

Bibliotherapy as a Tool to Support the Psychosocial Functioning of Seniors in Crisis Situations

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a research conducted by the author during regular sessions in the field of bibliotherapy and poetry therapy with students of Universities of the Third Age in Kraków, Wieliczka, and Oświęcim, using works by Polish and foreign writers. It has been demonstrated that reading prose and poetry in senior years effectively supports cognitive functions and abilities, enhances mentalization capabilities, stimulates memory trace consolidation, improves attention functions, reduces anxiety, strengthens resilience, alleviates ailments associated with the aging process, and impacts the quality of life of seniors and their adaptation to old age. Poetry possesses therapeutic qualities due to the simultaneous action of emotions, thoughts, and rhythm. Metaphors and symbolism used in poetic works resonate with the reader's emotions and may affect their mental and physical well-being. The aim of the research was to create a model for bibliotherapeutic activities and to construct a scale for measuring the empowerment provided by prose and poetry.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; poetry; senior; reading; mental health; resilience

Introduction

The presented article attempts to highlight the potential inherent in bibliotherapy and its possible applications in strengthening mental health, resilience, and well-being among seniors. It includes the results of research conducted by the Author during regular bibliotherapy and poetry therapy sessions with students of the Universities of the Third Age in Kraków, Wieliczka, and Oświęcim, utilizing works by Polish and foreign writers. The research aimed to develop a model for bibliotherapeutic activities and construct a scale to measure the empowerment derived from prose and poetry.

Bibliotherapy, as a process of dynamic interaction between the reader's personality and literature occurring within numerous psychological and sociological contexts, has been the subject of scientific reflection by many researchers (Shrodes, 1950; Rubin, 1978; Trzynadlowski, 1982; Borecka, 1992; Tomasiak, 1994; Szulc, 1994; Woźniczka-Paruzel, 2001; Czernianin, 2008). The primary objective of bibliotherapy is considered to be the support and empowerment of the reader through guided reading. In this process, a key role is played by the intermediary, the bibliotherapist, who employs methods developed in psychotherapy but focuses mainly on selecting and utilizing literature.

The appeal and challenge of describing bibliotherapy lie in its interdisciplinary nature, seamlessly integrating literary studies, bibliology, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, philosophy, ethics, history, anthropology, and medical sciences. It is essential to remember that bibliother-

apy, which benefits from advancements in medicine, originated in hospital libraries, drawing on methods developed in book science and psychology. Bibliotherapy involves not only reading texts but also employing various methods and forms of working with them to support development and achieve a better quality of life. The integration of bibliotherapy with efforts to strengthen health and cope with crises seems natural.

Professor Jerzy Woy-Wojciechowski, a long-time president of the Polish Medical Society, wrote in the Foreword to the book *Being a Doctor, Being a Patient: Conversations About the Psychology of Relationships* (Eichelberger et al., 2013) that “there is a kind of medicine administered through the ear: hope and kind words.” Spoken and written words can support, add strength, instill faith in overcoming difficulties, uplift, and act as a “balm.” However, they can also hurt, cause distress, and evoke sadness. Support through guided reading can be a valuable tool for promoting mental hygiene and personal development (Krzemińska, 1973; Cyrklaff, 2014).

Bibliotherapy as an Effective Tool for Working with Seniors at Universities of the Third Age

In the early 21st century, there is a noticeable increase in the number of seniors in European societies, including Poland. This trend is linked to longer life expectancy and a low natural growth rate. In 2024, Poland’s population reached 37.6 million, of which 26.3% (approximately 9.9 million) were aged 60 and older. Compared to 2022, the number of seniors increased by 96,000 (1.0%). As a result, developing effective patterns and tools to support the well-being of mature individuals is particularly important.

The activation of older people aims to maintain or improve their quality of life by stimulating activity in various areas. This is not a one-time action but a continuous process of adapting to the changing needs and capabilities of older adults. The main goal of activation is to counteract aging processes, reduce social isolation, and enhance self-esteem and life satisfaction.

