



Bibliotherapy and mental health: literature as a mediator of expressiveness and resilience in the face of global threat narratives and psychological vulnerability

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Abstract

Bibliotherapy is an intervention with both preventive and therapeutic dimensions, transdisciplinary and transdiagnostic in nature. It enables individuals, through listening, reading, or dramatization of texts (individually or in groups) to: communicate and express emotions, enhance self-understanding by valuing their personality and promoting self-esteem, become familiar with external reality and clarify real problems (improving their ability to respond to them), refine orientation toward reality by correcting perceptions of the surrounding world, and foster better adaptation and adjustment to their life context, whether in educational, professional, clinical, or correctional settings. Bibliotherapy encompasses personal, familial, and community domains. Understood as both a science and an art by researchers in the field, the bibliotherapeutic process also offers other benefits, namely: enhancing socialization and preventing isolation, promoting tolerance, respect, and self-acceptance as well as acceptance of others, stimulating critical thinking and higher-level reasoning, providing moments of joy and relaxation, and encouraging reading as a leisure activity. According to Régine Detambel, the main work of the bibliotherapist is to promote well-being and resilience. Through the examination of shared experiences and national and international studies, the application of bibliotherapy offers benefits to mental health for patients, their families, and therapists, making it a valuable addition to a health-professional practice toolkit, as it addresses all life stages and responds to the diversity of global threats and situations of heightened psychological vulnerability.

Keywords: Bibliotherapy, Introspection, Projection, Emotional expressiveness, Adaptation, Resilience.

Introduction

The Report on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Portugal (Observatório Nacional de Luta Contra a Pobreza, 2024) reveals that 20.1% of the resident population in Portugal is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with 16.4% at risk of monetary poverty, 5.3% facing severe material and social deprivation, and 5.6% of the population under 65 living in households with very low

work intensity. After a significant worsening of vulnerabilities already recorded in the 2023 report, a reduction was observed in the rates of poverty or social exclusion, monetary poverty, and severe material and social deprivation. However, there was a slight increase in work intensity rates (e.g., on the number of working hours). The European context of macroeconomic and geopolitical instability has presented

additional challenges to tackling financial precariousness, with a sharp decline in households' purchasing power in a short time span. This has been associated with rising mortgage interest rates and precarious employment conditions – factors heavily influenced by the pandemic, military conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, ongoing concerns about climate change, and potential shifts in employment profiles due to the emergence of artificial intelligence. According to Santos and Sousa (2023), this state of instability imposes high psychosocial demands at both individual and community levels, requiring substantial cognitive and emotional activation in an environment of heightened potential risk or increased prevalence of low psychological well-being.

Psychology, across its various fields and specialties, plays a vital role in promoting individual and collective resilience and well-being, as well as in shaping sustainable public policies. It is within this context that we present a mental health promotion intervention based on bibliotherapy, viewing literature as an effective mediator of expressiveness and a promoter of well-being and resilience in people experiencing greater psychological vulnerability. This perspective is supported by Briggs and Pehrsson (2008), who argue that patients exposed to literature are more capable of recognizing personal characteristics, understanding complexity, developing new interests, enhancing their sense of cultural identity, and expanding their worldview. In alignment with Azevedo and Oliveira (2016, p.11): *"The act of reading and listening to stories, through dialogue and reflection, brings people together, promotes respect for otherness, and enables questioning of the world. Good literary texts carry with them (...) self-love and love for others, interest in culture, sensitivity to beauty, the pursuit of freedom, and respect for life, offering moral and therapeutic value, as well as guiding human beings in their relationship with the world"*.

Bibliotherapy as a mediator of therapeutic processes: a brief historical overview

The prescription of books as a therapeutical strategy to modify maladaptive behavior and alleviate human distress has a long history, dating back at least to the

Middle Ages (Jack & Ronan, 2008; McKenna et al., 2010), when the texts selected by physicians were life stories of saints, moral, philosophical, and biblical texts (Monteiro, 2004). This author mentions that even in ancient Hindu medicine, stories were prescribed to heal the sick, and in various African and Eastern cultures, healing power was attributed to oral storytelling of traditional tales and prayers.

