



BIBLIOTHERAPY: A TOOL FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION PROGRAM WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS¹

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ABSTRACT

By definition, bibliotherapy is a technique for structuring interaction between the client and the therapist based on mutual sharing of literature in fulfilling the client therapeutic needs. It is also a form of supportive psychotherapy in which carefully selected reading materials are used. This study attempts to explore the application of bibliotherapy and how it can be effectively used while working with children and adolescents as a preventive measure to keep them away from drug abuse and addiction. This concept is believed could be use in the prevention work against drug abuse among children and adolescents. The advantages of using bibliotherapy in drug prevention, among which to develop an individual self-concept, to understand the human behavior and motivation, to relieve emotional pressure, to realize that 'you are not alone in this', to discuss a problem freely and to explore various alternatives to problem solving. Literature has been considered as powerful tools with which to guide children to think, to shape their behavior, to strengthen their character and to be able to understand themselves better. In addition, bibliotherapy can help mould the young to be more knowledgeable about the threat and the consequences of drug abuse, and learn to be more assertive, more courageous and more confident to say no to drugs. This paper outlined the strategy of conducting the therapy in primary prevention. Selection of suitable materials is an issue to be considered. Exposure and training in the application of the technique is highly recommended in drug related prevention work.

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ABSTRAK

Biblioterapi ialah satu teknik interaksi yang berstruktur di antara klien dengan terapis berdasarkan kepada perkongsian sesuatu bahan bacaan dalam memenuhi keperluan terapeutik klien. Ia juga merupakan satu bentuk terapi sokongan yang mana bahan bacaan tertentu dipilih untuk tujuan terapi. Kajian ini bertujuan meneroka aplikasi biblioterapi di kalangan kanak-kanak dan remaja dalam usaha mencegah mereka dari penggunaan dadah kemudian hari. Konsep ini dipercayai boleh digunakan untuk tujuan pencegahan. Kebaikan menggunakan biblioterapi ini antara lainnya ialah untuk membentuk konsep diri yang positif, memahami tingkah laku serta motivasi manusia, untuk melegakan tekanan emosi, untuk mendapat kesedaran bahawa 'kita bukanlah keseorangan', untuk membincangkan masalah secara terbuka dan meneroka pelbagai pilihan dalam penyelesaian masalah. Bahan bacaan dianggap sebagai alat yang berkesan untuk membentuk pemikiran, sikap serta membolehkan mereka lebih memahami diri masing-masing. Di samping itu, biblioterapi boleh membentuk anak muda untuk mengetahui tentang ancaman dan bahaya dadah dan mempelajari cara untuk lebih tegas, berani dan yakin untuk mengatakan "tidak" kepada dadah. Kertas ini menggariskan strategi menjalankan terapi dalam konteks pencegahan awalan. Pemilihan bahan yang bersesuaian sememangnya adalah isu untuk dipertimbangkan. Bagi mereka yang ingin menggunakan teknik ini, pendedahan dan latihan dalam aplikasi biblioterapi adalah perlu dan penting bagi menjamin kejayaannya.

"Literature is and has been through ages the great medium of thought transference. It is the mighty stronghold wherein are kept the gems of intellect. In its depths are reflected joy, sorrow, hope and despair, every emotion that recorded life has known"

(Theodosia Crosse, 1928)

1. Introduction

Reading is a dynamic process and it can be therapeutic. When we read a good book, we bring in our own needs and problems to the reading experience while interpreting the words according to our



own frame of reference. We became involved with the characters and we could relate to them. As they worked through a problem, we too would be emotionally involved in the struggle. We became interested with the main issues discussed in the literature and most of the time it does concern us. There is a lot of positive and negative emotion going on in the novel and we experienced them all. When we finished reading a book, we would often gain new insight about our own situation and ways to handle them. More than that, we would renew our hope to carry on with life and its challenges.

Bibliotherapy uses literature to bring about a therapeutic interaction between the client and the therapist. The idea of using literature is to help the client understand his situation better by reading a related material. Learning about other people experiences or possible experiences via literature is the best way to do that. Based on the literature, both the client and the therapist could then discuss the issue that is being focused on and explore the alternatives to the problem. The therapist role is to facilitate the client to express his emotions, to seek possible resolution of his dilemma and to guide him to deal with the situation the best way possible. We tend to look at our situation from a different perspective and a more positive attitude when we understand the situation better.

