



## READING TO RECOVER: EXPLORING BIBLIOTHERAPY AS A MOTIVATIONAL TOOL FOR RECOVERING ADDICTS

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### ABSTRACT

*Bibliotherapy is a technique for structuring interaction between the client and the therapist based on mutual sharing of literature in fulfilling the client's therapeutic needs. It is also a form of supportive psychotherapy in which carefully selected reading materials are used. A study was conducted to explore the use of bibliotherapy with addicts undergoing treatment and rehabilitation in a government-aided rehabilitation center in Malaysia. The center employs the psychosocial modality in its approach to treatment and rehabilitation, in which counseling is one of the components. The respondents in the study consisted of ten inmates from the center, who were selected based on their readiness to change using the URICA Stage of Change instrument screening process, which placed them at the Stage of Contemplation before the study began. A series of six group counseling sessions were conducted with these ten respondents. At the first session, each inmate was assigned one narrative for reading. The narratives were selected from a collection of stories on the real-life experiences of successfully rehabilitated Malaysian addicts, compiled earlier by a group of counselors. Over the next five sessions, the respondents were encouraged to discuss their feelings and thoughts about the rehabilitated addicts in the stories and to reflect on their own recovery process. After the last session, the URICA was used again to determine the respondents' stage of change. The findings show that reading the narratives had a positive motivational impact on the respondents' beliefs about their potential to change and helped them move from the Contemplation Stage to the Action Stage. The sessions also reshaped their beliefs about the recovery process and helped them*

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*feel less alone. The results suggest that bibliotherapy is worth exploring further as a tool for motivating recovering addicts. However, careful planning and the selection of suitable materials is an issue to be considered, as are exposure and training in the application of the technique.*

### ABSTRAK

Kaedah "bibliotherapy" secara definisinya adalah satu teknik untuk menstrukturkan interaksi di antara seseorang pelanggan dengan ahli terapi. Ianya adalah berdasarkan persefahaman kedua-dua pihak untuk memastikan keperluan terapi pelanggan tersebut akan dapat dipenuhi. Ia juga merupakan satu kaedah berbentuk "supportive psychotherapy" di mana bahan-bahan bacaan yang terpilih sahaja akan diguna pakai. Satu kajian telah dijalankan untuk mengkaji penggunaan "bibliotherapy" di kalangan penagih dadah yang sedang menjalani rawatan pemulihan di sebuah pusat pemulihan dadah kerajaan di Malaysia. Pusat ini mempraktikkan kaedah "psychosocial modality" dalam proses rawatan pemulihannya. Salah satu komponen rawatan ini adalah khidmat kaunseling. Responden kajian ini adalah terdiri daripada 10 orang bekas penagih dadah pusat ini. Mereka telah dipilih berdasarkan tahap kesediaan mereka untuk melakukan sesuatu perubahan. Tahap mereka ini telah ditentukan melalui ukuran "URICA Stage of Change" di mana mereka kesemuanya berada di tahap "Contemplation" di tahap awal kajian ini (iaitu sebelum kajian bermula). Sebanyak 6 sesi kaunseling secara berkumpulan telah dijalankan ke atas kesepuluh responden kajian ini. Di sesi pertama, setiap responden telah diberikan tugas membaca. Bahan bacaan yang diberikan adalah di antara satu koleksi pengalaman sebenar bekas penagih dadah yang berjaya dipulihkan. Lima sesi seterusnya pula bertujuan menggalakkan para responden untuk meluahkan perasaan dan fikiran mereka mengenai bekas penagih dadah yang berjaya dipulihkan serta mengimbas kembali proses pemulihan para responden sendiri. Selepas sesi terakhir, "URICA" digunakan sekali lagi untuk memastikan tahap kesediaan responden untuk berubah. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa bahan bacaan yang diedarkan telah memberikan satu impak motivasi positif terhadap kepercayaan para responden mengenai potensi mereka untuk mengalami proses perubahan. Ianya juga telah membantu mengubah tahap para responden dari "Contemplation" kepada tahap "Action". Kesemua sesi tersebut juga telah mengubah persepsi mereka mengenai proses pemulihan secara positif. Di samping itu, sesi-sesi tersebut telah membantu mengurangkan tahap "keseorangan" yang telah dialami mereka sebelum ini. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kaedah "bibliotherapy" mempunyai potensi menjadi salah satu alat motivasi untuk para penagih dadah yang sedang menjalani proses pemulihan. Walau bagaimanapun, bahan bacaan yang



diberikan perlulah dirancang dan dipilih dengan teliti. Di samping itu, tahap pendedahan dan latihan juga seharusnya dipantau dengan sebaiknya dalam aplikasi teknik ini.

