

Movie: Star Wars (A New Hope, 1977)

Synopsis

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...torn by civil dispute, rebel forces have stolen plans to the Death Star — a space station created by the Galactic Empire with capability to destroy an entire planet. Darth Vader, commander of the Death Star, fights Rebel leaders and Jedi warriors as they attempt to restore The Force to the galaxy.

Throughout the film franchise, we follow Anakin's journey from prodigious Jedi committed to The Force to eventual cyborg with sworn allegiance to the Galactic Empire and Dark Side. The franchise depicts both political and deep psychosocial challenges of characters coping with the stressors of civil war.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

At Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, we reference Anakin's case with respect to his maladaptive coping of his mother's death. Anakin experienced early maternal separation due to the premature death of his mother. When Padmé Amidala (the princess) dies after giving birth to twins (Luke and Leia), Anakin re-experiences the abandonment he felt upon the death of his mother. As a displaced mother object, Padmé had strengthened Anakin's superego. Upon her death, Anakin lost the ability to assess the reality of the external world and became susceptible to the Dark Side. Anakin's search for a father figure increased his risk of victimization by Palpatine (the evil emperor) who convinced him he could undo Padmé's death by turning to the Dark Side: "Darth Plagueis was a Dark Lord of the Sith, so powerful and so wise he could use the Force to influence the midi-chlorians to create life." Anakin's turning to the Dark Side also serves to remind that a grieving individual may fixate in two discrete stages of grief: denial and anger.

In Anakin's case, there is the classic conflict between the id (Dark Side) and the superego (the Ashla). For the purposes of this discussion, the latter represents the child's internalization of his parents' moral standards, a process greatly aided by a tendency to identify with the parents. The superego is the ethical component of the personality and provides the moral standards by which the ego operates. Ego strength is often used to describe one's ability to maintain one's sense of self in the face of pain, distress, and conflict, i.e. balance the force. Low ego strength may cause difficulties in interpersonal functioning that may lead to the development of psychiatric symptomatology including borderline traits. Without a father figure, Anakin taps into the dark side of the force as a Sith by giving into extreme emotion (id).

The central plot of the Star Wars franchise parallels the goals of psychotherapy. In situations involving psychological disorders such as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), weak ego strength results in a struggle to cope in the face of acute problems. Subsequently, following Padmé's death, Anakin avoids reality through defense mechanisms such as denial and fantasy as exemplified by his belief in Palpatine's promise of resurrection. Psychotherapy's aim would be to support the ego by resolving the unconscious conflict, thus fostering adaptive coping strategies. The personification of this is Luke Skywalker, Anakin's son, the 'chosen one' prophesized to restore balance to The Force (id versus superego) and restore peace (of mind) to the universe.

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