People who work in the human services profession face clients who struggle to cope with difficult situations in life on a daily basis. These helping interactions are more rehabilitative in nature, which is acceptable in inevitable situations such as disabilities. Drug abuse is one of those difficult situations we face today and the children and adolescents are at risk of the menace. Drug abuse is not inevitable. In this case, we need to work on the premise of prevention and the effort should benefit the whole schoolchildren population. How do the professional helpers help them to stay away from the lure of drugs? Is bibliotherapy a viable method, which may enable teachers to raise student's self-concept and self-assertiveness and to initiate behavior adjustment with their students in the school setting as a primary prevention measure?



The aims of this study is to understand the basic concept of bibliotherapy and how it can be applied while working with children and adolescents as a preventive measure to keep them away from drug abuse and addiction.

Background

The concept of using books to effect a change in a person thinking and behavior has been around for decades. Samuel Crothers coined the specific term of “bibliotherapy” in 1916 when he discussed a technique of prescribing books to patients who need help understanding their problems in *Atlantic Monthly*, and he labeled the technique as “bibliotherapy” (Myracle, 1995).

The application of bibliotherapy with children and adolescents was first recorded in 1946 with the work of Sister Mary Agnes who work with socially maladjusted children (Myracle, 1995). Bibliotherapy as applied to children and adolescents evolves from didacticism (written in instructive manner) to sentimentality (written in a moralistic and sentimental manner) to realism (written in realistic manner). The work of bibliotherapy in the area of drug addiction had progressed since 1960.

The reason of using literature in therapy is because it provides the healing and the therapeutic experiences. This implies the remedial or curative aspect of bibliotherapy. On the other hand, literature has for ages been considered as a powerful tool with which can be use to guide children to think, to shape their behavior, to strengthen their character and to understand themselves better (Myracle, 1995). With the four tenet of the statement, it is believed that the concept of bibliotherapy could be use in the prevention work against drug abuse among children and adolescents as an adjunctive therapy alongside other existing program.

Myracle (1995) pointed that researchers has attempted and succeeded in using bibliotherapy as a mean of helping children and adolescents feel better about themselves. With the positive attitude they developed, they became more adaptable and ready to face their problems. Other than the usual problem of appearance,



popularity and academic achievement, children and adolescents of today face more complicated issues such as homosexuality, alcohol and drug abuse. Professional helpers have a need to shift to a more realistic application of bibliotherapy with children and adolescents.

Olsen (1975) in Myracles (1995) argued that bibliotherapy is especially appropriate in the modern world because it allows children and adolescents a safe way of confronting dilemmas. Research shows that it is rather difficult for children and adolescents to express their feelings. In this instance, bibliotherapy provides an opportunity for imaginative interaction between the children, the adolescents, the therapist and the literature, which can be less threatening than direct confrontation. Bibliotherapy has the ability to enable children and adolescents to meet various developmental adjustments of adolescence in term of personal problem-solving and social adaptation. Through bibliotherapy, children have an opportunity to identify, to compensate and to relive in a controlled manner a problem that they now are aware of.

Myracle (1995) stated that bibliotherapy has been successfully used with specialized population such as juvenile delinquents, drugs and alcohol abusers. If that was the case, the writers believed that bibliotherapy could be used to provide the children and adolescents with all the necessary information on drugs and the consequences of drug abuse as part of the prevention program. They would be better equipped to handle negative influences and be more assertive to say no to drugs. Most important is that they know where to get help when faced with cues and warning signs of the danger.

As a form of therapy, bibliotherapy aims to develop the client self-concept and to increase his understanding of human behavior and motivation. It also serves the purpose to foster an individual honest self-appraisal and to open up venues for the client to find interest outside of self. The most important goal of bibliotherapy is to help the client to discuss a problem or situation more freely and in the process, he would be able to relieve emotional or mental pressure or other stressful situation he is dealing with. At



this point, the client would be convinced that he is not the first or only person to encounter such a problem. The ultimate goal would be to show him that there is more than one solution to a situation and to help the individual plan a constructive course of action to solve whatever problem that bothers him. The unique power of bibliotherapy is in the usage of literature as the primary tool and its emphasis on the healthy aspects of the mind for both the developmental and clinical clients. Bibliotherapy is directed to the encouragement and reinforcement of client strength and positive qualities.

Definition

Bibliotherapy generally means a technique for structuring interaction between the client and the therapist (either individual client or with a group of clientele) based on mutual sharing of literature (biblio) in fulfilling the client need to solve their problem or situation (therapy). It can also be understood as a form of supportive psychotherapy in which carefully selected reading materials are used.

Riordan and Wilson (1989) define bibliotherapy as “the guided reading of written materials in gaining understanding or solving problem relevant to a person’s therapeutic needs”. Electronic medium has been included as the resource materials.

