

The Mental Health Benefits of Reading

Research shows that literature can help—from the clinic to the community.

Posted March 16, 2022 | Reviewed by Ekua Hagan

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KEY POINTS

- Bibliotherapy, the therapeutic use of select reading material, has been used to alleviate many different mental health challenges.
- Reading fiction has been found to improve one's social cognition and ability to empathize with others.
- New research finds that reading programs can support youth mental health through conversation and connection.

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Despite recent controversies over which books should line the shelves of schools and libraries, there is little debate that literature expands the mind. But can the act of reading also improve our mental health and wellbeing?

Researchers are investigating the impact of reading experiences and reporting evidence of promising mental and social health benefits. Whether reading alone or with others, people are finding connection and meaning between the pages, giving their mental health a boost along the way. Now practitioners are exploring new models using the literary arts to support mental health in clinics, classrooms, and communities worldwide.

The Science-Backed Benefits of Reading

Getting wrapped up in a good book is good for our health.

The experience of being immersed or engaged while reading a story is called [narrative absorption](#) and serves as more than an innately pleasurable experience—it can also enhance our sense of wellbeing. Researchers believe that mentally transporting ourselves away from our physical surroundings can [provide an escape](#) or opportunity for [meaningful contemplation](#).

Reading not only provides these opportunities, but it also helps us make sense of our worlds. In [one neuroimaging study](#), participants who read more narrative fiction had greater activation of parts of the prefrontal cortex involved in perspective-taking when reading text containing social context. This greater activation may partially explain the correlation between lifetime reading and the ability to understand how people are thinking.

A good story tends to stick with you, too—and so do the benefits: The health impacts of reading last long after we put down the book, with some [research](#) showing reductions in depression symptoms persisting months or even years later in adults. And reading can not only help make life more worth living but is associated with living longer: [One study](#) found that older adults who regularly read books had a 20 percent reduction in mortality compared to those who did not read.

Bibliotherapy: An Accessible Treatment for Mental Health

Health practitioners use books and [bibliotherapy](#) to support the mental health of groups facing various challenges, including anxiety, depression, and grief. Though it can take on different

forms, [bibliotherapy](#) typically involves the experience of reading, reflection, and discussion of specific literature with an individual therapist or in a group therapy setting, though a therapist is not always involved. Some research suggests that clients may benefit from bibliotherapy used in conjunction with more traditional cognitive behavioral therapy or [grief counseling](#).

Although bibliotherapy's efficacy requires more research, this intervention has already shown some promising results amongst people with different health concerns. Researchers have reported that shared reading experiences helped alleviate depressive symptoms for [surgery patients](#), decreased cognitive and emotional symptoms in [dementia patients](#), and improved cognitive and psychological functioning in [patients with psychosis](#).

More [recent research](#) suggests that bibliotherapy could be a low-cost and accessible intervention to improve the mental health of healthcare workers and the general public living through the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. The systematic review cited the positive effects of bibliotherapy across 13 studies, indicating that the treatment helped to promote autonomy, giving people a sense of agency and control in their lives.

Reading Builds Bridges to Understanding Ourselves and Others

In a time of pronounced isolation and disconnection caused by the pandemic, reading fiction, in particular, may also help to foster greater empathy and social cognition.

[One seminal study](#) found that frequent fiction readers were associated with better social ability and that the tendency to get absorbed in a story correlated with higher empathy scores. These results have been replicated, and a [meta-analysis](#) found that lifetime exposure to narrative fiction was associated with more perspective-taking and empathy.

Reading and responding to fiction may [foster young people's understanding of human nature](#) and their place in the world, especially if the texts are thematically relevant and coupled with writing activities that reflect on personal experiences related to the reading. Identifying with characters going through [similar experiences can comfort readers](#), knowing that they are not alone in their struggles or pain.

A Citywide Reading Program to Support Youth Mental Health

Building upon these lessons, local organizations partnered to develop [One Book Baltimore](#), a citywide reading program to support youth mental wellbeing and connection. A recently published study of the program in the *Journal of Community Psychology* found that literature can be used to generate productive conversations about complex and sensitive topics, like violence and mental health.

Researchers from the [International Arts + Mind Lab](#) (IAM Lab) of Johns Hopkins University evaluated the results of the 2019 program, in which 10,000 seventh- and eighth-grade Baltimore City Public School students read the same award-winning novel, *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. Reynolds is currently the Library of Congress's National Ambassador for Young People's Literature.

"Long Way Down" powerfully portrays youth violence and its consequences through its teenage protagonist, Will.

The subject matter is familiar to many enrolled in the One Book Baltimore program: In surveys before and after the program, half of the students reported that they or a close family member had directly experienced violence.

"Literature, like many art forms, helps us talk about difficult or sensitive issues, and it gives us a starting point for new conversations," said Tasha Golden, Ph.D., director of research at IAM Lab and lead author of the study. "At a time when young people are suffering and seeking support — from their communities and from one another — we have to consider how the arts can help generate connection, creativity and dialogue."

The pandemic has [exacerbated social isolation and rates of mental illness](#), particularly in [youth populations](#). Program leaders developed the One Book Baltimore intervention to help mitigate the harmful effects of isolation that often accompany anxiety, depression or trauma.

The new research found that reading *Long Way Down* influenced how the middle-schoolers thought about violence, with a greater effect on those who had personal experiences with violence. The study also reported that students who read the novel in full had more conversations about violence with their friends and family. After the program, almost 60% of students reported that they wanted more opportunities to discuss violence and peace with their peers.

The study also makes recommendations on implementing the program in other places. Dr. Golden explained, "This is a way to explore new mental health supports for young people. The model, which draws upon schools, libraries, and literature, could work in any community."

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