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, the repertoire of methods available for helping people cope with problems has increased with the introduction of numerous alternative approaches. One such approach has utilized the art of enabling *catharsis*. Catharsis refers to the cleansing of emotions brought about by expressing oneself through some form of art, such as music, movement, painting or writing. This approach includes *bibliotherapy*.

The term *bibliotherapy* comes from *biblio*, or books, (from the Greek *vivlion* which means book) and from the Greek *therapeia*, or therapy. Bibliotherapy generally refers to the use of books – literary works in particular – to help people cope with problems such as emotional conflict, mental illness, or changes in their lives (Pardeck, 1994). Themes that may be found in literature include separation and divorce, child abuse, foster care, and adoption. In addition to helping people with problems, bibliotherapy is also employed in enhancing the well being of individuals who are not necessarily faced with such difficulties, but who could benefit from effective change, as well as personality growth and development (Lenkowsky, 1987; Adderholdt-Elliott & Eller, 1989). The aim of bibliotherapy practitioners is to help people of all ages to understand themselves and to cope with problems by providing literature relevant to their personal situations and developmental needs at appropriate times (Hebert & Kent, 2000).

## REACTIVE AND INTERACTIVE APPROACHES IN BIBLIOTHERAPY

Bibliotherapy dates back to the 1930s when librarians began compiling lists of written material that helped individuals modify their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors for therapeutic purposes. Counselors selected and ‘prescribed’ chosen literature for clients experiencing problems by working in tandem with librarians who had greater familiarity with literary themes (Pardeck, 1994). The underlying premise of bibliotherapy has always been that clients identify with literary characters similar to themselves, an association that helps the clients release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). However, since the 1930s, bibliotherapy practice has varied in its approach and focus.



The earlier, more traditional approach tended to be more *reactive* in its approach in that the process focused on getting individuals to react positively or negatively to the reading material. More recently, however, the therapeutic process has been given a more *interactive* dimension, a development that is consistent with experiential theories of Reader Response that views reading as a transactional process between reader and text. Based on Rosenblatt's publication of *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* in 1978, experiential Reader Response theories propose that during the reading process, readers become emotionally involved, construct alternative worlds and conceptualize characters, events and settings, create visual images, connect the text with their own experiences, and evaluate their own experiences against what happens in the texts (Beach, 1993). In other words, readers interact with texts, becoming part of the intellectual and emotional process as each story unfolds. As they attempt to process what is being communicated at the deepest level, readers engage in activities that help them reflect on what they read, such as group discussion and dialogue journal writings (Palmer, et al., 1997; Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Morawski & Gilbert, 2000). The readers also interact with their facilitators or counselors through discussion and "therapeutic interactions" (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986, p. 10). These activities are aimed at helping readers make a positive alternation or modification in behavior or attitude (Myers, 1998).

The use of literature in the helping process has translated into therapeutic methods employed for various purposes. In *clinical bibliotherapy* and *bibliocounselling*, skilled practitioners use therapeutic methods to help individuals experiencing serious emotional problems. Classroom teachers, however, are more likely to use *developmental bibliotherapy*, which involves helping 'normal' students in their general health and development. While the focus of bibliocounselling is on helping people cope with problems as and after the problems arise, *developmental bibliotherapy* focuses on helping teachers identify the concerns of their students and address the issues *before* problems arise. The latter approach can also be used to guide students through predictable stages of adolescence so that they are equipped with some knowledge of what to expect as well as examples of how other teenagers have dealt with the same concerns (Hebert & Kent, 2000).

Hynes and Hynes-Berry use 'literature' in a broad sense to include print, video and creative writing materials (Schumaker, Wantz, & Taricone, 1995). Thus, clients may be asked to consume literature through reading or viewing, or to create literature in the form of writing, painting



or movement. The benefits of these techniques are similar regardless of the medium used and they all require careful planning.

## **BASIC STAGES IN BIBLIOTHERAPY**

Activities in bibliotherapy are generally designed to provide information; provide insight; stimulate discussion about problems; communicate new values and attitudes; create awareness that other people also have similar problems and provide realistic solutions to problems. The process goes through four basic stages (Pardeck, 1993) namely identification, selection, presentation and follow-up.

### **Identification and Selection**

During the first two stages, the clients' needs must be identified, and appropriate stories or poems are selected to match their particular problems. One of the aims of bibliotherapy is to help readers feel relieved that they are not the only ones facing a specific problem or that they are the only ones who possess certain personality traits. Thus, the characters in the literature should resemble the readers in some aspects of behaviour or they should experience circumstances very similar to those of the readers.