In the study of bibliotherapy, the usage of the word literature, books, novel, resource material and reading materials are interchangeable. Participants are interchangeable with client and therapist are interchangeable with facilitator or practitioner.

The underlying assumption of the definition of bibliotherapy is that it is an interactive process between the client (or a group of clientele) and the therapist. Literature is defined in the broadest sense that it include printed and electronic medium. The reading material can be a self - help book, a novel, a true story, a fiction or even a tape recorder. It can be a poem or lyrics from a song.

As mention elsewhere, the practice of bibliotherapy may take place either on a one-on-one basis or in a group setting, depending on the need of the client. The results of effective bibliotherapy



sessions are improved self-esteem and assimilation of appropriate psychological or social values into the participant character and behavior.

The Strategy to Conduct a Bibliotherapy Session

Bibliotherapy can be conducted with individual or in a group basis. In individual session, the resource material is assigned to a participant for a specific problem. The participant would read the material and then discuss the material with the facilitator. As a follow-up activity, the client might write a report, talk into the tape recorder or express her reaction in an art form.

For drug abuse prevention work, the group therapy approach would be appropriate since the intervention is developmental in nature and the participants are in the universal group. But in case a member of the group found himself in need of a more personal attention for some particular reason, then other arrangement for a one-on-one basis can be made. The client might have some experience to share with the therapists and he would feel freer to express them in an individual session.

According to Aiex (1993), regardless of whether the practitioner decide on a one-on-one or a group session, the basic procedures in conducting bibliotherapy session that he should follow are:

- a. to motivate the client with introductory activities;
- b. to provide time for reading the material;
- c. to allow incubation time to reflect;
- d. to provide follow-up discussion time, using questions that will lead the participants to make interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of the information gathered from the reading; and
- e. to conduct evaluation towards closure, this involves both the evaluation by the therapists and self-evaluation by the individual.



Aiex (1993) had suggested a guideline on how to conduct a bibliotherapy session. This guideline is applicable to both the individual and the group approach. The guidelines are as follows:

- a. Identify the children and the adolescents needs. This task can be done through observation, parent conferences, student writing assignments and the review of the school records. For the purposes of this paper, the common needs identified would be preparing oneself against drug abuse;
- b. Match the children and the adolescents with appropriate reading materials. For the purpose of this paper, the therapists will have to find a reading material that deal with drug addiction. In doing so, the therapists would have to bear in mind that the material must be at the children and the adolescents reading ability level, the material must be appropriate to the maturity level of the children and the adolescents, the characters should be believable so that the children and the adolescents can empathize with their predicaments and the plot should be realistic and involved creativity in problem solving;
- c. Decide on the setting and time for sessions and how the sessions will be introduced to the children and the adolescents. How he decide on the setting and the introduction is up to the creativity of the therapists, but he will have to consider the time and duration of the session so that the outcome of the process would be significant;
- d. Design follow-up activities for the reading. Because he is working with children and the adolescents and because the topic of discussion is rather dry, the therapists will have to work in a manner that he could have the participant's attention. This can be done through discussion, report writing, drawing and drama;
- e. Motivate the children and the adolescents with introductory activities such as asking question to get a discussion going on a topic or may be inviting them to recite a poem or sing a song that is related to the topic;



- f. Engage in the reading, viewing or listening phase. To make the session lively and less monotonous, the therapists can ask leading questions or start short discussion throughout the phase. The therapists can also ask the participants to make short summary of what has occurred thus far to make sure that the message does not get lost in the trivial points. This is supposed to be the climax of the session. The therapist will have to be sensitive with the environment and care has to be taken for possible event of emotional catharsis that should be dealt with;
- g. After the apex of the session, it is time to cool down and the therapists may allow for a break or for a few minutes for the children and the adolescents to reflect on the material;
- h. Introduce the follow-up activities. This is the part where the therapists introduce the follow-up activities that he had design in step (d). The writers would like to suggest a few follow-up activities that can be carried out such as retelling the ending of the story as desired by the participants, have an in-depth discussion of the material (for example discussing the strong and weak points of the main character), art activities, creative writing (for instance resolving the story in a different way or may be analyzing the decisions of the characters) and may be drama;
- i. Assist the participants in achieving closure through discussion and listing of possible solutions. The participants may give their input on self-evaluation at this point. The therapists will make his comment on the progress of the session and then conclude the session.

