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The Art of Bibliotherapy

The Three-Axis Model for Using Stories, Poems and Writing in Therapy

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Abstract

This article outlines a model for creating tailored bibliotherapy interventions in both group and private settings. By detailing specific techniques and considerations for using stories, poems, and writing prompts, the model provides a framework to help therapists structure bibliotherapeutic interventions in a thoughtful and responsive manner. At its core, the model features three distinct axes, each representing a methodology for making decisions about which literary or poetic texts bibliotherapists should choose, the different qualities they embody, and what types of writing prompts to offer. This article explores considerations for navigating between the symbolic and metaphorical spheres and the more direct, personal realm; balancing the need for structured guidance with the freedom of open exploration, depending on the group dynamic and therapeutic goals; and determining whether to encourage clients to explore their thoughts and feelings broadly or to focus on deepening and condensing their writing. Ultimately, this approach fosters intentionality and adaptability in bibliotherapeutic practice, empowering facilitators to create meaningful and effective writing experiences for diverse client populations.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; poetry therapy; projective tools; expressive writing; group therapy

Introduction

Art**,** and particularly literary or poetic art, encompasses and reflects the human psyche in both metaphorical and symbolic forms. When individuals relate to a character in a story or enter the metaphorical sphere of a poem, they are invited to explore their own inner worlds. The symbolism offered by literature and poetry, therefore, provides a sheltered, implicit channel to uncharted territories of the self. This allows, as Jung (2009) indicates, the opportunity to discover, express, and connect the different, sometimes conflicting, parts of the human psyche, enabling them to interact and co-exist in a way that fosters greater integration, individualism, and authenticity.

It is on this foundation that psychotherapists and group facilitators often use stories, poems, and writing techniques with their clients, facilitating a deeper and more expanded connection between clients and their inner worlds, as well as between clients and their environment.

Using literary or poetic texts in group or private therapeutic sessions forms the basic foundation of *bibliotherapy* – a therapeutic modality that introduces "a third voice" into the therapeutic encounter: the voice of the literary or poetic text. This voice serves as the medium through which clinical discourse unfolds (Zoran, 2009). The text and the writing prompt that follows invite the client into an intermediate space (Winnicott, 1971), where reality and imagination intertwine, creating a unique environment for exploring one's psyche. This process allows for both implicit and explicit, conscious and unconscious, processing of experiences, themes, feelings, and memories.

The discipline of bibliotherapy considers stories, poems, and symbols as channels that open the gate to Winnicott's (1971) transitional space, where the individual is free from making distinctions between what is real and what is imaginary; what is internal and what is external; what is "me" and what is "not-me." It is a space where the actual and the symbolic interact to create new experiences, allowing the authentic, creative self to emerge and grow.

Bibliotherapists are often confronted with methodological questions when using a text within a group or private session. Questions such as: What kind of poem or story should be used? What writing prompt should be offered? How should the dialogue around it be constructed and facilitated? When and in which way should the transition between implicit and explicit discourse occur? These are integral aspects of bibliotherapeutic work and thus important to explore.

This article aims to offer a working model that provides guidelines and considerations for making these decisions. The model presented here is based on theoretical frameworks for working with literary and poetic texts for clinical purposes and is the result of many years of bibliotherapeutic work with various populations in diverse settings: private clinics, group settings, with children, adolescents, and adults, as part of ongoing therapeutic processes, and in short-term interventions and workshops—all conducted in Israel by certified practitioners, where bibliotherapy has been a well-established clinical discipline for over 30 years.

The model consists of three axes, each offering a perspective through which therapists can assess various aspects of the therapeutic process, such as the group/individual process, the therapeutic relationship, the stage of the therapeutic process, the level of safety and readiness to engage with sensitive topics, and the ability to use symbolic and creative methods. The model also provides a framework for evaluating the suitability of a specific text or writing prompt and their compatibility with the therapeutic goals. The three axes correspond with one another and can be applied in a flexible, non-linear manner across different sessions, and even within a single session.

Axis 1 – Implicit vs. Explicit Discourse

The first axis consists of two poles—explicit and implicit discourse. Expressive arts therapies and particularly bibliotherapy, allow the client to engage in an implicit, indirect and metaphorical discourse before turning to a more explicit and conscious one. This methodology is based on the understanding that human defense mechanisms prevent repressed psychological material from surfacing because it threatens the integrity of the self. However, engaging with these repressed parts enables individuals to participate in a meaningful process of change and development. Projective tools, such as stories and poems,

where the client can use the symbolic and metaphorical space to explore his or her subjective experience, provide a path to bypass these defences and make contact with "volatile" psychological material in an indirect, gradual, and safe manner. The therapeutic process unfolds through the use of literary and poetic means, serving as a channel between the therapist and the client, and especially between the client and parts of their personality that may not always be accessible or conscious. The literary or poetic text embeds qualities that invite the individual to engage in a process of projection, where one attributes parts of the self —such as emotions, thoughts, fears, and fantasies—onto the text. One of these qualities is what Iser (1971) referred to as the indeterminacy of the literary text: a literary work contains gaps, ambiguities, and open spaces that the reader must actively engage with to derive meaning. This ambiguity allows for a wide range of responses. The assumption is that the client's emotions, drives, attitudes, wishes, and needs are projected onto the text, and their reactions thus express their inner, unconscious world (Zoran, 2009).