During bibliotherapy workshops and accompanying research, the author assumed that well-conducted bibliotherapeutic sessions could significantly impact seniors' quality of life and adaptation to aging, foster communication development, and break stereotypes and barriers. An essential hypothesis was that literature could effectively support cognitive functions and abilities in mature individuals, enhance mentalization capabilities, stimulate and consolidate memory traces, improve attention functions, reduce anxiety, and alleviate aging-related ailments. Bibliotherapy, as a process of dynamic interaction between the reader's personality and literature, can strengthen their mental and physical health.

In Helena Duninówna's book *On the Evening of Your Life, Come with Your Own Lamp*, one character says: “You know, I’m 82 now. Quite an age, isn’t it? And I catch myself reading more and more avidly. I don’t know if, despite my age, I’m becoming more interested in what’s happening in the world, or if there are just more fascinating books being published. Sometimes it’s hard for me to keep up” (Duninówna, 1971, 32).

A vital part of the meetings became lectures and workshops on reminiscence bibliotherapy. These were based on the concept of biophilia, which Erich Fromm defined as love for life, prioritizing joy, empathy, and assertiveness in interpersonal relationships over pessimism, uncertainty, or selfishness. According to the German philosopher's theory, a biophile is someone who loves life, is warm, infectiously optimistic, and open to new experiences (Fromm, 1994). By

getting to know oneself better, a person becomes more tolerant of their own and others' flaws. Recalling one's youth is a vital need for those in the "autumn of life," improving well-being, allowing the sharing of personal experiences and values built over the years. For younger generations, this can be a wonderful lesson in history and patriotism, deepening knowledge about one's roots and the region's history.

During the author's workshops, seniors read carefully selected texts, such as the poetry of Wisława Szymborska or the prose of Olga Tokarczuk and Beata Krupska. They then discussed the problems raised in the books, relating them to their own life stories.

In the therapeutic context, it's essential to note that every work is completed during the reception process. Readers perceive literature subjectively, relating its content to personal experiences (Borecka, 2010). J. Trzynadlowski, in the article "Bibliotherapy – Illusions and Hopes," wrote: "In the concept of bibliotherapy, the WORD is capable of healing the soul and assisting in healing the body. This concerns the deeper psychological impact of words and texts, partially intended in specific directions and effects" (1990). This therapeutic function of literature is closely related to its other non-aesthetic functions. However, if aesthetic experiences are also to serve an educational or therapeutic role, they must arise from an understanding of the work's aesthetic values. This aligns with the principle that one cannot deeply experience something they do not understand (Szulc, 2011a).

In Beata Krupska's story "The Glass Man," she depicted the fragility of a sensitive individual—a person someone hurt with a "bad word," akin to a heavy, hard stone, causing the person to "shatter into tiny pieces of glass." The story concludes with the author's appeal: "Never say anything bad to anyone; you never know who among us is the Glass Man" (1989). Continuing this thought, one could argue that every person, like the Glass Man, might experience similar moments in their lives. You never know which word will make someone feel hurt, such as gossip about them. The symbolism and metaphors in texts can help release unacknowledged emotions and, through better understanding, transform them into feelings accessible to consciousness. Literature shows ways of acting and understanding situations through the protagonist's perspective, which the reader can discover for themselves and internalize according to their own needs.

The Therapeutic Function of Creative Writing Expression

Writing can also have a therapeutic effect, serving as a creative way of coping with a crisis by pouring emotions onto paper or keeping electronic records. Sherry Reiter, in her book *Writing Away the Demons: Stories of Creative Coping Through Transformative Writing*, discusses in detail the benefits of writing for mental health and well-being (2009). Creative expression can have personal developmental, therapeutic, and cathartic value. The attempt to authentically express feelings through one's language has been an inseparable part of *poiesis*—"creating" or "conveying" the intimate world of the author through words—since ancient times. This creation of meaning in *poiesis* is not a closed process; it allows for personal interpretations and encourages discourse, making it timeless. By publishing poems, the author invites readers into the intimate world of their deepest emotions. Perhaps this is the shortest path to discovering and understanding human sensitivity, subtlety, and sometimes spontaneity. The sincerity of poetic confessions reveals the creator to others and represents a kind of dialogue with oneself. As Rabindranath Tagore—an Indian philosopher, poet, physician, and the first Nobel laureate in literature from Asia (1913)—aptly noted: "Truth clothed in facts is rigid and constrained; in the garb of poetry, it moves lightly and freely" (1999).