There is always the question of who should conduct a bibliotherapy sessions. As for any other therapy, bibliotherapy has to be conducted by trained personnel. The therapists can be a teacher, a librarian, or a human services professional, but he will have to go for training to be able to conduct a good non-damaging sessions. Bibliotherapy must be handled with great sensitivity especially if the risk of emotional catharsis is involved. Practitioner should possess the personal quality of mental stability, good listening skills and a



genuine interest in working with others. Also in the cognitive faculty, therapists should be able to make accurate, empathic interpretations of the participant responses and through literature and dialogue, to draw out deeper self-understanding by the clients. In some literature, the ability to empathize with others without de-moralizing, threatening or commanding is being stressed.

As in group counseling, co-therapists in bibliotherapy sessions are appropriate. This collaboration and cooperation helps in balancing the process so that no one person is in charge. As in group counseling also, facilitators need to project a light voice tone and a thoughtful manner to allow for a comfortable discussion to take place.

Bibliotherapy worked best with groups. It can be instrumental in helping to deal with emotional problems. It creates a sense of belonging among members and provides the sense of security. The group dynamic allows members to share common experiences and this will lessen the anxieties. Working in a group may lead an individual to develop a different perspective and a new understanding of the problems of others.

In addition, the size of the group and time allocated for the session should be taken into consideration. Bibliotherapy session took a considerable amount of time. As in group counseling, the ideal size of a group would be about 6 to 8 participants. If the text of the material were short, such as a poem or maybe a visual for viewing, then it would be all right to dispense the material during the session. On the other hand, if the reading material requires a bit more time to comprehend, then one strategy that could be applied is to give the reading material before hand so that the members can have ample time to read it and then they could come to the session to discuss their reaction to the material.

As a precaution, however, before undertaking bibliotherapy, a practitioner must remember that bibliotherapy is more than just the casual recommendation of a certain literature or reading material to an individual to read and be done with. It is a deliberate course of action that requires careful planning and need to be executed properly.



Selection of Materials

Bibliotherapy works on the premise that a good book can mold a child self-concept. Good reading materials provide insight that would change children and adolescents behavior if they have a problem. Good literature would enable them to be obedient and thoughtful of others. The ultimatum of the therapy is for children and adolescents to grow up to be assertive and socially well adjusted so that they could keep themselves away from trouble and to be a productive member of society.

Plato in Myracle (1995) stated “And shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tale which may be devised by casual persons and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we wish them to have when they are grown up? We cannot. Anything received into the mind at this age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales, which the young first hear, should be models of virtuous thoughts”. Reading material can be either constructive or destructive as it can be elevating or debasing. Unfortunately, children and adolescents often do not know the difference and many read the inappropriate material. It is of utmost importance that we should be very selective in choosing the reading material for bibliotherapy sessions.

To be effective, bibliotherapy depends largely on the availability of a good and appropriate collection of literature on the identified issues. It also relies on the facilitator’s ability to choose material that speaks of the individual participant needs. The reading material should have literary merit. A poorly written novel with unrealistic characters and simplistic answers to complex questions does not provoke and stimulates the thinking faculty of the group members. It is probably worse than not reading anything at all and can leave clients with a negative view. Fictional works are said to be good for discussion purposes because participants can talk about the characters in a book rather than about themselves, especially for indicated group of participants, who in the interest of this paper is involved in drug abuse. This is often less threatening for the client.



Aiex (1993) had suggested a guideline on what to consider when selecting literary resources for a bibliotherapy session. Therapists can seek help from the resource person at the library to identify good reading materials. The writers had discussed a bit about matching the literary resources with the need of a specific clientele group in 5.4 b. Based on the argument discussed above, the guidelines are as follows:

- a. Consider the length of the material that intended to be used. A poem can be a good material for discussion. So do lyrics from songs. Both are short and easy on comprehension. A video that runs for an hour or so is also suitable. Though viewing the video would take a little bit of time, but then visuals are much easier to comprehend and this facilitates discussion. Books, novels and fiction posed a little bit of a problem as far as length of material is concern. Bottom line is it depends on the group that benefit from the session. For children and adolescents, short stories might be suitable;
- b. Consider the complexity of the material that intended to be used. The selected material should match the client's intellectual abilities. Bibliotherapy with children and adolescents are supposed to be a relaxed and enlightening occasion where the clients relate to the resource material in the attempt to explore and understand themselves better. Material that are too complex would defeat the purpose of the sessions;
- c. The resource material that intended to be used should be applicable to client situation. It will have to be related to the problem the client is currently facing for him to benefit from the sessions;
- d. The client reading ability should be known. But then, illiteracy is not an issue in bibliotherapy though being able to read is instrumental in most of the sessions. For those who cannot read, medium such as videos and tape recorders can be considered. Reading stories aloud also can be an option to achieve similar desired result with children;