The materials also need to be age-appropriate so that the readers can better relate to the content. The reading level should also be appropriate so that the readers will not have to struggle excessively to make sense of what goes on, as the focus should be on drawing parallels between literary characters and real-life characters. However, there should be enough depth in the stories or poems to enable a discussion of the issues. In addition, the books must provide correct information about a problem while not imparting a false sense of hope (Pardeck, 1994). Clearly, the selection process takes a great deal of skill and insight. Obtaining the opinions of other teachers or helpers can be extremely useful and sharing resources with is one way of developing a repertory of literary materials.

### **Presentation**

After the books or literary pieces have been selected, they must be presented carefully and strategically so that the clients are able to see similarities between themselves and the book's characters. Eventually, readers have to learn vicariously how to solve their problems by reflecting on how the characters in the book solve theirs (Hebert & Kent, 2000); this can also be seen as the "copying of character behaviours" (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).



The procedure used in the helping process need not vary greatly from normal interactive literature lessons in the classroom. During such lessons, teachers and students may begin by reading a book or poem. The literary material provides students with characters to react to and common experiences to discuss after the reading. In individual or group bibliocounselling, one way to begin is to have the individual or group read a piece of literature before a session. During the session, the participants are asked to talk about their reaction to what they have read. For example, if the assigned book is *The Blind Men and the Elephant: An Old Tale from the Land of India* (Quigley, 1959), participants are guided to see that personal perceptions differ according to experience. A discussion of the central theme can then lead to a more personalized examination of its meaning by individuals (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). In addition to the examination of themes, however, participants have to be helped to relate to one or more characters presented in the books or poems.

An alternative method is for counselors to get each participant to share a piece of literature that has a special significance to him or her. As he or she talks, the participant must be helped to realize what the story means to him or her, and why it has an impact. If this technique is carried out in a group setting, other participants may also identify themselves with particular characters.

### **Follow-up**

Once the participants can identify with relevant characters, they enter the follow-up stage during which they share what they have learnt about themselves as a result of identifying with and examining the literary characters and their experiences. This cathartic activity is designed to help readers come to terms with their problems and to cleanse themselves emotionally. They may express catharsis verbally during oral discussion or writing, or nonverbal means such as art (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000), role-playing, creative problem solving, or self-selected options for students to pursue individually (Hebert & Kent, 2000).

Once catharsis has occurred, the clients can be guided to gain further insight into the problem. Examples of activities suggested by Sridhar and Vaughn (2000) for this purpose include the following:

- Develop a summary of the book, through the point of view of a character other than that who is the focal point of the story.
- Create a diary for a character in the story.



- Write a letter from one character in the book to another, or from the student to one of the characters.
- Compose a different ending to the story.
- Compose a “Dear Abby” letter that a book character could have written about a problem situation (Pardeck, 1995).

Such activities help readers study issues from a variety of perspectives, and in doing so, they may obtain solutions to their own problems.

### THE ROLE OF THE HELPER

The success of the bibliotherapy program depends largely on how well helpers play their role throughout the entire process. Helpers must carefully design a programme that will take the clients through the stages of the therapy and they must be able to carry it out effectively. To do so, bibliotherapy helpers need to draw from the basic principles of a counsellor’s behaviour such as being non-judgemental and empathic, and being good listeners.

In addition to these essential counselling skills, bibliotherapy helpers also need to develop a familiarity with a reasonably wide range of literary materials on various themes, perhaps by enlisting the assistance of literature teachers and librarians. The helpers must also be effective facilitators who can help readers see aspects of their own behaviour or problems in the literary materials, and later help the readers participate in cathartic activities.

A basic knowledge of literary appreciation would also be an advantage, as literary materials often make use of metaphors or images that, if explored, can provide readers with a framework for viewing – or not viewing – their problems in specific ways. For example, Robert Frost’s poem *The Road Not Taken* looks at each of us as a traveller and compares the choices we make in life to roads – one is well travelled and secure, the other is unfamiliar and possibly full of risks and uncertainties. The poem leads us to ponder the question: Which road is more worth taking? In the poem, Frost voices the concern that “knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back”, and ends the poem with the decision the Traveller finally makes. A helper who is able to read into this metaphor and the poet’s meaning can introduce the poem to readers who are struggling with life’s choices themselves –



perhaps with career paths or more immediate concerns such as whether or not to befriend someone – to help them view the choices as roads on which they have to travel. Frost’s words suggest that readers could take a safer route: explore the different ways one path could lead, before making a decision. On the other hand, the poem could also encourage readers to take the plunge and explore the less travelled path. A sensitive helper can, through skilfully facilitated discussion, capitalise on this metaphoric representation of life to help readers draw parallels between poetry and real life. Whichever ‘path’ readers end up with, the realisation that there are others who face the same situation would leave them feeling less lonely and the discussions would definitely help them attain greater insight into their own inclinations.