During workshops conducted by the author that included elements of bibliotherapy, participants also created a collective, personal anthology containing self-written short forms of prose and poetry, diaries, letters, reproductions of drawings, paintings, and photographs. As part of this initiative, a publication titled *Youth in the Wisdom of Passing Time* (Stefańska–Bursztyńska & Matras-Mastalerz, 2008) was released. It featured works referencing personal experiences and emotions of seniors, often tied to retrospective memories of childhood and adolescence. Nostalgia for the past, the memory of events and experiences, sensitivity, and reflection were often juxtaposed with traumatic wartime recollections. As the authors emphasized, all the texts were written “from the heart” as a way to find themselves. A common feature of these “fragments of memory” was the awareness of the passage of time and acceptance of the inevitability of successive life stages. In a poem by Awa Gabor titled “Faith”, the following words appear:

When I am no more... I will be everywhere
In the heart of the rainbow, in the mist where I have never been...
I will be the wind in the crowns of the red beech
And a stream in the abyss of time.
I will seek people in the moonlight
And hold Michelangelo's hand.
I will see the whole beauty of the world, and...
I will be everywhere when I am no more...

(Gabor, 2008, 16)

The seniors participating in the workshops demonstrated a wide range of professional achievements supported by skills in various educational fields, including technical, humanities, legal, medical, and artistic disciplines. Each individual brought their own wealth of personal and social life experience. Therefore, it might have seemed that focusing such diverse personalities could have posed a challenge to the final outcomes of the endeavor. That this was not the case is evidenced by the words of one participant, who expressed approval for the significance of these meetings in one of the published volumes:

Despite many differences, we accepted and respected each other from the beginning. We always had something to say to one another. The workshops helped us live, gave us hope, and awakened trust in the world and people [...]. Each meeting was an unparalleled event for us. It's good to get to know other curious, world-oriented people who want to be together even for this short time. Perhaps, above all, it was a longing for an intellectually directed community. Because nothing sharpens attentiveness like another Human Being. They are our teacher, friend, guide, and gift. It's essential to draw from this source and continue developing. (Jastrzębiec-Myszkowska, 2008, 37).

Search for the Model of Bibliotherapeutic Activities

The multifaceted connections between aesthetic experiences occurring during the reception of literary works and psychotherapy were described by Caroline Shrodes, the author of the first scientific monograph on bibliotherapy (1950). Shrodes emphasized the role of the bibliotherapeutic helper and the need for appropriate training in this field. She noted that readers' identification with literary characters or situations and events could enhance the therapeutic process.

Shrodes meticulously described the psychodynamic model of bibliotherapy and its main phases, later developed by Clare Gillies (1988) and cited in many publications (Borecka, 1992; Tomasik, 1994; Woźniczka-Paruzel, 2002; Szulc, 2011a). These phases included affective expression toward the literary character, identification with them or the described situation, agreement or disagreement with their opinions, concern for their fate, deriving pleasure from being similar to the character (projection), deep emotional experience (catharsis), relief, venting psychological tensions and blocks, self-reflection, self-awareness, “working through” personal problems, and ultimately, a change in attitude toward oneself and others (Shrodes, 1950, 1960).

As Wita Szulc (2011b) aptly observed, this model is effective for fiction literature, while cognitive-behavioral bibliotherapy may be more suitable for using self-help books and factual literature. F. M. Berry, in an article published in *Bibliotherapy Sourcebook*, edited by R. J. Rubin (1978), proposed a clear distinction between clinical bibliotherapy, a type of psychotherapy used in groups of patients with psychiatric, emotional, and behavioral problems, and educational-humanistic (developmental) bibliotherapy aimed at individuals who need psychological support in self-awareness, self-realization, and achieving emotional maturity. In both cases, vicarious experiences enable readers to talk about their feelings under the guise of discussing the character, raising their tolerance threshold for frustration and stress, and helping them cope with illness, suffering, and adversity (Czernianin, 2008; Szulc, 2011).

