

## Practitioner Perspective

# Bibliotherapy as a Counselling Intervention for Bereavement, Loss and Grief

By Mari Gallagher



*For those who demonstrate an interest in reading, bibliotherapy is a proven means of helping clients understand the issues they are experiencing, normalizes those experiences, and offers hope for positive change. As a therapeutic modality, bibliotherapy is accessible and provides one potential format for therapeutic work outside of sessions*

## Introduction

Bibliotherapy involves the use of literature to help people cope with emotional problems, mental illnesses, or change in their lives (Pardeck, 1994 cited in Neville, 2010) so as to produce affective change and promote

personality growth and development (Lenowsky, 1987, Adderholt-Elliot & Eder, 1989 cited in Neville, 2010). This article will explore the history of bibliotherapy, intervention for bereavement, loss and grief (BLG), with a particular reference to counselling children, suggestions

for selection of appropriate titles, as well as personal and professional examples of the effectiveness of bibliotherapy.

The terms grief and loss are often interchangeable with bereavement: the suffering of loss due to the death of a loved one. However, for the purposes of exploring the effectiveness of bibliotherapy as a counselling aid, grief and loss can be interpreted as an umbrella term encompassing other matters that may present in the counselling room, such as loss of a close relationship or marital breakdown. A personal experience of bibliotherapy as an intervention in the case of loss of biological connection in adoption will also be outlined.

Loss happens in many forms. The American novelist, Mark Twain, summed up the comprehensive breadth of grief and loss by suggesting that nothing that grieves us can be called little - by the eternal laws of proportion, a child's loss of a doll and king's loss of a crown are events of the same size (1990).

Bibliotherapy offers the client who has an interest in reading a problem-solving approach to recovery and emphasises the potential of self-management (Irish College of General Practitioners, [ICGP] 2013). The book that stands in for a counsellor may provide the client with a more enduring, even lifelong therapeutic relationship, unlike the therapist as a live individual (Frank & Frank, 1991

cited in Lampropoulos & Spengler, 2005).

Bibliotherapy works on the principle that the reader identifies with the characters who are similar to them and reads a specific text to experience the release of particular emotions, leading to a catharsis (Neville, 2010). This catharsis can manifest itself in two ways: firstly by offering them an alternative way of how they might make a change in their lives and; secondly, by vicariously allowing them to try out new ways of interacting with others (Gladding & Gladding, 1991, cited in Neville, 2010).

### History of bibliotherapy

The term bibliotherapy originates from Greek language – *biblion* meaning ‘book’ and *therapeio* meaning ‘therapy’ (Moses & Zaccaria, 1978, cited in O’Rourke, 2012). Recognition of the therapeutic power of reading was evident 4,000 years ago, as demonstrated by the inscription over the library door at Thebes, Egypt: ‘The medicine chest of the soul’ (Davis, 2009).

Bibliotherapy has been extensively used in psychiatric hospitals in the 1930s and 1940s (Gumaer, 1984 cited in O’Rourke, 2012) and also in more recent years by school counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists and medical doctors (Pardeck & Pardeck 1993, cited in O’Rourke, 2012). American author and professor of psychiatry, Irvin D. Yalom, is a dedicated advocate of bibliotherapy as a counselling intervention. As a child he avidly read fiction, finding refuge in an alternate, more satisfying world, a source of inspiration and wisdom (Yalom, 2002).

### A counselling intervention for Bereavement, Loss and Grief

BLG is a complex and dynamic

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(Bowman, 2004)

process influencing individuals of all ages (Briggs and Pehrsson, 2008). BLG is described by Tatelbaum: “The death of a loved one is the most profound of all sorrows. The grief that comes with such a loss is intense and multifaceted, affecting our emotions, our bodies, and our lives” (1980, p.7).

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) identifies the five stages passed through by the dying as they approach the end of their lives – denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages have been universally accepted as also describing accurately the process experienced by those affected by BLG (Pass, 2006).

Denial and isolation are natural reactions to initially manage shock, as it is easier to try and tell oneself the loved one has not died, quickly followed by a deep sense of loneliness and isolation at the loss. Anger may be directed towards medical staff, family or one’s spirituality – ‘how could this happen to me?’ Bargaining with one’s inner spirit, trying to rationalise the loss and negotiate

a cure, could be followed by depression when reality hits that the loved one is definitely gone. Finally, acceptance, when the client faces the truth - a life without the loved one (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Not everyone will progress through all five stages or experience them in the same order; the bereaved will oscillate and vacillate between stages, often arriving back at the anger stage and some even staying stuck at the denial stage (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In the context of bibliotherapy as an intervention for BLG, the counsellor must always be aware of timing – a client’s readiness for a piece of reading may not be as the counsellor assumes (Bowman, 2004).