Although the development of literary appreciation seems at first glance to be unrelated to the practice of counselling and helping, they are in fact not so far removed from each other. Reading and discussing literary material involves activities such as restating or paraphrasing, clarifying, questioning, summarizing and reflection – strategies that are also employed in the counselling domain. Thus, the exercise of literary appreciation actually complements and may even enhance counselling skills.

It is important to remember that unlike traditional counselling sessions in which only the counsellor is expected to paraphrase, summarise, question and clarify, both helper and client in a bibliotherapy approach apply these strategies in studying the literary material. This shared activity helps create a complementary and reciprocal relationship between both parties – constructing a common ground for discussions.

### **BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF BIBLIOTHERAPY**

In addition to the “how” of conducting bibliotherapy, practitioners also need to be aware of potential benefits and pitfalls associated with this procedure. Bibliotherapy has obvious value in that it provides the opportunity for the participants to recognize and understand themselves, their characteristics, and the complexity of human thought and behaviour. It may also promote social development as well as garner the love for literature in general, and reading in particular (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). It reduces feelings of isolation that may be felt by people with problems.



The effectiveness of bibliotherapy, however, may be limited by several factors, including the unavailability of materials on certain topics, as well as the lack of materials in certain languages. This problem is especially relevant for counselling practitioners in the multi-ethnic context of Malaysia. For this reason, it would be beneficial for a network of bibliotherapy practitioners to include literature teachers and writers in addition to counsellors, so that lists of books on specific themes may be compiled and shared.

Another limitation to the bibliotherapy approach is a possible lack of client readiness and willingness to read. In order for the approach to work, clients must be willing to take time to read and reflect on the material. The material and presentation must therefore be attractive and relevant enough to the clients to stimulate and sustain their interest.

Clients may also project their own motives onto the characters and thus reinforce their own perceptions and solutions. In addition to that, participants may be defensive, thus discounting the actions of the characters and failing to identify with them, or even end up using them as scapegoats. Some of these limitations can be overcome through the continuation of the process itself, role-playing, and the use of group discussions (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

Facilitator limitations are also a challenge: facilitators may have limited knowledge of human development and developmental problems as well as inadequate knowledge about appropriate literature. Facilitators thus need to be properly trained and exposed to a repertoire of literature suitable for use in bibliotherapy.

One other limitation may lie in the bibliotherapy process itself: for example, clients may be unwilling to discuss areas that are uncomfortable, or facilitators may insist on making a point at the client's expense. The process is also limited if both the client and the counsellor only dwell on surface issues. These limitations can be addressed by suspending sessions until both parties are ready and willing to work, by taping and critiquing selected sessions so that facilitators can monitor their own reactions to certain clients or problem areas, and by revisiting issues in stories that have been treated superficially in previous sessions (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).



## OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of this study are to examine the suitability of bibliotherapy technique as a recovery tool for helping recovering addicts in a counseling process and to investigate the impact of reading true success stories of total recovery addicts at the stage of change and the motivation to change amongst recovering addicts.

## METHODOLOGY

Ten recovering addicts undergoing counseling in a rehabilitation program were given true success stories of recovered addicts to read. Six counseling sessions applying the bibliotherapy technique were conducted with them over a period of six consecutive weeks. They were pre-tested and post-tested on their readiness to change using URICA -the Readiness to Change Instrument and the level of self-esteem.

## INSTRUMENTS

*URICA Stage of Change:* A translated version of the Stage of Change Questionnaire, consisting of 30 items to measure the level of readiness to change, was used. The five stages of change are pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Pre-contemplation is the stage at which there is no intention to change behavior in the foreseeable future. Many individuals in this stage are unaware or less aware of their problems. Contemplation is the stage in which people are aware that a problem exists and are seriously thinking about overcoming it but have not yet made a commitment to take action. Preparation is the stage that combines intention and behavioral criteria. Individuals at this stage are intending to take action in the next month and have unsuccessfully taken action in the past year. Action is the stage in which individuals modify their behavior, experiences, or environment in order to overcome their problems. Action involves the most overt behavioral changes and requires considerable commitment of time and energy. Maintenance is the stage in which people work to prevent relapse and consolidate the gains attained during action. For addictive behaviors, this stage extends from six months to an indeterminate period past the initial action.

*Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale* - An adapted and translated version of Rosenberg Self- Esteem Scale of 10 items that describe the level of self esteem of personal self.