The difference between these two types of therapy lies in the needs of the target audience and, consequently, the different goals and methods of achieving them in the so-called “teaching life through life” approach (Tomasik, 1994). Therefore, the role of the bibliotherapist and the necessity of professional, competent preparation to fulfill this role differ (Matras-Mastalerz, 2012a).

According to the author of this article, creating a single model of bibliotherapeutic activities is not feasible due to the extensive scope and reach of bibliotherapy itself. When attempting to formulate conclusions based on current reflections, one should speak of “models” rather than a single, unified model of bibliotherapeutic procedures. The bibliotherapist’s task is to propose a type of work (therapeutic program) that enables the reader’s experiences related to the text to help them accept their current state or encourage them to attempt changes.

The Scale of Empowerment Measurement in Bibliotherapeutic Activities

The question of how written words affect human psychology has inspired researchers since ancient times. In the works of Plato and Aristotle, numerous references to this topic can be found (Szczeklik, 2003; Sinko, 2006). For those studying the role of literature in therapy, the primary interest lay in determining the efficacy of texts through empirical verification. Many authors have pointed to the challenges of creating methods, strategies, and tools to assess the effectiveness of working with texts (Rogers et al., 1997; Szulc, 1994; Czernianin et al., 2014; Cyrklaff, 2014; Dymel-Trzebiatowska, 2014).

Based on the theory of the response to literature developed by Norman Holland (1989), inspired by the psychoanalytical theories of Carl Gustav Jung (1981) and Sigmund Freud (1982, 1996), and supplemented by the insights of Michael Steig (1989), it can be noted that literary works impact the reader on two levels: one reaches the subconscious through form, acting like psychological defense mechanisms; the other conveys meaning interpreted by the individual ego (Dymel-Trzebiatowska, 2014). While the social utility of bibliotherapy seems undeniable, its scientific study is more complex, particularly in evaluating its efficacy. The changes

experienced by participants in bibliotherapy sessions may not be immediately apparent, often becoming noticeable only after the therapy concludes. Participants themselves may not initially realize if or how they have been affected by their interaction with the text, complicating the verification of bibliotherapists' effectiveness.

Literature “empowers” by providing vicarious experiences through descriptions, dialogues, and reflections on events, thereby offering emotional, informational, instrumental, and even spiritual support (Molicka, 2008). This “empowerment” of the reader, a core goal of bibliotherapy, involves equipping individuals with skills, competencies, and resources to achieve fuller development, harness their potential, and strengthen their capacity to achieve personal goals (Anczewska et al., 2007; Kociołek, 2012). Empowerment is an integral part of the healing process and can be seen in two dimensions: individual (self-awareness) and structural (institutional and social).

In clinical bibliotherapy, the therapist's actions in prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation are components of comprehensive rehabilitation (Szulc, 1994). Irena Szmid, in her *Psychological Analysis of Factors Influencing the Rehabilitation Process*, emphasized that “the result of rehabilitation can be considered the satisfaction of the rehabilitated person, as a psychological state most reinforcing motivation for further action” (1979).

A guide for finding effective methods for evaluating therapy's efficacy can be seen in the humanistic assertion of Polish philosopher and sociologist Florian Znaniecki, who wrote, “The fundamental empirical material concerning any human activity is the experience of the acting person, supplemented by the experience of those who respond to, repeat, or participate in these actions” (Znaniecki, 1936; Szacki, 1986). Individual, subjective feelings resulting from contact with books—whether from therapy participants or bibliotherapists—are often measured through questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and reading polls (Woźniczka-Paruzel, 2002; Borecka, 2008; Szulc, 2011a; Cyrklaff, 2014).

