kiss Sharon. This hot and cold depiction of their reluctant partnership is explored throughout the series

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (Skogland, 2021) and is especially well represented in the relational therapy session.

In season 1, episode 2 (Skogland, 2021, 33:14) Sam and Bucky see Dr. Raynor, a former soldier and individual therapist for Bucky (we will not even talk about the potential ethical issues here) (e.g., see Standard 1.3 of the AAMFT Code of Ethics, 2015), to talk through their relationship/partnership issues as they are forced together on their assigned missions. Sam is reticent to engage in the process, stating, "I get why you want me to talk to Freaky Magoo over here. But I'm 100% fine." Relational therapists are quite familiar with this dynamic wherein one partner is ambivalent about attending, much less engaging in the therapeutic process. We highlight this second portrayal of therapy in the MCU as it is both an opportunity to normalize attention to relationships (beyond partners and families) in therapy as well as fighting the stigma for men (Schermer, 2011; Sharp, 2022) to participate in therapy.

This brief depiction (4 minutes and 23 seconds) of the conjoint therapy session begins with Dr. Raynor establishing her role and mission of their time together, "It is my job to make sure that you're okay" (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier: The Star-Spangled Man*; Skogland, 2021, 33:47). She utilizes the miracle question from solution focused therapy (DeJong & Berg, 1998) to start the dialogue between Sam and Bucky, asking, "Suppose that while you are sleeping, a miracle occurs. When you wake up, what is something that you would like to see that would make your life better?" (Skogland, 2021, 34:17) When they struggle to respond, Dr. Raynor shifts (Skogland, 2021, 34:47) to an experiential technique called the "soul-gazing exercise" (Anand, 1989). Though the application of these therapeutic techniques is glamorized (and abbreviated) by Hollywood, they are actual representations of interventions used in clinical practice.

When therapy is depicted in pop culture, we imagine all therapists gazing with a protective eye and degrees of bemusement and discomfort. I (KSB) have favorites across pop culture that range from portraying actual skill and normalizing the therapeutic process to witty therapists who speak their mind beyond the ethical bounds of the profession, for example, Linda Freeman (Jane Lynch) in the TV series *Two and a Half Men* (Lorre & Aronsohn, 2003). My (KDK) favorite depictions are the psychiatrist Dr. Berger (Judd Hirsch) treating Conrad (Timothy Hutton) in the film *Ordinary People* (Redford, 1980), and therapist Ruth Brenner (Elizabeth Ashley) seeing Nadia (Natasha Lyonne) in the series *Russian Doll* (Lyonne, 2019-2022). These portrayals may be viewers' first glimpses of what a healing therapeutic relationship/process might be like. Various depictions can either serve as a barrier to facilitating engagement when needed or an invitation to utilize therapy as a healing opportunity. As such, we have a vested interest in highlighting and critiquing media representations of therapy in the protection of what *happens in the room*. As the value and necessity of mental healthcare with individuals,

couples, and families were highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that we embrace this promotion of the benefits of therapy, especially of relational work, in which couple and family therapists are specifically trained. With MCU's global influence as the "highest-grossing film franchise of all time" (Carollo, 2024), it is important to evaluate and elevate the potential influence of portrayals of therapy on the public.

Greek chorus: clinical implications

Cinematherapy techniques and interventions have a place in couple and family therapy in creating safe spaces to explore emotional terrain that might otherwise be ignored in the therapy room. Farber et al. (2019) found that nondisclosure occurs frequently across multiple topics, settings (clinics, hospitals, and private practices), and therapeutic orientations. Farber et al. (2019) found that 93% of a sample of over 500 clients in therapy admitted to having lied to their therapist, and the mean number of topics that they reported lying about was 8.4. In another study, 84% of nearly 800 respondents reported there was a topic they had deliberately avoided talking about or had been substantially dishonest about in therapy (Farber et al., 2019), concluding that the vast majority of clients acknowledged some form of concealment in therapy. In a survey of 1,345 therapy clients, Farber et al. (2019) reported the two most reported items were "I minimized how badly I really I feel" and "I minimized the severity of my symptoms." Why might clients withhold important truths about their deep psychological pain (Killian, 2025)?

