

# Movie Review: Awakenings

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*Awakenings*, a film directed by Penny Marshall and released in 1990, follows the story of Dr. Malcolm Sayer (Robin Williams) as he interacts with catatonic patients infected by an epidemic of viral encephalitis earlier in life. This film is based on true events and takes place in a behavioral institution in the late 1960s. Sayer begins his career at this hospital, where he integrates his passion for neurological research into an investigative approach to the treatment of his patients. However, he is met by initial resistance and apathy from his colleagues, who view the patients as essentially hopeless. One of the orderlies describes the area of practice as a garden "because all we do is feed them and water them." The film particularly follows the interactions and developing relationship between Sayer and one of his patients, Leonard Lowe, who is portrayed by Robert DeNiro. Through interactions with the patients, Sayer begins to notice various stimuli that trigger responses from them and theorizes that these patients may be afflicted with an extreme form of a Parkinson-like disease. Soon after, Sayer becomes a strong proponent for the use of a breakthrough treatment at the time, L-DOPA, for his patients in catatonia. Sayer first administers the drug to Leonard, in which a marked "awakening" is observed. The drug is then administered to the other patients, who also show a dramatic "awakening" from their years in catatonia. At this point, the film follows the new "awakened" experiences of the patients, especially that of Leonard. Despite being initially promising for these patients, the development of dyskinesia and the psychological stress brought on by reentering the real world after years in a catatonic state caused the treated patients to revert back to a catatonic state. This eventually led Dr. Sayer to determine that the drug was not a viable long-term treatment option for these patients.

The film delves into many topics relevant to pharmacy students. It addresses pharmacology, drug dosage, adverse events, and tolerance issues. It also focuses on

the idea of patients' health risks versus benefits, and other topics that serve as a real-life portrayal of the challenges clinicians face when initiating and continuing drug therapy. Furthermore, it was interesting to observe a pharmacist, portrayed by actor Steve Vinovich, in a supporting role in this film. The pharmacist's role in the film seemed limited to dispensing as opposed to a pharmacist now, who would be performing an integrated clinical role in evaluating drug therapy.

While not free from stigmatization of individuals with mental health challenges (which is added mainly for dramatic and comedic effect), this film manages to relate an accurate depiction of the challenges both patients and clinicians face and, in some ways, glorifies them as noble crusaders in the battle of understanding the mind. Overall, *Awakenings* is an entertaining, yet poignant film that is eloquently laced with poetry and a beautiful score by Randy Newman. Beyond this, there are outstanding acting performances by Robert Deniro, Robin Williams, Julie Kavner and others.

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