Some researchers claim that bibliotherapy was not formally established as a therapeutic technique until after 1900 (Riordan, Mullis & Nuchow, 1996). However, Nobre (2024) describes a visit to the city of Bruges, Belgium, where she encountered historical evidence of this practice in the 18th century, at the former St. John's Hospital – one of the oldest hospital buildings in Europe, functioning as a hospital until the 1970s (now a museum). There, she came across a painting by Flemish painter Jan Baptiste Beerblock depicting the bustling life of the hospital wards in 1778. At the center of the painting is said: *"a convalescent woman, with a head covering, wide-open eyes and her face turned toward the nun seated beside her, attentively listening to a passage being read aloud from the open book the nun holds in one hand"* (Nobre, 2024, p. 75). The term "bibliotherapy" emerged in the 20th century. It was coined in 1916 by the Samuel Crothers, to describe this emerging science (Azevedo & Oliveira, 2016; International Federation of Biblio/Poetry Therapy, 2021; Nobre, 2024). The field of bibliotherapy, and poetry therapy, gained considerable popularity in the 1960s and 1970s when it was adopted by hospital librarians who saw the need for a specialized term for the selection and use of books to be recommended to psychiatric patients (International Federation of Biblio/Poetry Therapy, 2021). Nonetheless, the literature unanimously identifies Caroline Shrodes, in 1949, as the first American researcher to redefine the concept of bibliotherapy as: *"a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature, which can engage the reader's emotions and release them for conscious and productive use"*. This formulation brought greater attention to this field of intervention (Shrodes, 1949; Cohen, 1992; Monteiro, 2004; Azevedo & Oliveira, 2016, p. 3; Rocha et al.,

2016; Melo & Borges, 2023; Nobre, 2024). Azevedo and Oliveira (2016), supported by Melo and Borges (2023), describe bibliotherapy as a therapy that brings relief, healing, and treatment through the written word of literary texts. They also mention the bible as a book used therapeutically since ancient times, as a remedy for the afflictions of the soul. It was after World War I that psychiatrists noticed that patients with access to literary texts recovered more quickly (Azevedo & Oliveira, 2016; Melo & Borges, 2023). Consequently, the American Library Association recognized reading as a form of therapy and recommended it to hospital programs, to support the rehabilitation and entertainment of returning soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress (*idem*). Thus, hospital libraries began appearing in the early 20th century.

Beyond mere pleasure, reading and literature allow readers – through identification, appropriation, and projection processes – to find a sense of safety and distance from the distress of illness (Moody & Limper, 1971; Bernardino et al., 2012; Melo & Borges, 2023). When readers encounter characters and their conflicts, they may identify with them and distance themselves from their own problems. Some authors propose that this experience facilitates better acceptance of adversity and treatment, promoting adherence to therapeutic regimens and reducing anxiety and fear associated with illness (Meyer, 1994; Jardim, 2010; Rocha et al., 2016; Melo & Borges, 2023).

According to Michel Meyer (1994) and Jardim (2010), fictional responses to real-life problems create a relationship between the reader's dilemmas and the imagined solutions to those problems. This highlights literature's symbolic nature: a space where problems are addressed, enabling readers to confront their personal struggles. Within the framework of the psychology of art, Vygotsky (1934) and Jardim (2010) assert that literature captures the unconscious and the emotions unexpressed in social interactions, thus serving as a social tool for managing emotions.

Bibliotherapy is thus understood as an activity with both preventive and therapeutic dimensions. Through the reading of fiction or self-help books – individually or in groups –, it aims to provide a health-recovering experience, enabling continuous personal development throughout all stages of the life cycle (Abreu, 2013; Rocha et al., 2016; Azevedo & Oliveira, 2016, p. 4; Melo & Borges, 2023).

However, "*bibliotherapy encompasses not only reading, but also the discussion that follows it*" (Caldin, 2001, cited in Azevedo & Oliveira, 2016, p. 4). The authors clarify that reading alone does not constitute bibliotherapy. To achieve its therapeutic effect, the presence of a facilitator or therapist is required. The facilitator should, through dialogue, promote reflection on the content read, leading the reader or listener into a brainstorming process. This process enables participants to experience a world of alternative and more adaptive possibilities.