Using the language of imagination and symbolism opens a therapeutic space that is both protected and non-threatening, while encouraging creativity and playfulness. By using projective tools, unconscious material is brought into consciousness, where the implicit can gradually turn into explicit discourse, leading to understanding, awareness and the creation of meaning.

The degree of ambiguity in literary or poetic texts varies significantly—from concrete and clear to abstract and vague. Literary texts can be placed on the continuum between *readerly* and *writerly*, as Barthes (1974) distinguishes. While readerly texts are conventional and straightforward, guiding the reader to a single, clear meaning with little need for interpretation, writerly texts invite more active and creative engagement from the reader. These texts resist simple interpretation and encourage the reader to generate multiple meanings, thus blurring the boundaries between writer and reader. In a writerly text, the reader plays a more active role in creating the meaning, rather than merely receiving it. Facilitators can choose the level of abstraction they wish to invite clients to engage with, and how to guide the discourse ignited by the text—whether and to what extent they remain in the symbolic sphere, inviting more projective themes to surface, or move into the reality sphere, where clients are invited to interpret and connect the content with their own lives.

When dealing with the theme of loss and bereavement, for example, bibliotherapists may choose to work with poems that address the experience of losing a loved one directly, such as "For Grief" by John O'Donohue (2008):

> When you lose someone you love,
> Your life becomes strange,
> The ground beneath you gets fragile,
> Your thoughts make your eyes unsure;

This explicit and direct poem alleviates the loneliness and isolation individuals may feel when coping with bereavement, as it reflects a sense of joining and validating the subjective experience. Alternatively, bibliotherapists may choose to work with "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost (1923), which is using the changing colors of leaves as an implicit metaphor for the transient nature of all things. This poem does not explicitly describe emotions or experiences related to loss, leaving more space for projection and interpretation, while also allowing the client to determine how much distance they wish to maintain from the actual theme—particularly important when addressing painful, sensitive, or recent experiences.

Guidelines for Determining the Position Between Explicit and Implicit Texts in a Therapeutic Session

When deciding between explicit or implicit texts and writing prompts, therapists can use the following guiding principles, which integrate key questions about the therapeutic process, group dynamics, and the client's emotional and cognitive readiness:

1. Therapeutic Process and Stage of Development

What stage is the group or therapeutic process in? If the therapeutic relationship or group dynamic is still in its early stages**,** and a safe space has not yet been fully established, it is often beneficial to use implicit texts that remain in the symbolic and projective realms. This approach is particularly useful when the group is still in the formation phase. Once the therapeutic space is established and is safe and intimate, therapists can move towards using more explicit texts.

2. The nature of the theme explored in the session

Has the theme been processed, and to what extent?
When the subject matter is sensitive and could potentially overwhelm or threaten participants, using more ambiguous texts allows for indirect engagement, helping clients process difficult material at their own pace without feeling exposed or vulnerable, allowing for greater psychic distance, while the symbolic, metaphorical space is used as a buffer between the threatening material and the client. If the theme has been explored to some degree and participants feel ready to engage more directly**,** explicit texts can be introduced to encourage deeper self-reflection and mutual understanding. Explicit prompts help to uncover insights**,** expand perspective, and bring unconscious content into conscious awareness, fostering connection and shared experiences within the group.

3. Client's Capacity for Symbolic Thinking

What is the client's or group's capacity for symbolic or playful thinking?
Clients vary in their ability to self-reflect and engage in mentalization. Clients with greater capacity for symbolic thinking and playfulness can benefit from implicit texts, which invite creativity and a more associative, imaginative form of processing. For clients who tend toward more concrete thinking or those who may feel overwhelmed by their emotions, explicit texts can help organize their thoughts, giving structure to their internal experiences. This is especially useful for clients who struggle with emotional regulation or reflective capacity.

Axis II – Open vs. Guided Writing Prompts

Once a literary or poetic text has been presented to clients in a private session or group, bibliotherapists often invite them to engage with the text through writing. This allows them to respond either implicitly (remaining in the metaphorical space) or explicitly (reflecting on personal experiences invoked by the text). Bibliotherapists can also decide whether to invite clients to respond freely, openly, and intuitively, following their own associations in a spontaneous, self-directed way, or to offer more structured guidance, navigating the writing process in more organized and formulated manner.