Farber et al. (2019) found clients' wishes to "look good" – to be seen as competent, somewhat well-adjusted, or a "good person" – and to be viewed positively by one's therapist "can make nondisclosure an inviting option" (Killian, 2025, p. 2). Ongoing profound grief can be associated with significant vulnerability, even shame or embarrassment, and for this reason, clients may pull back from discussing their feelings openly and candidly (Baumann & Hill, 2016; Farber et al., 2019). Further, some clients have great difficulty identifying their feelings and describing their emotional pain to others due to alexithymia, or low emotional self-awareness (Bergmans et al., 2020). That is, they find it extremely challenging to identify, name, and communicate their feelings and their intense emotional distress to others. The use of carefully curated clips of characters engaging in the struggle to label and share feelings of loss can open space for clients to articulate their "take" on these struggles and the ways in which they find them relatable.

In addition, sociocultural factors (Hogge et al., 2023) can contribute to reticence to disclosing feelings of profound loss. Clients may strongly believe that no one can help them in their distressed state, "so what would be the point of talking about it?" Clients may hesitate to openly share their feelings because of "codes" or "cultural scripts of silence" regarding emotional distress and

suffering (Szlyk et al., 2019, p. 779). For example, first responders, persons in law enforcement (Allen et al., 2014; Syed et al., 2020), and the military (Bernecker et al., 2019; Drew & Martin, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023) may worry that disclosure of feelings of grief and depression will be perceived as a sign of weakness or an indication that they are *unfit for duty*. Therefore, therapists may find value in cinematherapy with persons in these professions as they are often loath to seek help or disclose the depth of their distress, but could begin to by first experiencing it *vicariously* through relatable heroes up on the screen.

As a fan of the MCU, I (KSB) have especially enjoyed recent explorations by Killian (2023) and Jones (2022) connecting my work to my "hobby." For this article, we enjoyed our collaboration, especially talking about not only therapy but also the presence of grief and loss throughout the MCU, and the field of family therapy. For me, the most moving portrayals of this are Thor's (Chris Hemsworth) immense grief (and guilt) in *Endgame* because he did not stop Thanos, and Hawkeye's (Jeremy Renner) reaction to the loss of both his family and Natasha's (a.k.a. Black Widow, Scarlett Johansson) death, which is further explored in the TV series *Hawkeye* (Thomas, 2021). As a therapist, I would like nothing more than the opportunity to sit with these superheroes to explore the powerful emotions that they are and are not dealing with. Our work could help them to connect their secondary emotions to relational experiences rather than use them as a way to isolate. Further, grief and loss are the cinematic trope that inspires the creation of the "Avengers," as Nick Fury (Samuel Jackson) uses their hurt, loss, and rage over the death of Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg) to *inspire* them to assemble in *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012).

I (KDK), too, am a fan of superhero movies and series and believe that sharing selected scenes from them with clients can hold therapeutic value. Using some of the scenes discussed in this article may aid clients' attempts to express their emotions about loss, mourning, and seeking assistance when all hope seems lost. In addition, scenes from MCU series such as *Wanda/Vision* or *Jessica Jones* (Rosenberg, 2015-2019) featuring female leads devastated by traumatic stress and loss (Rutter, 2021) can be used with clients who might find these characters more relatable than a preponderance of male comic book characters with military service backgrounds. In the case of Carol "Captain Marvel" Danvers (Brie Larson), audiences and clients see the portrayal of a female lead who also possesses a military background and experiences a growing awareness of significant gaslighting perpetrated against her over the course of the film *Captain Marvel* (Boden & Fleck, 2019). Hammer and Kavanaugh (2023) discuss the use of scenes from *Captain Marvel* as a therapeutic tool for helping clients break free of relationships characterized by gaslighting. Clips from media and movies can be an excellent tool to facilitate this with clients (Killian, 2019b). As

Phase 5 of the MCU came to a close with *Thunderbolts** (Schreirer, 2025), featuring Bucky Barnes, additional scenes focused on trauma, loneliness, healing, and redemption have become available. Thus, cinematherapy via MCU series and films represents another resource and intervention in a clinician's toolbox. As a tool, these scenes can also be used in training clinicians by serving as vignettes, role plays, and observations of grief and loss journeys.

Epilogue

As MCU fans, we have presented our own experiences as therapists of watching these superheroes develop through the timeline. We have identified two instances of therapy that are both systemic in nature – group therapy and relationship therapy. As I (KSB) reflect on this exploration, I struggle with the notion that if therapy had been more integral to the MCU, would we even have any of these superheroes? What would bring them together? Whom would they avenge? Rather than be distracted by the *What Ifs*,[1] I embrace what is and find the overall message to be that strength comes from working together. My answer to the miracle question is that systemic relationship therapy becomes normalized as a preventative, proactive, and reactive resource for connections beyond marriage and family; that invitation and access improve across opportunities where people come together for any shared purpose. With therapy, the collective healing, growth, and resilience can be the catalyst to which these superheroes save the world (again and again).