Three core components can be attributed to bibliotherapy: catharsis, identification, and introspection, each functioning as an interdependent phase toward the intended outcomes – whether therapeutic or preventive. Catharsis involves the release of emotions and can be understood as emotional relief, calmness, and pacification. In the identification phase – closely associated to catharsis – the individual has the opportunity to understand her own conflicts by relating to the experiences of literary characters. This identification process, resulting from emotional engagement with literature, encourages inner analysis and reflection. Introspection serves a therapeutic role by prompting the reader to reflect on her own feelings – an examination of thoughts and attitudes – following the reading, narration, or dramatization of a literary work, with the goal of behavior change or self-acceptance (Shrodes, 1949; Rocha et al., 2016; Pinto & Vaz de Almeida, 2020; Melo & Borges, 2023).

According to Ouaknin (1994), additional bibliotherapeutic components include: interpretation, existential and subjective reading, narrative, transcendence and

openness, impermanence of identity, otherness, dialogue, and intertextuality. When engaging with a text, one moves beyond the binary logic of "true" or "false" to contemplate an inexhaustible multiplicity of interpretations, through which the reader transforms and reinvents the narrative. The author's and reader's intentions no longer coincide, giving way to the reader's subjective and existential understanding, shaped by her life experiences and knowledge base. The reader begins to transform the narrative and project themselves into the future by retrieving memories, which leads to new hypotheses and perspectives, promoting hope and the possibility of transition from states of disharmony to equilibrium or serenity, and even personal growth. Otherness is present, in the sense that the words of others evoke emotions that the reader comes to experience as well, almost as an echo, providing access to new dimensions of both the world and the self. Dialogue is ever-present: dialogue with oneself (through introspection), with the therapist, and possibly with other participants in bibliotherapy sessions, all of which are crucial for care and transformation. The texts may reference each other and intertwine, forming a consistent network – thus giving rise to intertextuality.

The main objectives of bibliotherapy include: helping individuals better to understand their psychological and physical reactions to frustration and conflict, encouraging open discussion of personal problems, reducing internal conflict by enhancing self-esteem through the recognition that others have experienced similar issues, assisting in behavioral analysis, providing experiences through literature without real-world risks; reinforcing acceptable cultural and social norms, and stimulating the imagination (Shrodes, 1949; Monteiro, 2004; Nobre, 2024).

Frude (2004) and McKenna et al. (2010) refer to several benefits of bibliotherapy, including low relapse rates, high therapeutic adherence, strong client acceptability, minimal adverse side effects, and low cost (Frude, 2004; McKenna et al., 2010; Melo & Borges, 2023).

Bibliotherapy as a therapeutic resource: from concept to empirical evidence and clinical practice

Good, in 1966, as cited by Pardeck (1990, p.83) argues: *"the use of books to influence overall development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature for the purposes of personality assessment, adjustment, growth, and mental and clinical hygiene; the notion that ideas inherent in the selected reading material can have a therapeutic effect on the reader's mental or physical afflictions"*.

When applied in therapeutic settings, bibliotherapy may involve both fictional and non-fictional materials, although fiction books tend to be less frequently chosen and used (McKenna et al., 2010). Fictional bibliotherapy (e.g., novels, poetry) is a dynamic process in which the material is actively interpreted, considering the reader's circumstances. From a psychodynamic perspective, fictional materials are believed to be effective through the processes of identification, catharsis, and insight (Shrodes, 1949). By identifying with a character in the story, the reader elaborates and explores ideas, emotions, and situations creatively, and can visualize their own problems. By empathizing with them, the client experiences a form of catharsis, gaining hope and releasing emotional tension, which leads to insights and behavioral changes (McKenna et al., 2010). However, the cognitive-behavioral therapy approach advocates and use more structured materials, with the aim of enabling the client to become aware of the thought distortions that cause suffering and the behavioral patterns that reinforce them. It allows the client to identify inappropriate thought patterns and replace them with more rational and realistic thinking (idem).

