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## **Books to support mental well-being: a study on the possible challenges in implementing Bibliotherapy in the Sri Lankan context**

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### **Abstract**

This ongoing research examines the Bibliotherapy in several aspects. Bibliotherapy is the "process of dynamic interactions between the personality of the reader and literature as a psychological field which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment and growth" (Shrodes, 1949). The focus of the study is on defining the concept, determining the capacity of Bibliotherapy to support mental well-being and discuss the possible challenges in applying Bibliotherapy to the Sri Lankan context. The study involved a qualitative thematic analysis concerning the selected areas. The study revealed that Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic approach which is assisted by the healing power of books; the reading therapy. The previous studies reveal that this concept is new to Sri Lanka, compared to several other countries which practice this method competently. According to the statistics of secondary data sources, the necessity of counselling and psychological support for the individuals in Sri Lanka is increasing day by day. In such a context, this can be a solution for the pressing psychological issues faced by the individuals. Sources of reading materials are found everywhere in Sri Lanka and the implementation of the therapy within the country appreciably can stand as a slayer of the psychosocial insecurities faced by the public. It was interpreted that this therapy is more effective for those that display an inborn preference for reading. Approaching diverse psychological issues with focused Bibliotherapeutic approaches is vital. Accordingly, a well-trained group of Bibliotherapists is a necessity. In implementing this service in Sri Lanka, inadequate number of professionally qualified Bibliotherapists will be a challenge. Moreover, in training Bibliotherapists, Government will need a stable financial provision along with the assistance of professionals representing foreign countries. Enlightening the relevant authorities

about the importance of this concept and introducing it to the Sri Lankan library system can also be suggested.

**Key words;** *Bibliotherapy, implementation, possible challenges, mental wellbeing, Sri Lankan context, Library system.*

## **Introduction**

*Books are the quietest and most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers.*

- Charles W. Eliot

Words and their power to heal could be helpful in recovering distressed and distorted minds. Bibliotherapy, also known as booktherapy, bibliocounseling, biblioguidance, literatherapy, or reading therapy is a concept involving books to support human solve psychological issues. Bibliotherapy dates back at least to the early nineteenth century (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1998). Both Sigmund and Anna Freud included the use of literature in their psychoanalytic practices. During World War I, both in England and the United States, the oft prescribed treatment for hospitalized patients included literature. Currently, many mental health professionals incorporate bibliotherapy (Pehrsson et al, 2007). Involvement of bibliotherapy concept in psychological treatment thus proves to be an important area of concern.

In most of the European countries, bibliotherapy is often used as a therapy to lessen different negative mental conditions. However, this is still a new method in the Sri Lankan context. There are hardly any researches conducted on the possibilities of practicing or attempts on practicing bibliotherapy in Sri Lanka. This ongoing research is focused on investigating the possibilities, challenges, pros and cons in introducing the concept of bibliotherapy and practicing it as a professional service in the Sri Lankan context.

## **Objectives**

- To define the concept; bibliotherapy
- To determine the capacity of bibliotherapy to enhance the mental well-being
- To discuss the possible challenges that might occur while implementing the bibliotherapy method in the Sri Lankan context.

## **Methodology**

The study involved a qualitative thematic analysis concerning the selected areas related to the focused topic such as involving of a new concept, challenges and problems that might occur and such. The researcher referred related electronic references such as e-books, e-journals and websites to collect secondary data. Scarcity of previously conducted researches on Bibliotherapy with regard to the Sri Lankan context is found challenging and resulted in limitations to the study.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section of the paper discusses the findings of the study based on the data collected involving the methods previously mentioned. The results would be discussed concerning the themes taken into consideration during the study.

## **Definitions of Bibliotherapy**

*“Come, and take choice of all my library, and so beguile thy sorrow.” – William Shakespeare*

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines “Bibliotherapy” as ‘the use of reading materials for help in solving personal problems or for psychiatric therapy’. According to Armando Zavazza (1968) Bibliotherapy is a program of selected activity involving reading materials, planned, conducted and controlled as treatment under" the guidance of the physician for emotional and other problems. It must be administered by a skilled professionally-trained librarian within-the prescribed purpose and goals. The important and dynamic factors are the relationships which are established between the patient's reactions and responses, and the reporting back to the, physician for, interpretation, evaluation and directions for follow-up’. In other words, this can be

termed as a therapy done through reading in order to support and help heal problems that are challenging your life.