- e. Consider how well the resource material helps with fostering personal insight. Material that does not offer new insight to the readers is not of much use in bibliotherapy for the reason that it wont be able to develop or provoke discrepancies on the part of the client for him to initiate changes;
- f. Consider how well the resource material helps with triggering emotional catharsis. In bibliotherapy, we do not purposely set out to trigger emotional catharsis because it would be too risky for the comfort of the client, which would not help the sessions at all. Somehow the therapists need to rebuke some emotion from the client in order to gain new insight but the provocation should be kept minimal and under control. It is important to be prepared to deal with the emotional issue should it results.
- g. Consider how well the resource material helps with assisting in problem solving. The main goal of bibliotherapy is to make the client aware that there is more than one solution to a situation, to guide the client on how to make a good decision by considering the pros and cons of each alternative there is in problem solving. The material should be able to help the clients to be more creative in finding a possible solution and help the individual to plan a constructive course of action to solve whatever problem bothers him. Bottom line is it has to bring about an acceptable, good positive outcome;
- h. Consider how well the resource material helps with altering the ways in which the clients act. A person reaction and behavior are the manifestation of his values, attitude and his belief system. Reading appropriate resource material might be remedial if the client is experiencing distorted cognitive. The desired outcome in behavior modification is of paramount interest in the work of bibliotherapy for both the developmental and clinical intervention;
- i. Consider how well the resource material help with promoting satisfying relationship with peers. This is particularly important because in group-based bibliotherapy, the

cohesiveness of the members would in return, contribute to group dynamism. If the group works well together, chances are the intervention will be productive and beneficial;

- j. Consider how well the resource material help with providing information about shared problems. The basis of bibliotherapy is about mutual sharing of literature between the clientele and the therapists on the ground of common problems. The selected material should be comprehensive to be able to help the parties involved to explore all the possibilities in understanding their common problems and to provides ideas, alternatives and ways to deal with the situation; and

- k. Consider how well the resource material help with providing a good quality recreation experience. As stated elsewhere, a bibliotherapy session should be a relaxed and enlightening event to the children and adolescents. The clientele are attracted to recreation, adventure and having fun. A good piece of resource material, together with the creativity of the therapists can bring about the fun from the sessions.

In the process of interactive bibliotherapy, a trained facilitator uses guided discussion to help the clinical or developmental participants integrate both emotive and cognitive responses to a selected work of literature, which may be printed text, some form of audiovisual material or a creative writing. This resource material is the integral part of the therapy. Provided that we were able to come up with good resource material, various kinds of information can be conveyed through shared reading and discussion. Having discussed the fine aspects of resource material selection, the writers became more convinced of the prospect of using bibliotherapy in the work of drug abuse prevention.

Discussion

While most people would think that if literature was to play such a role, than the message should be something like “if you are upright and honest and you work really hard, everything will work out in the end”. However, often in real life, things does



not always work out, but with some good help, we can manage to deal with the situation without causing harm to ourselves or the people we love.

Knowing where to find the good help can be discussed during the therapy session. Apart from drug abuse, the session should also tackle current issues that are relevant to the children and adolescent such as sexual issues, broken families, delinquency and school because the issues are inter related. One is the causality factor to the other. It is not to the extent to make popular the negative habit, but to guide the children and adolescent to deal with the situation the way they should, thoughtfully and courageously.

As far as bibliotheca is concern, it is believed that there is enough resource material to start with. It is understandable that there might be a shortage of trained personnel in the field of bibliotherapy pertaining to drug abuse prevention. The higher learning institution could play their part in the field of training. We will have to start somewhere and see how it will progress and developed.

The problem of the availability of material is not that prominent but identifying them would. In the western country, where bibliotherapy has already been made popular, they have worked on listing, indexes and guide with given summaries and general themes to help practitioners identify appropriate good, suitable materials. This effort can be initiated with the help of the National Library.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the process of bibliotherapy is able to unblock emotions and relieve emotional pressures. By analyzing the moral values and the stimulation of critical thinking, the client develop self-awareness, enhanced self-concept, and improved personal and social judgement. This should result in improved behavior and able to handle and understand the important life issues. It can also result in increased empathy, tolerance, respect and acceptance to others. Given suitable reading materials, bibliotherapy can help mold the young to be more knowledgeable about the threat and the consequences of drug abuse, and henceforth learn to be more assertive and more confident to say no to drugs.



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