We can distinguish two types of bibliotherapy: reactive and interactive. The first involves the patient independently reading therapeutic materials and responding to them positively or negatively. This was the earliest form of bibliotherapy (Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Rordan, Mullis & Nuchow, 1996). The interactive type focuses, instead, on dialogue guided by a facilitator – the bibliotherapist – who integrates and

directs the emotions and thoughts elicited by the materials toward personal development.

Nobre (2024) identifies seven types of bibliotherapy: institutional, clinical, developmental, creative, informal, self-help, and corporate. These types differ mainly in whether a mediator (bibliotherapist) is involved, whether the approach is clinical or preventive (aiming to promote mental health, even in the absence of diagnosed issues), and whether the context is personal or corporate (including workplace settings).

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) based bibliotherapy may include strategies for addressing clinical problems and developing adaptive coping skills. Structured activities are also incorporated, alongside the reading activity, to promote problem-solving and explore alternative ways of responding to real-life problems (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; McKenna et al., 2010).

Several studies involving individuals across different life stages have revealed clear benefits of bibliotherapy in treating anxiety disorders (Febbraro, 2005; Wootton et al., 2018), mood disorders (Liu et al., 2009; Moldovan et al., 2013; Scogin et al., 2014; Brière et al., 2016), grief (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008), eating disorders (Costa & Melnik, 2016), and sexual abuse (Pardeck, 1990). Gonçalves (2018) contextualizes this therapeutic intervention within the field of mental health and psychiatry, enhancing self-awareness and recognition of the other, helping individuals develop effective coping strategies that promote resilience and functional readjustment. In an exploratory study by Pinto and Vaz de Almeida (2020), the authors present bibliotherapy as an interactive process involving the successful integration of feelings, values, and actions, aimed at a balanced and harmonious path of personal growth and development. They conclude that it can be applied to various user profiles, particularly the elderly and/or vulnerable individuals, contributing to their well-being, harmony, and humanization. Monteiro's (2004) outlines bibliotherapy as an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral activity that

can also be used by nurses in mental health or psychiatric units in the treatment and recovery of mental health patients (Monteiro, 2004, p.14): *"(...) for the purposes of health education and mental health promotion in specific groups such as children undergoing long-term hospitalization, adolescents with aggressive behavior, individuals with disabilities, elderly at risk, and even in palliative care settings"*.

Subsequent research in this field includes Cristóvão's work with children and adolescents (2014), arguing that bibliotherapy can serve as a springboard for self-help, self-knowledge, and self-esteem among youngsters. She emphasizes the importance of selecting texts that foster joy, pleasure, relaxation, and essential well-being components, while also cultivating social values such as respect, justice, solidarity, commitment, equality, and democracy. She found that fairy tales are symbolic records through which the psyche expresses itself and can contribute to the reader's harmonious development (Azevedo & Oliveira, 2016).

Silva (2014) conducted a study involving a group of adults with psychosocial needs aged between 21 and 49. She observed a strong need among participants to talk about their problems and noted that when the session text was more reflective and accompanied by music, engagement increased. Her sessions included poems, parables, Portuguese tales, and song lyrics. Participants projected themselves into the texts, also with written reflections. The researcher evaluated participation as positive and beneficial for their treatment and rehabilitation.

In 2019, a study involving a group of adults hospitalized in a psychiatric ward in central Portugal, concluded that therapeutic occupation activities using bibliotherapy significantly improved therapeutic adherence and quality of life for psychiatric patients in specialized psychiatric care units (Borges & Melo, 2023). Clinical and social benefits included: reduced anxiety and distress, promotion of well-being behaviors, self-control, resilience, and coping, problem-solving, and decreased relapse. Additionally, these activities provided mutually enriching therapeutic experiences and relationships.

Melo & Borges (2025) concluded that across nine selected studies there is evidence of bibliotherapy's impact on multiple dimensions: self-awareness, consciousness, reflection on oneself and one's actions, mental health promotion and recovery, coping, problem-solving, and relapse prevention, distress and anxiety, impulsiveness/carelessness, well-being and functioning, resilience, family caregiving experience and caregiver burden, and satisfaction and adherence to intervention programs.

