

WHAT IS BIBLIOTHERAPY?

Susan McLaine is currently working towards a doctorate in bibliotherapy, and has presented on the topic at previous conferences for library and information professionals and Alzheimer's experts and careworkers. A case study from one of Susan's papers will shortly be included in a publication being produced by beyondblue for use by aged care staff.

With so many members of the community becoming more insular and personally disconnected, Susan says the possibilities of bibliotherapy are significant, and libraries have a potentially vital role to play as people search for more meaningful ways to connect.

The concept of bibliotherapy is both old and new. Traditional applications use non-fiction literature, in the form of self-help books, as an adjunct treatment for mental illness. Contemporary definitions on the other hand, use imaginative literature to promote good mental health, and as such nurture our sense of wellbeing. Group bibliotherapy offers a practical alternative to nourish connection in contemporary society.

While the word 'bibliotherapy' has been in use for almost a hundred years, its history is much longer. The concept of bibliotherapy dates back to 300 BC, when ancient civilisations placed inscriptions over library entrances stating that within the building was 'medicine for the soul'.

The early connection to libraries is even traced to William Shakespeare's tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, in which Titus says 'Come, and take choice of all my library, And so beguile thy sorrow ...'

The word bibliotherapy originates from the Greek words for book, 'biblion', and healing, 'therapeia.' An American minister, Samuel Crothers, combined these Greek words in an article titled *A Literary Clinic*, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1916 to describe bibliotherapy as a 'process in which specific literature, both fiction and non-fiction, was prescribed as medicine for a variety of ailments.'

In its early forms, bibliotherapy was used in psychiatric hospitals as a treatment for the mentally ill. By the 20th century, libraries had become established in many European and American psychiatric hospitals. Towards the end of the First World War, libraries had become established in many



Susan McLaine: Bibliotherapy can help people find meaningful ways to connect.

veteran hospitals and bibliotherapy was administered to support an increase in demand to treat military veterans suffering emotional trauma.

An important factor in the evolution of bibliotherapy was the deinstitutionalisation of mental health care in the 1970s. This trend saw the use of bibliotherapy begin to move away from the hospital environment, and into diverse areas of the community including libraries, general medical practice, psychology, criminal justice, nursing, social work, education and occupational therapy.

Echoing Crothers' description, many subsequent definitions and applications are broad, allowing scope for the use of both fiction and non-fiction and each is usually defined in terms of its purpose. The one thing they all have in common is the use of literature to help people deal with psychological, emotional and social problems.

MODELS OF BIBLIOTHERAPY

The term 'prescriptive bibliotherapy' is interchangeably used with the term 'self-help', where books are recommended for the purpose of supporting an individual with psychological issues. A self-help book is a cognitive behavioural therapy book containing information on techniques for changing thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This model of bibliotherapy is used in clinical settings.

The 'books on prescription' model supports the delivery of the self-help bibliotherapy approach as a community-driven service. It operates through partnerships between general practitioners and librarians. General practitioners recommend or 'prescribe' a book to a patient, usually from a recommended list. The patient then takes the book prescription to a local library to source and borrow the book.

Creative bibliotherapy involves imaginative literature (fiction, inspirational stories, poetry) being read aloud in a group by a trained facilitator, with group members joining in reading aloud if they wish, followed by discussion around meaning and creation. Creative bibliotherapy aims to enrich life quality and life spirit though looking for the wisdom to be found in writing.

Through creative bibliotherapy, the facilitator is offering support, guidance and access to literature, and it is the choice of each group member to respond to that – or not.

PUBLIC LIBRARY STAFF ACTUALLY PROVIDE BIBLIOTHERAPY AS PART OF THEIR DAILY ROLE.

The facilitator specifically selects a text to provide the main structure and focus for the group discussion, and encourages group members to share stories relevant to the themes under discussion. In this way, literature can help people realise emotions, and the result can be that emotions deep inside are then able to be expressed and shared.

Wellbeing is broadly considered to mean the 'level' of life quality and has been recently defined as a 'positive state of mind and body, feeling safe and able to cope, with a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment.'

There is a strong emphasis on the term 'social' in relation to connection and wellbeing. For someone experiencing social isolation there is not a choice about being withdrawn; this is why facilitation is necessary in offering the experience to participate in something. Creative bibliotherapy provides an opportunity to be with people, without the pressure of the expectation of having to interact.

LIBRARIES CAN LEAD THE WAY

Public library staff actually provide bibliotherapy as part of their daily role. In order to recommend something that is going to be a good read for someone around a specific

situation, or give an uplifting experience, librarians need to know a little bit about the person and what they want to read. It's important to ask the user specific questions about their relationship to reading, and about themselves to be able to do this. Knowing this context, the staff member can then use their professional knowledge and experience to recommend books for the user.

BOOKS ON PRESCRIPTION

Early in the 21st century, an interesting development between health professionals and librarians transpired in the UK, when a Cardiff doctor, Dr. Neil Frude, developed a recommended reading list and piloted a partnership with Cardiff Libraries. In 2003, this became national policy in Wales. Books on Prescription schemes have since been adopted in Ireland, London and western New South Wales.

Research conducted by cognitive neuropsychologist Dr David Lewis in 2009 offers further evidence that reading is good for you. In fact, the research showed reading works better and faster than other relaxation methods to reduce stress levels. Reading silently for six minutes reduced stress by 68 percent. This was higher than listening to music at 61 percent, having a 'cuppa' at 54 percent, or going for a walk at 42 percent.

Psychologists believe reading is good for you because the mind has to concentrate on the reading and so the focus

shifts, leading to an easing of the tensions around the heart and muscles. However, this is more than a distraction; it is an active engaging of the imagination, which causes you to enter what psychologists describe as an altered state of consciousness. Studies by Professors Keith Oatley and Dan Johnson are beginning to show a link to a correlation between reading fiction and developing empathy. There are significant numbers of publications in peer-reviewed journals that provides evidence of the efficacy of self-help bibliotherapy in providing treatment for an extensive range of psychological issues for both children and adults.

More recently, studies involving creative bibliotherapy have collected strong anecdotal evidence to show it has been successful in helping individuals deal with a wide range of psychological, emotional and social problems. Further endeavours to establish strong evidence bases around newer innovative applications will strengthen the theoretical base for the concept of using imaginative literature to maintain good mental health and support wellbeing.

SUSAN MCLAIN

Project Coordinator Public Libraries & Community Engagement
State Library of Victoria
smclaine@slv.vic.gov.au