



## Bibliotherapy: Overview and Implications for Counselors

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*All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them. – Isak Dinesen*

### Introduction

Stories affect human emotions, and books can serve as models for development. Their influence on emotions and development has been recorded throughout history. Aristotle observed the effect of drama on audiences and coined the term “catharsis” to describe emotional release. Shakespeare scribed these words for Titus Andronicus, “Come and take choice of all my library and so beguile thy sorrow” (Act IV, Scene I).

Bibliotherapy dates back at least to the early nineteenth century (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1998). Both Sigmund and Anna Freud included the use of literature in their psychoanalytic practices. During World War I, both in England and the United States, the oft prescribed treatment for hospitalized patients included literature. Currently, many mental health professionals incorporate bibliotherapy.

### Definitions

*Bibliotherapy*, the use of books within therapeutic contexts, first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1916. Sometimes referred to as, *biblioguidance*, *bibliocounseling*, *literatherapy*, *bookmatching* or *reading therapy*, bibliotherapy involves the use of books and other media to facilitate both normal development and clinically significant problems. *Clinical bibliotherapy*, utilized by mental health practitioners, addresses emotional-behavioral problems to meet therapeutic goals. *Developmental bibliotherapy*, employed by educators, librarians and healthcare workers, facilitates transitions with basically healthy individuals (Rubin, 1978).

### Current Relevance

Publications from 1985 - 2006 indicate that professionals from counselors to physicians employ fiction and non-fiction in bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy addresses numerous conditions including abuse, behavioral issues, chemical dependency, chronic illness, homelessness, self-destructive behaviors, and many more (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

### Benefits

Reported benefits include reduction of negative emotions and symptoms with their replacement by more positive behaviors and feelings. Bibliotherapy is effective in promoting problem solving, increasing compassion, developing empathetic understanding and enhancing self-awareness. Bibliotherapy encourages effective social behavior, clarifies values, and instills cultural identity and ethnic pride. Bibliotherapy is applicable to individuals and groups. Group benefits include feedback from others concerning interpretations and behaviors and opportunities for modeling and improving communication.

Although benefits may be derived just from reading helpful literature (Floyd et al., 2006), researchers found enhanced effects when counselors help select material. This appears to be the case especially with materials that prompt discussion and clarification of issues (Newman et al., 2003).

### Theoretic and Therapeutic Processes

Shrodes (1950), drawing from psychodynamic premises, postulated a model applied best with fictional works and includes: identification (client alignment with information, storyline or characters), catharsis (client experience of emotional release) and insight (client understanding of own processes). Others built upon Shrodes’s initial construct by contributing the components of universalization (client generalization to other people, situations, and cultures) and integration (client incorporation into own life) (Afolayan, 1992).

Hynes developed an interactive model, suggesting specific steps for preparation, selection, application, facilitation and follow-up (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994). Preparation includes both relationship building and assessment of client interests and reading skills. Selection, informed by the assessment, involves matching material with clients. Applications vary from client-initiated to counselor-initiated, structured to unstructured, directive to non-directive and more-facilitated to less-facilitated. Measures of client growth and material effectiveness are included in follow-up.

Counselors employ both fiction and non-fiction. Those inclined more toward client-centered and humanistic therapies tend to employ fiction whereas cognitive-behaviorists more often employ non-fiction, especially self-help literature. Self-help books usually provide direct suggestions and strategies concerning specific subjects or conditions (e.g., anger management, depression, and anxiety). They very often provide helpful facts and simple exercises clients can learn and practice outside of counseling sessions. Though they differ, both fiction and non-fiction offer advantages and may even work in combination with one another. “Didactic literature (non-fiction) may contribute to the reader’s understanding of his [*sic*] motivations and behavior... (and) is more apt to contribute to man’s [*sic*] intellectual awareness whereas imaginative literature (fiction) is more likely to afford the reader an emotional experience without which effective therapy is impossible.” (Shrodes, 1950, p.33)

### Effectiveness

Interpretations of and reactions to literature are highly subjective and because bibliotherapy is often incorporated into a larger therapeutic process, its effectiveness is difficult to measure. Pardeck (1998) reviewed research in counseling,

psychology, psychiatry and medicine and concluded evidence supporting the use of non-fiction (e.g., self-help books) is stronger than fiction.

Marrs (1995), using a meta-analysis approach of studies involving bibliotherapy, found only a limited number of empirical studies meeting his defined criteria and found no empirical study involving the use of fiction. Marrs's work was confounded by factors such as diverse populations, small sample size, and lack of standardized procedures. Vast differences in methodology made comparisons across studies inappropriate and insufficient specificity disallowed replication. Nevertheless, he found evidence for benefits when self-help books were used for clients with anxiety, depression, and alcohol abuse. Because bibliotherapy is often incorporated into a larger therapeutic process, separating out its contributions proves difficult.

Riordan (1991) warns, "The use of bibliotherapy far outstrips the tight validating studies supporting its use" (p. 306). Despite the lack of empirical evidence, fiction is used across disciplines as an integral part of therapy, suggesting counselors find its use effective (Floyd et al., 2006).

### Resources

One training program, a two-tier certification, training and supervision program incorporates bibliotherapy into its curriculum (<http://www.poetrytherapy.org/>). Another on-line site (<http://bibliotherapy.library.oregonstate.edu/>) can help counselors choose appropriate books. On-line programs such as these could be improved by further research.

### Guidelines and Cautions

Counselors would do well to follow a few guidelines when choosing materials and applying bibliotherapy. Each book should be read before using or recommending it to clients. Choose each carefully to be sure it is current, credible and most importantly that it is relevant to a client's needs. Additionally, choose materials that embrace cultural respect and inclusiveness. Facilitate the process and do follow up to assess its effectiveness. Counselor training, education and supervision in the selection and use of fictional and non-fictional literature are strongly recommended.

Bibliotherapy is part of a larger framework, often an integral part of a therapeutic plan. As such, counselors should apply strategies congruent with their theories and treatments. One final caution: clients with reading/learning disorders or extreme anxiety especially school-related should never be asked to read orally to others without preparation by practicing first. Public embarrassment due to word stumbling is not therapeutic.

### Conclusion

Bibliotherapy practices demand further investigation. This is especially true where fiction is employed. Additionally, although hundreds of articles have been written about bibliotherapy, little exists about counselor preparation (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005).

Bibliotherapy is best used by prepared practitioners who are skilled and supervised in its application. Reading books is recognized as a means to help individuals deal with deep concerns and can offer strategies specific to developmental issues. Nevertheless, bibliotherapy appears to be in its infancy. Although empirical research is lacking, few would disagree that stories affect human emotions.

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