

Is reading an effective therapy strategy?

Many experts think so

When Sonya Tsakalakis first heard about bibliotherapy, she was intrigued. Bibliotherapy, she discovered, is the practice of reading books for therapy. Or, as she likes to describe it, “It’s the use of creative literature for healing, nourishing and motivating us in life.”

Tsakalakis stumbled across the term in an article she was reading. At the time, she was working in aged care. But the more she thought about it, the more she felt vocationally drawn to this field. So, in 2013, she took the plunge and founded a bibliotherapy practice, The Literary Hand.

So what does a bibliotherapist actually do? In Tsakalakis’ case, she conducts one-on-one sessions with clients to discuss their reading habits along with other topics, such as their worries, dreams and passions. After the session, she then “prescribes” a list of reading. Alternatively, she says, she works in groups, in which people come together to read aloud from the same text, then share their immediate thoughts and reflections.

The concept is far from new, with Tsakalakis saying it can be traced back to ancient Greece. At that time, libraries were constructed next to hospitals. “And above the library there would be a banner or placard which read, ‘Places for healing of the soul.’ “So you’d go to the hospital for physical healing, and there was this understanding that libraries were places to seek solace and healing, and to nurture ourselves through stories.”

And reading can be healing. Melinda* can attest to that. The 48-year-old consultant has had generalised anxiety disorder since childhood. In the past, she’s seen a psychologist to manage her condition, and dabbled in yoga and meditation. But when she read an article about bibliotherapy, Melinda’s interest was piqued. She’d always found reading to be “a balm”, she says. “So it made sense to learn about its therapeutic qualities.”

Last year, when burnt out from work, Melinda booked a bibliotherapy session – and hasn't looked back. She has found great solace in “escaping” into her prescribed reading, and feels it has helped manage her anxiety.

Overall, she describes the experience as “uplifting”, saying it's a positive complement to her mental healthcare.

Bibliotherapy offers further mental health benefits. Tsakalakis says studies have found that reading for pleasure for 30 minutes a day can reduce anxiety while improving self-esteem, empathy and emotional intelligence.

Further research, published in the European Journal of Public Health in 2017, also found bibliotherapy could be a cost-effective intervention for people affected by depression.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of bibliotherapy is how it fosters a sense of connection, which Tsakalakis says is integral to mental wellbeing. “Every time we read a book, every time we sit down and read a poem, we're reminded of that sense of commonality in the shared human experience.”

If you're not ready to book a session with a bibliotherapist, set aside half an hour a day to read. “You'll become lost in a different world and create a suspension of self,” says Tsakalakis, who calls this a type of mindfulness, as you're “anchored” by the story.

Choose books you love, she says, then, when you're in the reading habit, keep a “reading notebook” in which favourite lines or passages can be jotted down. That way you can “consolidate the preciousness of books” and have something to lift your mood when feeling low.

Tsakalakis says bibliotherapy is a powerful and unique healing tool because when you read something that truly speaks to you, or that reflects your own feelings, it makes you feel less alone. “And there's solace in that.”

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