Recently, Nobre (2024) published the book "Reading to Live", highlighting the advantages of care through bibliotherapy and fostering holistic human development through the subjective and existential relationship each reader establishes with stories – whether read aloud, silently, or even dramatized.

In a child and adolescent psychiatry unit in central Portugal, a project called BiblioCuidar has been implemented since late 2019, with more than 400 bibliotherapy interventions, providing evidence of its effectiveness (Borges et al., 2024). The authors present a case-study involving a 16-year-old girl with an eating disorder within BiblioCuidar project, and the reasoning and qualitative analysis to the recorded interviews revealed evidence of categories aligned with previously defined nursing care priorities: body image, anxiety, anxiety self-control, health status acceptance, adherence behavior, parental role, and social interaction – reinforcing the intentionality of the chosen text by the patient (Borges et al., 2024). These results showed identification and expressive communication related to dysfunctional patterns, self-awareness processes, and recognition of coping strategies by adolescent, producing progressive cognitive-emotional improvement. Despite the potential influence of other contributing factors – such as participant's affinity with the literature type, social desirability bias, developmental stage, awareness level, and health status adjustment – this BiblioCuidar project has shown clinical impact on adolescents' expressive communication.

Backed by both empirical evidence and clinical practice, the co-authors of this essay have also developed and will soon launch a project involving bibliotherapy groups for adults in private clinical settings, aiming for satisfaction and favorable outcomes for the participants involved.

In the context of associative or corporate practice, it is relevant to highlight the work of the Francophone Bibliotherapy Association (AFB), a young nonprofit organization founded on January 4, 2020, and headquartered in Vienne, France. Its members are mostly bibliotherapists (largely psychologists, as well as other health professionals, librarians, and students from various fields), mainly French speaking (but also from countries like Portugal), with the mission of promoting well-being through literature, used as a therapeutic mediation tool. The AFB organizes regular virtual and in-person meetings among members to share therapeutic resources and validate and develop bibliotherapeutic practices. It is currently working on a collaborative book project exploring the topic from multiple perspectives.

Bibliotherapy as a promoter of expressiveness and resilience

Corroborating the widespread conclusion in the literature that bibliotherapy is a transdisciplinary therapeutic intervention (Monteiro, 2004; Melo & Borges, 2023) – employed by librarians, writers, educators, psychologists, physicians, nurses, and occupational therapists – the co-authors of this essay apply it in their clinical practice using a transdiagnostic approach. This approach is innovative, highly relevant, and practical-oriented. It focuses on the shared features of different psychopathological conditions (e.g., anxiety, depressed mood, low self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive behavior), allowing individuals with dysfunctional beliefs and emotions to reduce their intensity and frequency, thereby learning to regulate themselves functionally and adaptively in daily life (Wootton et al., 2018; Pando et al., 2018; Diego-Castaño, 2019).

Despite the numerous advantages empirically demonstrated and clinically observed about bibliotherapy, there are some inherent limitations of the technique. In line with Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1994) and Briggs and Pehrsson (2008), therapists must exercise caution when using bibliotherapy. Some books or texts may be inappropriate for certain individuals, who might project harmful motives and beliefs onto the characters, thus reinforcing dysfunctional patterns.

Another limitation is the current cost of purchasing books, especially considering families' financial insecurity and survival priorities. However, access to public libraries and digital platforms (Rossi-Remenche, 2022) significantly reduces this burden, making the intervention relatively inexpensive compared to other forms of therapy.

Following the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgent need to adapt in many settings, replacing printed books and in-person sessions with digital content, books, and apps. While these resources have their value, printed books still hold a unique and privileged role: neuroscience has demonstrated the many advantages of print over digital formats, as they stimulate different brain areas, impacting sustained attention, information processing, reading comprehension (Delgado et al., 2018), and memory. A highly motivating and well-received alternative is the use of song lyrics – especially commercial or popular ones among specific age groups, facilitating adherence and commitment to bibliotherapy intervention.

Facing today's global challenges and threats – such as job insecurity, war threats, addictions, poverty, and the housing crisis –, how can bibliotherapy, as a transdisciplinary therapeutic intervention applicable in various settings contribute to promoting mental health and functional readjustment throughout the life cycle?