According to the history, the word ‘bibliotherapy’ is a combination of the two Greek words ‘biblion’ which means book and ‘therapeia’ which means healing. This word was coined by the American minister, Samuel Crothers (1916) to define bibliotherapy as a ‘process in which specific literature, both fiction and non-fiction, was prescribed as medicine for a variety of ailments.’ American Psychological Association (2021) defines Bibliotherapy as “a form of therapy that uses structured reading material. Bibliotherapy is often used as an adjunct to psychotherapy for such purposes as reinforcing specific in-session concepts or strategies or enhancing lifestyle changes. Carefully chosen readings are also used by some individuals as self-help tools to foster personal growth and development, for example, by facilitating communication and open discussion of problems or enhancing self-concept.” John M Reitz (n.d.) defines Bibliotherapy in the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science that ‘the use of books selected on the basis of content in a planned reading program designed to facilitate the recovery of patients suffering from mental illness or emotional disturbance. Ideally, the process occurs in three phases: personal identification of the reader with a particular character in the recommended work, resulting in psychological catharsis, which leads to rational insight concerning the relevance of the solution suggested in the text to the reader's own experience. Assistance of a trained psychotherapist is advised.’ Bibliotherapy, therefore, can be identified as a therapeutic approach which involves the healing power of books to address individual psychological problems.

### **Bibliothreapy in enhancing the mental well-being**

Use of bibliotherapy to purify the minds runs back in history. The concept of bibliotherapy dates back to 300 BC when ancient civilizations placed inscriptions over library entrances that stated that within the building was healing for the soul. As the Mental Health program manager, Stan Preston says “Everyone has mental health, just like everyone has physical health, not everyone will experience mental illness, but everyone will have periods of time when they struggle with their mental well-being, just as we have physical health issues from time to time.” (Hopley and Lingrell, 2019). This confirms that people are vulnerable to issues related to mental well-being

and will have times where they have to seek support from counsellors, medical personals and those that can assist with psychological support. Therefore, it is evident that the requirement for Bibliotherapy along with its benefits has always been on the run.

Up until mid-20th century bibliotherapy had been mainly used with hospitalized adults to support mental health. An important factor in the evolution of bibliotherapy was the deinstitutionalization of mental health care in the 1970s. This saw the use of bibliotherapy begin to move away from the hospital environment and into diverse areas of the community including libraries, general medical practice, psychology, criminal justice, nursing, social work, education and occupational therapy (Mclaine, n.d).

### **Need for counselling and psychological support in the current society**

The world is getting complicated with the passage of time. Unceasing need for money, increasing materialistic needs, development and intervention of modern technologies, difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships, failures in life all such matters can be the roots to create unease among individuals. As a result, they get lost in labyrinths of various problems challenging their lives which often lead to issues in mental well-being. Some fortunately get psychological support while some end up committing suicide in extreme situations.

As per the Leading Causes of Death Reports of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2019), Suicide was the tenth leading cause of death overall in the United States, claiming the lives of over 47,500 people. World Health Organization [WHO] (2021) mentions “More than 700 000 people die by suicide every year, which is one person every 40 seconds.” Moreover, as per the statistics of WHO, ‘suicide is a global phenomenon; in fact, 77% of suicides occurred in low- and middle-income countries in 2019. Suicide accounted for 1.3% of all deaths worldwide, making it the 17th leading cause of death in 2019’. When considering the Sri Lankan context, the issue of suicidal attempts and suicides still prevail. “Compared to the past in Sri Lanka, there has been a marked decrease in the number of suicides, but there has been no decrease in the number of suicide attempts. There are various social, psychological and other reasons for this (Jayalath & Gunawardane, 2021) the social and economic costs associated with growing burden of mental ill health focused the possibilities for promoting mental health as well as preventing and treating mental illness. Thus the Mental Health is linked to behaviour and seen as fundamental to

physical health and quality of life (Rani, n.d). Depression on the other hand is also one of the most common mental diseases in the world which demands support from professionals and individuals who are capable of assisting. There are many different mental diseases among human beings and the correct approach and assistance is important. Current pandemic in the world has also made people turn to talk more about mental health and well-being.

It is speculated that safety measures like self-isolation and quarantine have affected usual activities, routines and livelihood of people that may lead to increased loneliness, anxiety, depression, insomnia, harmful alcohol or drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behavior (World Health Organization, 2021). UNICEF official website (2021) mentions, COVID 19 has forced most of us to be confined inside our homes. Human history will record this period as a time of unparalleled separation and crisis but also of great courage, learning and collaboration. Each one of us is having to review/ rethink the way they function and their way of life itself. As we have seen across the world in multiple situations of crisis, children being the most vulnerable are often the worst affected. This verifies that the impact of the pandemic and the related circumstances is not only on the adults but also on the children and therefore, proves that the psychological issues may arise in every individual of any age. Psychosocial involvements are thus essential, to support people in maintaining mental health to help implementing strategies to take care of themselves as well as the other people.