With open writing prompts, clients are encouraged to respond freely and openly to the text. They are invited to verbalize any thoughts, feelings, or images that spring to mind, regardless of how random, trivial, or irrelevant they may seem. This approach is consistent with the psychoanalytic tradition of allowing the unconscious mind to express itself without censorship, bypassing the logical and judgmental filters of the conscious mind. The therapist then attunes to these associations and collaborates with the client to unveil and process their meaning.

On the guided writing prompts pole, therapists use the rhythmic and structured nature of certain literary or poetic genres to provide clients with a template to help them process their own material in a structured and carefully guided way. For example, clients may be invited to use the opening and closing lines of a poem, filling in the gaps with their own words while adhering to the original structure. Alternatively, they can use Campbell's (1949) *Hero's Journey* as a template, which describes a hero's call to leave their familiar world, battle enemies, and make allies. This schema provides a framework through which clients can explore their own life journeys, reflecting on questions such as: What was their call? What obstacles or enemies did they encounter? What allies or forces did they encounter?

For example, the poem "Amor Fati" by Jane Hirshfeld (2016), touches the theme of transformation, the tension between desire and consequence, and the journey towards self-awareness. It has references to the archetypical nature of fairytales, in which the hero is called to leave their known and familiar world and enter the uncharted territory of the dark forest, venturing into the unknown, where both danger and the potential for discovery and growth await.

When working with this poem, bibliotherapists can invite clients to respond freely and spontaneously to it in their own way. Inviting them to write a letter to their own little soul or reflecting on a journey they once embarked upon in their lives is a more guided prompt, but still offer an open and wide enough port of entry into the inner world. Alternatively, clients can be presented with a gradual, more structured way to respond to the poem. For example:

In the metaphorical sphere:

- Choose one image from the poem.
- Describe it in details: shape, size, colors, atmosphere etc.

In the realistic sphere:

- How was this image manifested in your world as a child?
- How is this image manifested in your world today?
- How would you like to have this image manifested in your world going forward?

This type of work guides the client to gradually move from the metaphorical space and look into their own world – past, present and future, using the images in the poem to reflect on their own journeys, hope, fears and choices.

Guidelines for Determining the Position Between Open and Guided Writing Prompts

When deciding between open or guided writing prompts, therapists can use the following guiding principles, informed by key questions to consider about the client's emotional state, the therapeutic relationship, and the clinical context:

1. Client's Emotional State and Readiness

Does the client need help organizing and framing their experience?
If the client is experiencing emotional overwhelm**,** inarticulation, scattered associative thinking or a creative and emotional block, guided writing prompts can help provide structure to organize and ground their thoughts. In such cases, templates or schemas can support clarity and reduce anxiety. On the other hand, If the client is feeling more stable and ready for exploration, open prompts allow for greater freedom, enabling the expression of thoughts and feelings more spontaneously and creatively.

2. Confidence with the Therapist or Group and the Therapeutic Relationship

Is the therapeutic relationship in its early stages, and is trust still being built?
In the early stages of therapy or group work, anxiety levels may be higher. This often requires more attuned and structured interventions to create a safe, contained environment. Guided writing prompts using templates or step-by-step guidance can support this process. Once a sense of safety and trust has been established in the therapeutic relationship, open writing prompts can be more readily used. This allows the client to explore their thoughts and feelings more freely, often uncovering deeper material.

3. Client's Articulation and Reflective Capacity

Does the client have sufficient verbal expression or reflective capacity?
If the client struggles with verbal expression or lacks the mentalization capacity to fully articulate their emotions, guided writing prompts can help by offering clear, structured ways to engage with the text and reflect on their experience. As the client's ability to reflect and articulate their thoughts improves, open writing prompts can encourage them to engage more freely, facilitating deeper self-exploration.

Axis III – Condensing vs. Expanding

Writing techniques in the bibliotherapeutic space are wide and diverse. Some invite the client to unload, ventilate and express, using language as a vehicle to add more layers, aspects, meanings of their own experience. Others invite the clients to crystallize, organize and clarify the essence of a certain narrative, experience or mindset. This axis describes the continuum between the *pole of Expansion* writing techniques, which emphasizes the broadening or layering of the narrative, adding perspectives, details, and depth. And the *pole of Condensation* writing techniques, which highlights the process of distilling or focusing the writing, streamlining it to the core meaning or emotion.