I (KDK) am reminded of a meme that comments on the origin of a superhero in the DC universe. In it, psychiatrist Harley Quinn's analysis of Batman is succinct and persuasive: "A rich, traumatized orphan who proves that men would rather wage an endless war of vengeance than go to therapy" (KotakuInAction on Reddit, 2023). Would superheroes exist if they had not suffered some traumatic loss that spurred them forward, continuously drawing on their persistent pain as they seek to right wrongs in the world[2]? As alluded to earlier, Hollywood has a habit of creating dramatic impact by killing off characters and creating more loss for their loved ones on the screen and for us as audience members. This is one of the reasons I rarely recommend any films and TV series to my friends, colleagues, or clients: I am not certain how loss and trauma are going to *hit* them. But by carefully curating the material we present to clients, we can simultaneously create an opportunity for them to process their loss(es) and adroitly eschew re-traumatizing them. Our goal is to show superheroes' struggles and then invite clients of all ages to join their "grief therapy group," share their experiences, and then have the courage to go a step or two further than Steve Rogers did in *Endgame* - to become vulnerable and congruent, giving voice to the pain and to begin healing.

Media stinger: post-credits scene

The MCU was one of the first film *franchises* to utilize media stingers (i.e., scenes during and after the credits) throughout to connect movies, series, and characters. These additional scenes have become instrumental in linking the stories of the MCU. Perhaps the most iconic media stinger is in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, 1986) where Ferris (Matthew Broderick) breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly to the viewer (i.e., addressing the audience directly). This technique is used extensively throughout the Deadpool franchise (Leitch, 2018; Miller, 2016), which will be "joining the MCU" in its third installment (Ahmed, 2023). The media stingers used throughout the MCU, sometimes two scenes during and after the credits, keep the viewer in the story, increasing anticipation of the next movie or TV show. Currently, there are over 40 movies, TV shows, and limited series across 5 phases of the MCU, with plans to crossover with not only Deadpool in phase 6, but the Fantastic Four, and the X-Men. There is a portrayal of (attempted) individual therapy in the media stinger of Iron Man 3 (Black, 2013). Over the end credits, we hear Tony Stark say, "Thank you, by the way for listening. There's something about just getting it off my chest and putting it out there in the atmosphere instead of holding this in. I mean, this is what gets people sick, you know" (Black, 2013, 2:09:04). He is speaking to Dr. Banner, who appropriately responds, "I'm not that kind of doctor. I'm not a therapist. It's not my training" (Black, 2013, 2:010:12), reminding viewers that therapy is a specific discipline with concomitant training.

As we reflect on this article, our own media stinger brings us back to Vision's words presented at the start: "*What is grief, if not love persevering?*" (Feige et al., 2021, Ep. 8, 24:48). This is a positive reframe of how to think about grief; it serves as a way of keeping those we have lost with us in a way that heals. We're not "moving on" or forgetting a single detail of someone dear to us. We may not even stop talking to loved ones who have shed this mortal coil, but instead come to a new understanding of how we can bring the best parts of who we were (and are) forward in the physical absence of those we grieve. The thrust of the present article is how grief, loss, and therapy itself are represented on the small and big screens, communicating to both audiences and clients alike how therapeutic processes for their personal grief and loss might unfurl. By utilizing movies and clips such as these from the MCU, therapists have the opportunity to not only deepen their training in grief and loss, but can also use it as cinematherapy with clients. Through the use of the MCU, we focus on how grief can bring us together for the greater good rather than allowing the pain we experience to tear us and those around us

apart. If Stan Lee were to have one of his famed cameos in our media stinger, he would say, to all the audience members who harbor a secret pain and who wonder if they have what it takes to lift up their hurt, "Excelsior!" (Mair & Lee, 2018). We concur.

Notes

1. This is an intentional nod to the TV series, *What If . . . ?* (Bradley, 2021) which "explores various alternate timelines across the multiverse in which major moments from the MCU films occur differently" (What If . . . ?, 2024).
2. See the concepts of post-traumatic growth (Majdandzic & du Plooy, 2025) and vicarious resilience (Killian et al., 2025).

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Conflict of interest

As one of the authors is also the Editor-in-Chief, of the Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, this submission was reviewed by a Guest Editor due to this conflict of interest.

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