### **Importance of offering Bibliotherapy services in Sri Lanka**

The gap in the researches incorporating the concept of Bibliotherapy and the library services and other forms of reading sources in Sri Lanka, reveals that the concept is not given adequate concentration. Arulanantham and Navaneethakrishnan (2014) mentions in their study on Bibliotherapy (one of the very few studies conducted on Bibliotherapy in Sri Lankan context) that the public libraries of Jaffna district are implementing variety of services such as book exhibitions or book launches on Children's and Elders' day or disaster day, provision of special facilities for patients and the disabled, organizing training programmes for communication development providing resource materials for counselling centres, and providing mobile library services for orphanages, etc. This could more or less be related to the concept of bibliotherapy. Although, the book exhibitions, book launches and reading programmes can be considered

activities related to the bibliotherapy, it is quite difficult to say that these events are solely based on the exact therapeutic essence in the concept of Bibliotherapy. Since, bibliotherapy is considered a medical based approach, it is challenging to consider every other reading activity or programme as a correlative to the concept. Although, the librarians and a considerable number of individuals show awareness in the concept of Bibliotherapy.

The study also referred the websites of few libraries of Sri Lanka and found no statements mentioning that the centers offer bibliotherapy to the general public as a service.

### **The possible challenges in implementing Bibliotherapy in the Sri Lankan context**

Sources of reading materials (e.g.: libraries) are found everywhere in Sri Lanka and the implementation of the therapy services within the Sri Lankan context appreciably will be easy. This section of the paper discusses the possible challenges that might occur while implementing the bibliotherapy concept in Sri Lanka. These challenges can rise before implementing and during the continuation of the service.

- ***Need for well- trained Bibliotherapists/ bibliotherapy practitioners***

It was interpreted that this therapy is more effective for those that have an inborn preference for reading. As per the findings, the awareness on Bibliotherapy is relatively immature. People have different issues in life. Hence, approaching them with unique and focused Bibliotherapy approaches is vital. Accordingly, a well- trained group of Bibliotherapists will be advantageous to the reader community as well as the service providers of Bibliotherapy. In implementing this service in Sri Lanka, inadequate number of professionally qualified Bibliotherapists will be a challenge. Moreover, in training Bibliotherapists the Government will need a stable financial support along with the assistance of professionals representing foreign countries.

Bibliotherapy is part of a larger framework, often an integral part of a therapeutic plan. As such, counselors should apply strategies congruent with their theories and treatments (Pehrsson et al, 2007). Either practitioners of bibliotherapy or counsellors offering the service, everyone must follow a therapeutic plan in guiding a mentally unstable person. When setting up the therapeutic plan, it is important to look at several areas, namely the psychological condition and the history of the client, psychological theories in supporting, the selection of the most suitable books and an

understanding of the content included in the selected book. Pehrsson and the fellow researchers, the latter as a mandatory guideline to follow; Counselors would do well to follow a few guidelines when choosing materials and applying bibliotherapy. Each book should be read before using or recommending it to clients. Choose each carefully to be sure it is current, credible and most importantly that it is relevant to a client's needs (Pehrsson et al, 2007). These necessities must be supported with a good training and practice on the implementation of the plans.

Bibliotherapy, initially collaboration between library and healthcare professionals, has now become widely adopted by counselors, psychologists and social workers (Pehrsson and McMillen, 2006). In the countries where bibliotherapy services are offered, the personals specialized in the field are engaged in ongoing efforts to strengthen and support the practitioners and to give a better service to clients. Pehrsson and McMillens project on bibliotherapy, includes the hard work they put on it.

When considering Sri Lanka, it is doubtless that the process of establishing and strengthening bibliotherapy concept is going to take a long period, mostly because of the lesser awareness on the concept. In the mentioned long process, starting with a well-trained set of bibliotherapists would lay a better foundation to the system of service. Therefore, before establishing a schedule to offer the bibliotherapy service, the relevant authorities must give a considerable thought on having a set of well- trained practitioners, how to have them and what to initially do on that. As an initial solution, taking support from the professionals from other countries and the active engagement of the local participants would be beneficial.

- ***Necessity of Government involvement in strengthening the bibliotherapy setup***

Initiative measures to establish a solid foundation to bibliotherapy in the country should be taken up by the prevailing government hand in hand with the authorities who can continue improving the set up. As mentioned earlier, bibliotherapy in Sri Lanka, compared to most foreign countries which practice it, is still in the infant level. Therefore, a strong foundation for the service is a must.