In the literature, there have also been critical voices regarding attempts to document bibliotherapy's statistical effectiveness. According to M. Molicka, “therapy through literature is an individual process of its transformation, so seeking generalizations in the form of statistical results is a misunderstanding, as its impact is highly individualized and multidimensional” (Molicka, 2010).

An intriguing attempt to create an “Empowerment Scale” for individuals with mental illnesses was made by E. Sally Rogers, Judi Chamberlin, and Marsha Langer Ellison in 1997. This tool could be effectively used to measure clinical bibliotherapy's efficacy and, with minor modifications, also in general developmental (humanistic) bibliotherapy. It includes five areas: self-esteem and the development of self-worth, the ability to influence the present and future, conscious control of events, readiness for community action, autonomy, assertive behaviors, and the ability to express social dissent (Rogers et al., 2007).

Given that bibliotherapy is a method of personal development using carefully selected materials to support human functioning, it can be incorporated into a broader strategy of psychological and psychiatric rehabilitation. Supporting individuals during difficult periods of adjustment to new, unfavorable conditions, as well as in subsequent emotional and interpersonal crises, is a key therapeutic task (Puzyński, 1993). Undoubtedly, the bibliotherapist and physician are allies in combating human illness. While the physician addresses psychosomatic and mental health conditions, the bibliotherapist tackles “spiritual ailments” through appropriate literature (Hora, 1986; Kociołek, 2012).

Selecting appropriate texts requires substantial knowledge and experience in working with individuals in need of support. In 2004, Dale Elizabeth Pehrsson and Paula S. McMillen from Oregon State University developed a systematic evaluation questionnaire for books, assessing their usefulness in therapy. Discussed in their article “A Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool” (2005), the tool considered themes, intended audience, situational context, text difficulty, and therapeutic applications.

Such proposals remind us that literature is a starting point for therapeutic interventions, stimulating beneficial emotions for the recovery process while preventing undesirable ones (Hora, 1986). A book is a pretext for meeting another person—and oneself—and its deepest empowering and therapeutic potential lies in this courageous confrontation, even if it cannot always be precisely measured or described.

Conclusions

Janusz Dunin, in his monograph *Writing Changes the World. Reading. Literary Reception. Reading Practices*, wrote that “the therapeutic value of a book needs to be demonstrated only to those who have never personally experienced bibliotherapy or explored the possibilities it offers” (1998, 62). This article aimed to highlight the potential of using carefully selected literature in the process of strengthening the mental and physical health of mature individuals. The goal of therapy through text is to introduce a positive change in a person’s health, well-being, and quality of life.

According to the author, bibliotherapy is a practical science deeply rooted in the humanities and medicine, and its primary objective is to effectively achieve its intended outcomes. Researchers in the field of therapy through books have already developed appropriate bibliotherapeutic models, clarified key concepts, and demonstrated its practical application. However, bibliotherapy is still perceived as a new and evolving discipline. In reality, the evolution of bibliotherapeutic practices requires further quantitative and qualitative research to prove and document the effectiveness of therapy through literature.

For the therapeutic process to proceed correctly and yield the desired effects, a professionally prepared intermediary—a bibliotherapist, or “guide” through the world of books—is essential. Interaction with literary works can have therapeutic properties when the relationship between the text and the reader is based on three fundamental functions: providing pleasure, alleviating psychological tension, and leading to personal growth (transformation).

Research conducted by the author indicates that books can serve as a remedy for individual emotional problems and lead to a positive reevaluation of negative experiences by providing role models and interpretative frameworks. A well-selected text acts like a catalyst, “revealing” the participant’s problem in the bibliotherapeutic process and ultimately leading to a stage of transformation. The emotional experience and accompanying release of psychological tensions and blocks strengthen an affirmative attitude toward life and others, while compensating for unmet needs.

As Jan Tomkowski aptly noted in his essay “To Live in a Library:” “The path to books leads through other books” (2004, 59). It is worth searching to ultimately discover the right readings that will allow us to “savor” the act of reading, undoubtedly enhancing our well-being and effectively regenerating our personal resources.

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