### Selection of appropriate reading material

Clients who are suffering from the trauma of BLG can struggle to talk about what they have seen, heard or felt. Finding words for those sensory experiences can also affect their ability to reflect on what happened to them (Bowman, 2004). Provocative literary material can help or hinder that process. Excitement about literary tools can cause any counsellor to overlook the potential harm to clients. Hence, for most counsellors who address BLG by utilizing literary resources in their work, the potential for misuse or unintended consequences is great (Bowman, 2004).

For example, I attempted to read C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed* (1961) during the early months of bereavement. The accuracy of Lewis’ description of grief fitted so well with my own experience that instead of offering hope and comfort, I found myself dissolving further into a maelstrom of melancholy. I share this insight

as a way of illustrating the importance of matching reading material with the stage of grief - books with a task-oriented focus rather than a memoir/chronicle of grief are likely to provide more therapeutic assistance, while BLG is still new and raw.

In the case of the early stages of grief, Judy Tatelbaum's *The Courage to Grieve* (1980), would be my recommendation as a text offering practical insights and a task-oriented approach to BLG. Tatelbaum's words helped me face the inevitable – a life without a beloved, younger sister and soulmate. I learned that it was possible to recover and move on: "Although it may be hard to believe, we can recover from our sorrow. Recovery from grief is the restoration of our capacity for living a full life and enjoying life without feelings of guilt, shame, sorrow, or regret" (p.94). Tatelbaum also offered practical suggestions such as facing death "squarely" by making a will, getting our own belongings organised as a way of assisting loved ones in the event of our own death and buying life assurance.

Also, during the early days of grief, Mary E. Frye's (1932) poem, *Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep*, offered an inspirational and comforting view on death, as well as a sense of relief in the continued spiritual presence of the loved one.

Awareness of this aspect of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic intervention is particularly important for newly-qualified psychotherapists. The basis of successful intervention is the establishing of a warm and trusting relationship with the facilitating conditions of unconditional acceptance, genuineness, empathy and trust (Rogers, 1961). Knowing and understanding the client and

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where they are 'at' in the grieving process is, in my view, crucial for the making of a suitable recommendation for reading material.

#### **Effectiveness of bibliotherapy**

Little research exists about the use of literature with grieving adults, so the extent to which this method is used (or its success) is difficult to know (Briggs, C & Pehrsson, D. 2008). The effectiveness of bibliotherapy depends on the motivation and application (as well as the literacy) of the person using a self-help text (Frude, 2005). Those who actively read the self-help material and engage with it enthusiastically and conscientiously are more likely to benefit than those who are reluctant in their attempts (Frude, 2005).

In selecting a book for the client to read, the counsellor must be familiar with each work, that is, the counsellor must have read the book before making a prescription (Briggs, C & Pehrsson, 2008). The aforementioned is essential, in my view, as it ensures that the counsellor will be able to knowledgeably discuss the book's contents with the client. One possible counselling intervention is that the client retells the story

or discusses characters or case studies from the selected reading material, allowing the client a safe way to talk about their own painful experiences of loss (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008).

Irish author, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne writes of the combined support of counselling and bibliotherapy in the wake of the loss in 2013 of her beloved husband, Bo Almqvist. In her memoir, *Twelve Thousand Days: A memoir of love and loss*, she cites a number of titles that she found helpful. In particular, Colin Murray Parkes's study of grief in widows proved comforting (1972). Ní Dhuibhne writes: "*Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (1972) is a scientific study of the process of grief, but it's written in accessible prose (p.196, 2018)."

As the therapeutic relationship deepens, the client can begin talking about personal loss in comparison to the losses described in the literature (Jackson, 2001, cited in Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). Book-based therapy will not be suitable for everyone, but it is certainly appropriate for a proportion of those who consult their GP or other healthcare professionals with an emotional problem (ICGP, 2013). Not every client is receptive to bibliotherapy as an intervention and making the decision to suggest reading material as part of counselling will be based on the therapist's understanding of how the client is disposed towards reading as a pursuit.

#### **Public library services as a resource for the therapist and client**

'Shelf Help' is now available in libraries nationwide, and is a collection of titles covering the topics of low mood and depression, worry, stress and anxiety, general mental health and

wellbeing, addiction, parenting, relationships and social issues (Kildare County Library and Art Services, 2019). As a matter of note, I have borrowed books from my local library and passed them to clients who have consistently returned them after reading. (It is important to note that if lending a library book to a client who decides to finish therapy before returning a book, it is possible for the client to drop the book to his/her nearest library rather than be obliged to return the book directly to the therapist).

