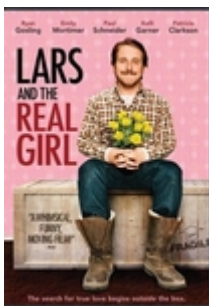


Healing Through Relationship

A review of the film



Lars and the Real Girl

(2007)

Craig Gillespie (Director)



Reviewed by

[L. M. Leitner](#)

There are many movies about the healing power of relationships (e.g., *Ordinary People*, *As Good as It Gets*). However, healing through connection with more seriously injured people is rarely, if ever, tackled. (As one example, compare the credit that is given to psychotropics in the movie *A Beautiful Mind* versus the book.) Further, most movies that show people growing beyond psychological injuries emphasize the role of a talented therapist, more than real relationships in the client's real world. *Lars and the Real Girl* stands in stark contrast. The movie presents many challenging psychological issues in what can best be described as a touching and romantic comedy. It is easy to lose the underlying psychological points while simply enjoying the story.

As the movie opens, we meet Lars, a tender and decent man who probably would earn a *DSM* diagnosis of schizoid, avoidant, or perhaps even schizotypal personality disorder. Lars has established a stable relational life, living in his deceased parents' garage apartment

and avoiding contact with everyone except through careful rituals at work. He seems to be a quiet, somewhat geeky guy. We begin to understand the extent to which he is a loner as we watch him avoid his sister-in-law's repeated attempts to invite him to dinner. Lars's tentative stability meets a crisis when a new employee (Margo) begins to express some interest in connecting with him. However, it is important to keep in mind that Margo's interest in Lars could not precipitate such a crisis without his being interested in her. In other words, Lars's innate need to relationally connect with others is beginning to assert itself in his life. The avoidant lifestyle has served whatever purpose it had, and he is moving toward a new way of being.

At this point, beginning with his brother and sister-in-law, Lars introduces the community to Bianca, his girlfriend. As it turns out, Bianca is a mail-order doll, obtained from the on-line Real Girl Company. Lars gives Bianca a past and creates her as a paraplegic (perhaps as a projection of his own injury). Because she cannot injure Lars, he is able to use the safety of his relationship with her to begin to connect with others in the world. In so doing, he exhibits the creativity inherent in clients who are innately self-healing (Bohart & Tallman, 1999). Through this relationship, he actually becomes at ease with people.

Others, though, are not as at ease with Lars and Bianca. As a result, Lars sees a physician who also is a psychologist for a few sessions. The doctor tells Lars that Bianca is sick and needs intensive treatment. While she is sleeping after her treatments, the doctor and Lars talk about life. It is interesting that, rather than label Lars as delusional or schizophrenic, the psychologist tells the family that Lars has invented Bianca as a real woman to solve some relational problems and that, if they go along with his experience, he will be fine. In other words, the psychologist aligns herself with an extensive literature (e.g., Elliott, 2002) showing that honoring the experience of another allows healing to occur. As his family begins to connect more significantly with him, they also have to deal with some of the relational injuries that may have made Lars so fearful (e.g., his mother dying while giving birth to him, his brother abandoning him to a distraught and disturbed father, etc.).

Lars's relationship with Bianca creates a dilemma for the larger community. After much soul searching, the community members agree to relate to Bianca as a real woman. In other words, Lars now has an entire community that is supporting his construction of reality. In many ways, the community becomes like a Kingsley Hall (e.g., Barnes & Berke, 2002) or a Soteria House (Mosher, 1999), where the entire community normalizes the experiences of one another. Because the community now experiences Bianca as real, Lars is able to deal with issues that occur as a relationship develops. For example, he has to let her have her own life when people want her to volunteer at the hospital. Through these interactions, he learns that anger, rather than inevitably leading to relational destruction, may facilitate emotional contact.

At this time, in a session with Dagmar (the psychologist), Lars poignantly describes his fears of relationship. While discussing his discomfort with his sister-in-law's tendency to hug people, Lars confides that he cannot allow someone to touch him physically because it

burns his skin. As he allows Dagmar to touch him in session, he develops a panic attack and keeps saying, "It's dangerous."

It is interesting that at the same time that he is more openly discussing the dangers of contact, he is connecting more deeply with others in the world. For example, when a coworker hangs her stuffed bear, Margo runs off in tears. Lars tries to comfort her while gently administering CPR to the stuffed bear. This transformation will come as no surprise to people who have seen more deeply injured clients in therapy. The client's ability to more clearly verbalize the terrors around connection is, paradoxically, a move toward greater connection in the relationship. Aspects of experience that were symbolized in nonverbal ways now can be discussed and understood more clearly (Faidley, 2001).

Lars's growth becomes more visible when he goes bowling with Margo and some friends. His ability to enjoy the evening with others is in marked contrast to the Lars who literally hid from his sister-in-law when she knocked on his door. His attraction to Margo has now reached the point where he feels compelled to tell her that he could never cheat on Bianca. Margo assures him that she is not asking him to cheat on Bianca. However, she states quite genuinely how much she wishes she could find a man with his characteristics for herself. After this interaction, he is able to shake Margo's hand with no evidence of any pain or burning sensations.

As Lars becomes better able to relate to others, he needs Bianca less. She becomes sicker and eventually dies. The entire community supports Lars through his grief as he buries his love. The movie ends with Lars and Margo standing at Bianca's grave after the funeral. He asks her if she would like to take a walk and she responds affirmatively and enthusiastically. Clearly, he is a transformed person and can more deeply connect with her than one would have thought possible when the movie began.

The movie emphasizes two things that are critical in life-changing psychotherapy. First, others need to trust the client's innate self-healing potential. Through a mail-order doll, Lars creates the perfect relational partner to wrestle with the injuries that make connection so dangerous for him. Because she is totally safe, he can connect with her as well as through her to others. Yet, Lars's self-healing is not enough. It also takes others who are willing to enter into and honor Lars's experiential world to allow for Lars to self-heal. If these others had lacked the ability to connect with Lars's experience, he would have been labeled psychotic, would have been given drugs, and easily could have never recovered. In this way, one of the underlying themes of the film is a scathing critique of current "state of the art" treatment methods.

In a constructivist vein, the film invites us to explore what is "real." When the "unreal" Bianca is treated by everyone as if she were real, Lars is able to emerge into a real person himself. Compared with the treatment of choice for someone like Lars today, many would consider Lars's milieu of healing to be unreal. On the other hand, is a life on drugs a real life?

Because the movie is a comedy, the underlying psychological issues are more subtly presented. The movie does not dramatically and explicitly emphasize either the connection between relational injuries and psychological terror or the ways relational connection can facilitate client self-healing. The use of comedy may allow viewers to appreciate and be more open to alternative ways of understanding psychological injuries. The film also encourages the viewer to be more tolerant of the ways all of us are somewhat weird in our uniqueness. Sometimes subtle messages delivered behind comedic lines allow the viewer to dismiss more profound implications. I hope that viewers will see the tragedy and the triumph behind the comedy in this gentle, poignant film.

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