## **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE**

A series of counseling sessions were conducted where issues of recovery were discussed based on the true stories of successfully recovering addicts.

### **Session 1: Getting Acquainted**

- a. Structuring of the group process. Clients were given information on the purpose of the group work and the responsibilities of group members. Structuring includes rules and regulation, expectations, involvement and as well as other issues related to group procedures and protocols.
- b. Distribution of reading material. Clients were given literatures of true story of recovering addicts to be read through by each of the group members.
- c. Pre-test using Rosenberg Self Esteem Scales & URICA were conducted.

### **Session 2 to Session 5**

Group process and sharing of experiences, feelings, thought, insight and other related issues leading to the motivation to change from the article read. Every member was given the opportunity to share their feelings, thoughts and responses to the respective articles they have read.

### **Session 6: The Post-test and Termination of the Counseling Process**

Post-tests were conducted using the same instruments to investigate changes that may have taken place in terms of their readiness to change. During the termination process, every individual was given the opportunity to reflect what they felt and what they have in mind regarding changes, getting into a normal life as well as developing their personal beings.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of the study show that bibliotherapy can be used as an approach or recovery tool in addition to other recovery tools in helping addicts on their journey to recovery. The following are the results of the psychometric test - URICA- used to measure the readiness to change.



Res-pondent	Pre- test	Type of Drug	Number of years addicted	Number of relapses	Post-test	Statements and thoughts
R1	Contemplation	Opiate	5	3	Action	Never thought there are people who can gain total recovery
R2	Contemplation	Opiate	4	3	Action	Would like to follow what the client in the literature have done
R3	Contemplation	ATS	6	5	Preparation	Don't know if he can ever recover but it seems that there are people who can do it. That means I can too.
R4	Contemplation	Opiate	3	2	Action	Motivated by the fact that there are people who managed to get out of this loop.
R5	Contemplation	ATS	4	3	Action	Gain confidence and wants to follow the footstep of that person in the literature
R6	Contemplation	ATS	4	3	Action	Wants to speak to family members to seek for help because that person in the literature managed to gain recovery with the support of his family
R7	Contemplation	Opiate	2	1	Maintenance	Very highly motivated and has hope
R8	Contemplation	Opiate	2	1	Maintenance	Believe in self and will stay strong with the believe that he will recover.
R9	Contemplation	ATS	3	2	Action	It's difficult to go through but other people have managed to do it.
R10	Contemplation	ATS	5	4	Preparation	Don't really know if he can because the family members have given up on him and he has no where to return.



Based on the table, the use of literature has a strong influence of the perception of respondents towards change. All respondents demonstrated a change of attitude in which they viewed that there was room for improvement in themselves. Those respondents who were still engaged with their families hoped to be able to talk to their families about their plan of action to change.

The following are the post-test result of self esteem levels amongst respondents using Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ( SA- Strongly Agree, A- Agree, D- Disagree, SD- Strongly Disagree).

Items	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	D	D	SD	D	A	A	SA	SA	A	SD
At times, I think I am not good at all	A	SA	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	SA
I feel that I have a number of good qualities	A	A	A	A	A	A	SA	SA	SA	A
I am able to do things as well as most other people	A	D	SD	A	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	A
I feel I do not have much to be proud of	SA	D	A	A	D	D	D	D	A	A
I certainly feel useless at times	SA	A	A	A	D	D	D	D	A	SA
I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane as others	A	A	D	A	A	A	SA	SA	A	A
I wish I could have more respect for my self	SA									
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure	D	D	A	D	D	D	SD	SD	D	A
I take a positive attitude towards myself	D	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	D

## DISCUSSION

There is evidence of change in behavior as an outcome from the bibliotherapy technique in working with addicts.

Literature consisting of true accounts of successful recovering addicts can be a helpful recovery tool to boost motivation to change as well as to help improve cognitive distortion of individuals who are in the treatment process.

Sharing true stories of recovering addicts helps clients to investigate and be aware of their personal strengths in preparing themselves to change.



Addiction counselors need to use various approaches when working with addicts especially in helping develop the addicts' emotional and psychological levels as well as personal beliefs about the treatment and the ability to change.

## CONCLUSION

Bibliotherapy is a potentially powerful method for counsellors to use at different levels and types of cognitive distortion and personal beliefs. In order to establish a strong bibliotherapy program in an institution, practitioners must present the procedure as a non-threatening one, starting by calling the process biblioguidance, for instance. They must also solicit the input and advice of colleagues, parents, and administrators. Nevertheless, they must always be alert and aware of the limitations of bibliotherapy.

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