Forgan (2002, p.75, cited in Strub, 2007), writes: "Have you ever read a book for self-help or to find answers to your difficulties, such as how others dealt with a loss, learned to become self-assured, or overcame a hardship? If you responded 'yes', then you have used bibliotherapy."

Many books with a great variety of themes, which are more or less psychological in content, are available on the market.

### Benefits of bibliotherapy for children

Orton (1997, cited in O'Rourke, 2012) outlines five values which underpin the benefits of bibliotherapy for children:

- Free expression of issues that are sometimes hidden, especially if the book is a good match to the child's problem.
- Helps the child analyse why they are feeling the way they are feeling, particularly in the safety of their own thoughts.
- Provides information to solve problems and foster positive thinking; Books such as the Harry Potter series, which show the hero overcoming a number of life-changing obstacles, provide the reader with valuable insights that

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*(Keefer and Schooler, 2000)*

serve to foster self-reliance and resilience.

- Promotes relaxation while reducing anxiety and fostering emotional release as well as an escape from loneliness.
- A fun way to experiment with new coping skills and try out new ways of doing things by taking the example of heroes in the literature.

### Bibliotherapy and adoption loss

The only 'bad' grief is that which is unexpressed (Oates, Martha, 1988, cited in Michael O'Rourke, 2012). Adoption grief is a grief often compounded and deepened by the fact that it is frequently not acknowledged by society in general and, by extension, adoptive parents. (Keefer and Schooler, 2000). If the child's adoption loss is not acknowledged by those closest to him, grief may be acted out in other ways, such as explosive anger, nightmares and social withdrawal (Eldridge, 1999).

As an adoptive parent, I acknowledge the benefits of bibliotherapy for the adopted child and can confirm that reading certain literature assisted in illustrating to the child that grief and loss is universal and can be overcome. The reading of the Harry Potter series (1997-2007) provided not just the

usual enjoyment experienced from an imaginative and wonderfully constructed tale, but also an excellent opportunity to discuss loss.

For example, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), Harry finds the mirror of Erised ('desire' spelled backwards), in which he can see the faces of his deceased parents, who are waving and smiling at him. Harry is repeatedly drawn back to the mirror until the headmaster, Dumbledore, takes the mirror away and tells him "it does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (p.157).

While reading this passage, it was clear from the reaction of my children that they had absorbed a very important message about moving on from loss and a discussion on same ensued. Markell (2008) cites the Harry Potter series as a particularly helpful addition to a therapeutic reading list for children dealing with BLG.

Adoptive mother, Jamie Lee Curtis' (1996) book, *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, was also instrumental in helping with the essential job of clarifying the events around adoption.

### Case histories of bibliotherapy as a counselling intervention

A client who presented with suicidal ideation spoke of his perception of a lack of meaning in his life following a relationship break-up and restricted access to his children. The client's reading of Viktor E. Frankl's (1946) *Man's Search For Meaning*, instigated a dialogue in the counselling room about the key thrust of Frankl's classic book: no matter how bad things are, there is always a reason to live (Frankl, 1946). The client declared a renewed determination to forge ongoing connection with his children.



Another client reflected on the links between childhood trauma/parental abuse and his ongoing battle with low self-esteem and depression. Reading Haemin Sumin's *Love for Imperfect Things* instigated a dialogue on self-acceptance and the client spoke of keeping quotes from the book for ongoing reference.

A client who presented with depression and anxiety in the wake of a difficult marital break-up spoke of her struggles to deal with her life as a single mother, described finding solace in books I lent in the counselling room: Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements*, from which the quote: "Don't take anything personally. Nothing other people do is about you. It is because of themselves" (Ruiz, 1997, p. 48) was selected by the client to keep close to hand for ongoing reference and inspiration. A second book by Dr David D Burns, *The Feeling Good Handbook* (1990), was described by the client as helpful

and informative, assisting her in the development of necessary skills for the forging of new relationships.

### Conclusion

This article has defined bibliotherapy, shared personal and professional insights on its effectiveness, examined the importance of the selection of suitable reading material, outlined the application of bibliotherapy in the BLG counselling process and looked at counselling children, with a focus on adoption loss.

While bibliotherapy is a worthy counselling intervention and is particularly suitable for clients who are readers by nature, it must be noted that there is no substitute for the establishment and nurturing of a warm, congruent, empathic relationship, irrespective of the suitability of reading materials provided.

To conclude, an observation from *Shadowlands* (1993), the movie adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *A Grief*

*Observed* might be appropriate, an observation that underpins the answer to the 'Why' of bibliotherapy: "We read to know we are not alone." ☺

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