Beyond all that has been said about bibliotherapeutic approaches, we reaffirm Petit and Guinard's (2008) assertion that reading helps us resist adversity, even in the harshest conditions. However, most testimonies

refer to individuals who were immersed in written culture from an early age. This is particularly relevant considering that, Portuguese children, youth and adults do not have deeply ingrained reading habits. According to a INE (2023) survey on income and living conditions, more than half of the population aged 16 or older (58.1%) reported not having read a single book in the 12 months prior to the interview, with about two thirds referring lack of interest (65.7%). Just over 40% had read at least one book, and 70% of those had read only between one and four books. This reality poses an additional challenge for this type of therapeutic intervention.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that curiosity, the need for stories, and the urge to express lived experience through words are universal – regardless of social background (Petit & Guinard, 2008). It is vital to be able to make sense of the surrounding world and our inner experiences, which often feel chaotic or distressing. The words found in books help transform the unfamiliar into something familiar, and culture allows for distance from psychological suffering, namely offering protection from the anxiety of death and separation.

What's particularly interesting, as Petit and Guinard (2008) point out, is that this transformation of strange situations into familiar and more manageable ones is possible even for those who read little: snippets of stories or phrases found by chance can be enough to create meaning. It's not just avid readers who can convert sadness into adaptive thought. In clinical practice, a simple motivating sentence or even a popular proverb can spark deep reflection, producing enthusiasm and active involvement from participants.

Returning to Petit and Guinard's (2008) perspective, even in times of crisis and disorder – including economic crises – a favorable adaptation is possible. A New York Times article, in the USA, noted that library attendance increased after the 1929 crash (Petit & Guinard, 2008). And in Spain, Le Monde reported in its March 27, 2008 (Petit & Guinard, 2008, p.6): "*It's the crisis: restaurants are closing, bookstores are opening*". The same trend was observed in France.

In times of crisis, culture seems to become a refuge. Attendance at movie theaters, plays, festivals, operas, and exhibitions increased significantly (Petit & Guinard, 2008, p.6). Spanish philosopher and writer Irene Vallejo also stated that “books help us survive major historical catastrophes and the small tragedies of our own lives” (Nobre, 2024, p. 145). We might also support this idea with a quote from Montesquieu, French philosopher, politician, and writer: “I have never had a sorrow that an hour of reading did not dissipate” (Nobre, 2024, p. 149).

It is important to emphasize that, as mediators of such interventions, the intentional selection of texts for therapeutic group work – focusing on themes underlying participants' anxieties, concerns, and discomfort – helps to dismantle myths and dysfunctional beliefs and promotes adaptive thinking. Therefore, understanding each participant's preferred literary type in advance is useful for encouraging engagement and achieving consistent results. This care leads to even better outcomes in individual interventions, especially for people who are shy or have impaired social interaction, making them more hesitant to discuss personal or family problems in front of strangers.

Conclusions

Our experience as facilitators of bibliotherapy and the observed impact on participants' expressiveness and resilience – particularly in the context of specialized care for both adolescents and adults hospitalized in mental health and psychiatric services – leads us to reaffirm the concept of 'art' as described by Petit and Guinard (2008). The art of bibliotherapeutic mediators lies primarily in their capacity to welcome, to offer hospitality, to be deeply available, and to trust in each person's capabilities and creativity. The verbal expressions of children, adolescents and adults are well received and valued. It is also an art of inquiry: those engaged in these programs have reflected on their own life paths and their personal relationships with books, generously offering parts of themselves to participants, while carefully observing what unfolds during the sessions.

Petit (2010, p. 191) also reminds us that “*Literature is a unique means of resistance to the adversities of difficult times and spaces in crisis*”, recognizing the world as a “*space of crisis that arises whenever the systems of regulation (...) become ineffective in dealing with current transformations and violence in reality*”.

From the shared experiences and empirical studies reviewed, we conclude that the application of bibliotherapy offers clear advantages for mental health – not only for users, but also for their families and therapists. These benefits make it relevant to include bibliotherapy in the intervention portfolios of our professional practice, as it accommodates the various stages of the life cycle and addresses the diversity of global threats and situations of increased psychological vulnerability.

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