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Bibliotherapy: Boost Well-being and Find Community With a Therapeutic Book Club

By [Sandi Schwartz](#) | March 15, 2024 | 0



Millions of Americans participate in some type of book club, whether virtual or in-person. Book clubs come in all shapes and sizes. They can focus on fiction or nonfiction, have themes to guide book choices, and be organized through places like work, school, professional organizations, religious groups and libraries. Book clubs provide an enjoyable and intellectually stimulating way to engage with others to share stories, ideas and maybe even a cocktail.

However, book clubs aren't exclusively for entertainment—some can also be therapeutic. With all the chaos and stress in the world, people are craving community and healing. "So many people are hurting and have no real support. You can find validation, solace and joy in a book," notes Emely Rumble, LCSW, therapist and owner of [LiterapyNYC](#) and author of the forthcoming book, *Bibliotherapy in The Bronx*.

What is bibliotherapy?

Dating back to ancient Greece, bibliotherapy is the idea that reading can be healing. This therapeutic approach supports mental health and well-being by exploring books, poems, song lyrics and other written materials to help people understand and cope with their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Bibliotherapy can help address anxiety, depression, substance abuse, trauma, chronic pain and more.

By connecting with characters in a book, readers can gain personal insights and new perspectives about the challenges they face. “Books heal by getting into your subconscious and transforming the way you see the world,” reveals Ella Berthoud, bibliotherapist and author of [The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You](#). Through her work, she has helped individuals experiencing anxiety face their fears and become more resilient through reading novels that portray those characteristics. “I have also helped bereaved people to feel less lonely by giving them books that relate to their loss and help them to find ways of dealing with it,” she says.

While guided bibliotherapy involves working with a therapist who “prescribes” specific books to address emotional challenges, DIY self-help bibliotherapy is also an option. In fact, a [study](#) that compared the effectiveness of self-administered bibliotherapy with cognitive behavioral therapy for adults diagnosed with depression found both approaches were equally effective in reducing symptoms.

Bibliotherapy book clubs

Bibliotherapy is also commonly used in a group setting, tapping into the benefits of the collective experience. These groups are often facilitated by a therapist or other trained professional. Rumble offers individual bibliotherapy sessions online, a free bibliotherapy book club via Fable called [Readers Who Run With the Wolves](#) and a subscription-based book club. Berthoud offers [free live bibliotherapy sessions](#) on Instagram and Facebook to tackle different themes each week.



Libraries are also an up-and-coming place to find bibliotherapy book clubs. As co-authors of [The Librarian's Guide to Bibliotherapy](#), Judit H. Ward, PhD, MLIS, and Nicholas Allred, PhD, hope more librarians will engage with patrons through bibliotherapy book clubs. While American libraries rarely have a staff member who is a trained bibliotherapist, Allred says that their book makes the case that it is very feasible and rewarding to integrate bibliotherapy-informed practices into library programs, including book clubs. Ask your local librarian about bibliotherapy book club offerings, such as scheduled clubs or kits to start your own.

Other therapeutic book clubs: Silent Book Club

For those who prefer a more relaxed and independent approach to therapeutic book clubs, joining a Silent Book Club may be an attractive option. Launched in San Francisco in 2012, this movement especially [appeals to introverts](#). “Silent Book Club is a volunteer-driven effort to build social connections in local communities,” explained co-founder Guinevere de la Mare. “It is about more than just reading. It’s about creating a sense of belonging and providing a space where people can feel comfortable being themselves, without the pressure of small talk or networking.”

What makes this type of therapeutic book club so unique is that members bring their own book and read at their own pace. Mimi Gonzalez, director of [griefsense](#) and member of Under Cover: A Silent Book Club in Connecticut that focuses on healing and well-being, describes what a typical gathering looks like: “We start our sessions with a mixer, sharing what we’re healing from and our community work. Then we dive into silent reading, each with our own book. This has been super healing for me. As a griever, it’s easy to isolate, but the silent book club offers a sense of community while still allowing personal space.”

Silent Book Clubs are booming, with over 500 chapters in 50 countries led by local volunteers. “Post COVID-19 lockdowns, we have seen an exponential growth in Silent Book Clubs,” explains de la Mare. “Last year our chapters grew by three times globally, and in the month of January alone we’ve already added 120 new chapters. We’re excited to welcome so many new volunteer organizers to Silent Book Club and we’re looking forward to connecting readers around the world.”

To join a Silent Book Club in your area or to start your own, visit [Silent Book Club](#).

How to choose the right bibliotherapy books

Ready to get started? Choosing the best bibliotherapy books for you or your club is key. “The goal is not just to find books that readers might enjoy, but also that offer them a new and helpful perspective on their own lives and concerns, without hitting so close to home as to be painful in an unproductive way,” Allred advises. To avoid trigger warnings, refer to sources like [The StoryGraph](#) and [Book Trigger Warnings](#).

You can hire a bibliotherapist to curate an appropriate reading list or ask your local librarian. “A skilled librarian can recommend your next book based on your reading preferences through the process of a special reference interview called a readers’ advisory,” explains Ward. “For a bibliotherapy-focused readers’ advisory, the librarian will consider factors, such as potential responses, emotions evoked, positive effects, resonance and level of need for support in order to meaningfully engage the reader.”

The American Library Association offers recommended [reading lists for bibliotherapy](#). Finally, Berthoud’s book, *The Novel Cure*, is filled with book recommendations based on concern.

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