

Psychotherapy Guidebook

BIBLIOTHERAPY

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Bibliotherapy

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DEFINITION

Bibliotherapy is a technique that utilizes the reading of literature. The belief that reading can affect an individual's attitudes, feelings, and behavior is as old as reading itself. Bibliotherapy involves the reading of selected literature, planned and conducted as a treatment procedure with therapeutic objectives. It is not an esoteric technique, but is founded upon an acknowledgment of the dynamic process that takes place within the reader.

In the professional literature, Bibliotherapy is usually defined in terms of its objectives. The objectives of the technique and the values attributed to it are numerous, thus creating many definitions. For example, it has been defined as a "technique for the development of wholesome principles of conduct and the prevention of delinquency..." (Kircher, 1966), or "the prescription of reading materials which will help to develop emotional maturity and nourish and sustain mental health" (Bryan, 1939). Despite the many objectives, all definitions include the reading of literature to achieve specific desired results.

HISTORY

Throughout history, dating back to ancient times, the concept of growth through reading is evident from various writings. Although the value of books had long been recognized, the underlying concept of Bibliotherapy was not formally identified until the twentieth century.

Among the first professional people in America to set the tone for Bibliotherapy were two physicians, Benjamin Rush in 1815 and John Minson Gait II in 1853. They recommended reading as part of a patient's treatment plan. In 1904, it became recognized as an aspect of librarianship, and the first partnership between librarianship and psychiatry began at the McLean Hospital in Waverly, Massachusetts. Other professionals, such as educators and psychologists, became interested in the subject.

During the next several decades numerous articles were published on Bibliotherapy. Although much of the writing indicated uncertainty and speculation about the new concept, a definite trend toward expansion was obvious. The exploration of new approaches was investigated, with practical applications outrunning theoretical projections. It was not until 1949 that a comprehensive attempt was made to formulate a theoretical base for Bibliotherapy (Shrodes, 1949).

Several decades have passed since Bibliotherapy became recognized as

a therapeutic technique, and it continues to be applied for various purposes. However, it still remains largely unexplored, and not all is known about its application and effects.

TECHNIQUE

Depending upon objectives and level of intervention, either diagnostic or imaginative literature is employed. If didactic literature is utilized, the objective is generally to facilitate a change within the individual through a more cognitive understanding of self. The literature is instructional and educational, such as handbooks, documents or how-to books. Subjects that may be included are child rearing, marriage and sex, coping with stress, relaxation and meditation.

Imaginative literature refers to the presentation of human behavior in a dramatic manner. This category includes novels, short stories, and plays. The theoretical base postulates a relationship between personality and vicarious experience. The reader is simultaneously involved and detached from the story, as is true in the vicarious situation. In psychoanalytic terms, the process may be explained as paralleling the primary phases of psychotherapy: identification, catharsis, and insight.

There is no one particular manner of applying Bibliotherapy in the treatment situation. For example, specific literature can be recommended or

“prescribed” by the therapist for reading between sessions and discussed subsequently, or the actual reading may take place in a group session and serve as a springboard for personal disclosure, or the therapist may read a story as an adjunct to a play therapy session. Bibliotherapy has been viewed both as a major technique as well as an adjunct to various other therapeutic means.

No explicit methodology exists for the selection of appropriate reading materials. There are bibliographies that list suggested literature for use in therapy; however, it is most important that the therapist know not only the patient but also be familiar with and appreciate literature.

APPLICATIONS

Bibliotherapy has been utilized in a variety of settings for a number of specific problems. People in various parallel professions have been involved in its application. It has been utilized extensively in neuropsychiatric hospitals as well as in outpatient psychiatric treatment. It has been applied to children, adolescents, and adults, in short-term or long-term treatment plans, and for a variety of psychopathologies .

The objectives of the application of Bibliotherapy are numerous. Using both didactic and imaginative literature, the levels of intervention may be divided into four broad areas: intellectual, social, behavioral, and emotional

(Sclabassi, 1973). On the intellectual level, Bibliotherapy is used to stimulate the individual to think and analyze attitudes and behavior between sessions and allow the person to realize that there are choices in the way problems are handled. The individual may obtain facts needed for solution of problems, and acquire knowledge about human behavior to help understand one's own self and gain intellectual insight. It may also widen the individual's sphere of interests.

On the social level, Bibliotherapy can be used to expand an individual's awareness beyond his own frame of reference and to increase social sensitivity by being, in the imagination, in the place of others. It may be used to reinforce social and cultural patterns, absorb human values, and give a feeling of belonging. It may also help channel socially unapproved expressions of emotion and impulse, and facilitate the reader to form satisfactory life goals and thus live more effectively.

Behaviorally, Bibliotherapy can contribute to competence in activities. It can also give the individual an opportunity to experiment imaginatively with various modes of behavior and envision the probable effects. It may help to inhibit infantile behavior, promote growth in reaction patterns, and develop wholesome principles of conduct.

Emotionally, Bibliotherapy may provide a vicarious experience without

initially exposing the person to the risks of actual experience. The reader may gain confidence in talking about problems ordinarily difficult to discuss, due to such feelings as fear, shame, or guilt, and it may encourage discussion without the initial embarrassment of explicit self-revelation. It may enable the reader to bring submerged feelings and experiences to consciousness, effect controlled release of unconscious processes, and develop emotional insight. It may provide successful solution of similar problems in others, thus stimulating eagerness to solve one's own problems. It can also help the individual to understand the motivations of self and others in a particular situation.