Expansion writing techniques allow the client to add more depth into their story by engaging in exploration of different points of view, adding different types of writing – descriptive, expressive and reflective, adding more sequences to discover new meanings and assist in

turning a fixed, narrow narrative into a dynamic, multi-layered and rich one. It is especially imperative in cases of rigidity of perspective, where the client seems to hold on to a negative narrative or a perspective which hinders their development and well-being. It is also important in cases where the narrative is informative and external, lacking internal and subjective content such as thoughts, intentions, feelings and needs.

Some examples for using expansion writing techniques:

- Intuitive writing – free or as a response to a specific theme / text / prompt.
- Writing the story from another character's perspective.
- Adding an imaginary character to the story.
- Creating an imaginary dialogue between two characters in the story.
- Adding mentalization to the characters in the story: thoughts, feelings, intentions, wishes etc.
- Using letters, role plays, dialogues to expand communication with important figures.

Condensing writing techniques help the client reduce associative "noise", identify the most important aspects of their experience while allowing for greater clarity. By narrowing down their narrative, the clients can pinpoint what truly matters in a situation, leading to a more focused understanding of their feelings or thoughts and assisting in reducing emotional overwhelm. Condensing allows the client to identify key themes or patterns. This process often leads to more profound insights into their inner world and uncovering the meaning behind their experiences. Condensing writing can help the individual move toward a sense of closure. By narrowing their focus to the most salient aspects of an experience, clients may be able to resolve lingering emotional tension, allowing them to more easily let go of unresolved feelings.

Examples for condensing writing techniques:

- Choosing the key sentence from a piece of expressive writing.
- Writing a story or a poem in a limited number of words or lines, such as a haiku poem.
- Writing a story using a template (e.g. dividing the story into parts / chapters, providing opening and concluding lines, etc.).
- Giving the story a title.
- Writing the story as a report.

Guidelines for Determining the Position Between Expansion and Condensation Writing Techniques

When deciding whether to use *expansion* or *condensation* techniques, therapists should consider the following guiding questions, which take into account the client's emotional state, self-awareness, the complexity of the issue, and the therapeutic goal:

1. Client's Emotional State

Is the client feeling overwhelmed or flooded with emotions? If the client feels emotionally overwhelmed, condensation might help by narrowing the focus, providing a sense of holding while bringing clarity to key emotions or themes, providing a sense of control. If the client needs to organize or make sense of overwhelming emotions, condensation helps by distilling and structuring the experience, providing clearer insight into the core issues.

Is the client feeling stuck or unable to express themselves fully?
If the client is struggling to articulate or expand on their experience, expansion techniques can help open up new avenues for exploration, allowing the client to delve deeper into their feelings and gain more insight.

Is the client ready to explore deeper layers of their experience? If the client is prepared to process more complex feelings, expansion can be used to explore different facets and layers of the experience, allowing for richer understanding and self-reflection.

2. Complexity of the Issue Being Addressed

Is the issue complex and difficult to articulate? If the client's issue is intricate, fragmented, or difficult to express, as some traumatic experiences may be, for example, condensation can provide a frame which holds and guides clients through their path to meaning-making through writing.

Does the client's issue feel one-dimensional or lack depth? If the issue feels shallow or the client is not fully exploring their emotions, expansion can open the experience up, revealing deeper meaning and uncovering hidden layers.

Conclusion

Many therapists, group facilitators, and practitioners use literary and poetic texts, as well as writing techniques, to facilitate self-exploration and emotional processing, and to foster connections between different parts of the psyche and the surrounding environment. This article presents an innovative and structured bibliotherapeutic model designed to guide practitioners in using creative methods to promote self-development and well-being. The model emphasizes a dynamic, modulated approach that adapts to therapeutic goals and client needs, introducing three key axes that serve as frameworks for decision-making. These axes can be flexibly applied at different stages of therapy, offering both structure and creative freedom.

In bibliotherapy, the literary, poetic, or written text is considered "a third voice" (Zoran, 2009), creating a projective, transitional space where both therapist and client can meet and explore new meanings and realizations. The bibliotherapist must assess several key factors in this encounter: from the client's side, evaluating the therapeutic phase, the extent to which the theme has been addressed, and the client's capacity for mentalization and figurative thinking; and from the text's side, determining whether it is more readerly or writerly, and deciding if the writing prompt should be more structured or open, as well as whether the client would benefit from expanding or condensing their writing.

The model's innovation lies in its ability to dynamically shift between these axes, tailoring interventions based on the therapeutic context, client needs, and emotional states. By

balancing explicit and implicit engagement, and adjusting writing prompts and techniques, therapists can create a safe space in which clients can develop a deeper sense of self-awareness, improve their ability to mentalize, process emotions–and grow personally. This flexible, client-centered framework enhances the therapeutic relationship and facilitates exploration of the inner world through the powerful medium of literary and poetic texts.

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