

An Introduction to Bibliotherapy

What is bibliotherapy?

In her introduction to the book *Bibliotherapy*, Liz Brewster says that “The basic premise of bibliotherapy is that information, guidance and solace can be found through reading” (Brewster, Introduction 2018). Bibliotherapy programmes and specialised bibliotherapy collections using books to promote good mental health are found across the globe in many different settings including public, healthcare and academic libraries.

Non-fiction bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy schemes that use non-fiction books and self-help materials often use a cognitive behavioural model of therapy. This approach aims to treat mild to moderate mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression by using positive changes in behaviour to help patients break out of a cycle of negative emotions. These schemes also offer books to help readers find information about common physical and mental health conditions which may affect their wellbeing.

- This kind of bibliotherapy can be used as part of a wider treatment programme also involving medication and face to face cognitive behavioural therapy or psychodynamic therapy with a counsellor.
- It can also be very helpful for people who have recently been diagnosed with an illness and who are on a waiting list for further treatment.

However, it is important to remember that most models that currently use this style of bibliotherapy in UK libraries are not directly overseen by a clinician and do not involve any discussion of the books read.

Fiction bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy schemes which focus on reading fiction or poetry (and in some cases creating it, using creative writing to enhance and support wellbeing) are based more on ideas of reader development and the power of the reading experience. As a person reads and interacts with a work of fiction they may go through a process of identification, catharsis and insight. Identification occurs when a reader has an empathic response to a certain character or situation which reflects their own experiences. Catharsis occurs when the reader shares many of the emotions and feeling as the character in a work of fiction – the reader may be able to express intense emotions and begin to process difficult experiences through this fictional character. Finally, insight is gained where a reader is able to relate to a character and use this vicarious experience to deal more effectively with their own problems. (Brewster, Identification, catharsis and insight 2018). Through this process, bibliotherapy using works of fiction helps readers to improve and maintain their mental health and wellbeing.

- This kind of bibliotherapy can take many forms including shared reading groups, where an extract from a work of fiction or a poem is read aloud and then discussed; reading groups, where a work of fiction is read before the group meets and then discussed during the meeting; and creative writing groups
- Works of fiction can also be read independently by people wishing to improve or maintain their mental wellbeing. In recent years several universities have set up leisure reading or reading for pleasure collections to encourage their users to maintain and improve their wellbeing through reading (Hurst, et al. 2017)

Some bibliotherapy schemes combine both approaches. For example, the *Reading Well* bibliotherapy scheme, which is widely offered in public libraries in the UK, combines lists of CBT based non-fiction books which are chosen by healthcare professionals with recommendations for what they call “mood boosting books” (The Reading Agency 2021). These are mostly works of fiction, autobiography and poetry designed to lift the reader’s mood. Many are suggested by readers and reading groups.

A short history of the term “bibliotherapy”

Some would say that the link between reading and wellbeing goes all the way back to the ancient world. Several ancient Libraries included the libraries at Alexandria and Thebes had the phrase “medicine for the soul” inscribed above the door (McDaniel 1956).

The term “bibliotherapy” was first used by Samuel McCord Crothers in his article “A Literary Clinic” published in the journal *Atlantic Monthly* in September 1916 (Crothers 1916). Crothers’ article paints a humorous picture of a clinic run by his friend where literature is used to treat people’s ailments. Crothers’ friend goes into detail about the different kinds of books which can be “prescribed” and the differing effects on the patient’s health that these books have. Although Crothers’ articles is rather tongue-in-cheek it does reflect a widening interest in using reading to support physical and mental health which was happening at this time.

Although Crothers gave us the term bibliotherapy, he was not the first to realise that books and reading had a valuable therapeutic purpose. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century many advocates for a reform in treatment of mentally ill patients included reading in their more humane treatment regimes (Weimerskirch 1965). Benjamin Rush, an early American advocate of using reading to treat the sick, recommended two types of books for therapeutic reading: amusing books and books for conveying knowledge (Rush 1811). Although the applications of bibliotherapy have evolved with the changes in attitudes towards mental health over the last 200 years, this model is not so different to many of the modern bibliotherapy schemes currently offered in UK libraries including the *Books on Prescription* and *Reading Well* schemes offered in UK public libraries since the early 2000s.

Some things to consider when you are looking at introducing a bibliotherapy programme or a bibliotherapy collection to your library

While we are looking at bibliotherapy and the powerful effect that books can have on readers, it is important to acknowledge that readers can have negative responses to bibliotherapy texts as well as positive responses. This does not mean that we should not use the principles of bibliotherapy to encourage reading for wellbeing in our libraries but when building a wellbeing collection, or offering any form of bibliotherapy, we need to consider how we will help people who have a negative reaction to a text in our collection. If your library is part of a large organisation such as a university or college, it probably already has some safeguarding guidelines which can help you.

It is also important to consider if there are any other sources of support that you can refer users onto if they have a negative experience while reading a bibliotherapy text (or if they just need a bit more support). If you are working in a university or college, your organisation may have a counselling service, a student welfare service or a helpline which can offer more support to your users and you should think about how you signpost these services to people who are looking at your bibliotherapy offering. If you are working for a public library, your local NHS service may be able to offer some help or perhaps there are charitable organisations in your local area who could do this. For example, the charity Mind has a number of regional branches which offer support for mental wellbeing and

common mental health problems. Most importantly, make sure that your frontline service workers have access to this information and are able to suggest where users can go for more help when it is needed.

Further reading

Bibliotherapy by Liz Brewster and Sarah McNicol, Facet Publishing, 2018 ISBN: 9781783303427

This book gives an excellent introduction to the history of the practice of bibliotherapy and the theories which support bibliotherapy. It also offers several excellent case studies which show how bibliotherapy is being practiced in different library settings across the world. It is a great place to start for anyone looking to learn more about bibliotherapy and how it can be used in a library setting.

Shared Reading Edited by Jean M. Clark and Eileen Bostle, Library Association Publishing Limited, 1988 ISBN: 0853656371

This book is slightly older so perhaps gives less of a current picture of how bibliotherapy is practiced. However, it offers interesting insights into the growth of bibliotherapy – or Reading Therapy which is the preferred term for bibliotherapy in this book - in the UK. It also offers examples of how bibliotherapy is used outside libraries in many different, more clinical settings giving a picture of the many different ways that bibliotherapy can help readers to improve their mental health and sense of wellbeing.

The Reading Well website - <https://reading-well.org.uk/>

Reading Well is a bibliotherapy scheme currently offered in public libraries in the UK. This scheme aims to help people manage and improve their wellbeing using self-help reading. Reading Well originally focused on common mental health conditions but has now expanded to include books which give advice and support on living with long-term physical health conditions and dementia. Reading Well also offers specialised lists of books to support young people's wellbeing as well as lists of "mood boosting books" – fictional works which have been chosen by readers because they are uplifting and help to boost your mood. Lists of all of these books can be found on the Reading Well website and if you are considering starting a bibliotherapy scheme or a wellbeing collection in your library, they are a great place to start. This website also contains many other helpful resources about how books can support wellbeing.

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