A Government, without concerning the political biasness should concentrate on the mental health of the public. As per the WHO statistics, countries spend on average only 2% of their health

budgets on mental health. Despite some increases in recent years, international development assistance for mental health has never exceeded 1% of all development assistance for health (WHO, 2021). The stress is on the necessity of increasing and improving the concentration of the authorities and public on mental health. In Sri Lanka, counselling services are barely used as a support, although the numbers of people with minor or major psychological issues are increasing. A reason for this must be the lack of awareness about counselling services and other professional psychological support sources.

The Sri Lankan Government must pay serious attention on the mental health of the general public during the fundamental stages of policy making. In an analysis of economic and demographic data from 2008 to 2014, the researchers found that a single extra poor mental health day in a month was associated with a 1.84 percent drop in the per capita real income growth rate, resulting in \$53 billion less total income each year, said Stephan Goetz, professor of agricultural and regional economics, Penn State, and director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (Penn State, 2018).

As per the statistical data of Sri Lanka National Institute of Professional Counsellors, the number of practitioners in the counselling field of Sri Lanka is increasing day by day. This proves that there is a positive tendency towards the improved concentration on mental health and related concerns of the people of the country. On the other hand, it also highlights that the need for psychological support is also increasing. For instance, the current news reveal that many of the school children of Sri Lanka are troubled with various problems related to psycho-social matters. The services rendered by the teacher counsellors in schools are praiseworthy. On the other hand, every school also has a library. As an initiation to the bibliotherapy services in Sri Lanka, the Government may involve teacher counsellors and provide them with proper training and credentials relevant to bibliotherapy and bridge a link in between them and the school libraries to introduce the concept to school contexts first. Following this, the Government can broaden this service to Universities as well as workplaces with the passage of time.

- *Need for a strong financial support*

As mentioned previously, having a well-trained set of practitioner is a vital fact to establish a proper bibliotherapy service in Sri Lanka. Since, the relevant authorities have to seek support from the foreign countries who currently practice bibliotherapy, a strong financial base should be there. Whether to bring the specialists in the field to the local environment to conduct training sessions or to send the batches of trainees to relevant countries, the authorities must provide adequate financial assistance.

Moreover, the people of country lack awareness on bibliotherapy and its positive outcomes. Hence, it is also important to launch several programs to increase the awareness of the common people on this concept called bibliotherapy and continue engaging in a few promotion programmes relevant to the matter. Conducting awareness programs and workshops will also cost a lot, however, the results of them definitely will be a plus point to the attempts of maintaining mental well-being. Therefore, laying a strong financial foundation at the beginning of the project will also can be counted as a possible challenge considering the economic status of Sri Lanka.

## **Conclusion**

The paper focused on discussing the definitions of bibliotherapy, involvement of bibliotherapy in supporting mental health, contemporaneity of introducing bibliotherapy to the Sri Lankan context and the possible challenges that might occur in offering bibliotherapy in the Sri Lankan context. The study proved that there is a vital need among the people for assistance in mental health and wellbeing. The findings also indicate that the bibliotherapy has a capacity to support different psychological issues and traumas. In the Sri Lankan context, the need for psychological assistance is increasing day by day. Hence, apart from medical treatments and counselling approaches the people can also take advantages from bibliotherapy. However, the results similarly proved that the foundation set for bibliotherapy is weaker compared to several other countries. Moreover, majority of the Sri Lankans possess less awareness on bibliotherapy. Therefore, the necessity of strengthening the foundation for bibliotherapy in the contemporary Sri Lankan context becomes important. In setting up a stronger basis for bibliotherapy, Sri Lankan government has to implement a method to produce a well-trained set of bibliotherapists, since having the medical, psychological knowledge and professional skills is inadequate for a

person to offer bibliotherapy for the people in need. Moreover, in producing a set of bibliotherapists, Sri Lanka also has to concentrate on getting professional guidance and technical assistance from the foreign countries which successfully continues with bibliotherapy and related services. With that being said, it is also important to have stronger financial conditions establishing a setup to produce well trained bibliotherapists for the country. When considering the therapeutic approaches in bibliotherapy the question arises whether the therapist could address the variety in psychological nuances of each individual who is in need. Hence, when offering services, it is vital for the bibliotherapist to have the professional knowledge and a solid awareness about the variety in people and their psychological changes.

Enlightening the relevant authorities about the importance of this concept and introducing it to the Sri Lankan library system can also be suggested. This ongoing research would continue to explore more on the capacities of solid establishment of bibliotherapy services in Sri Lanka involving both content based studies and field researches.

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