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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bibliotherapy: An effective therapeutic tool for female sexual dysfunction? ☆

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Sexuality;
Female sexual dysfunction;
Hypoactive sexual desire;
Anorgasmia;
Dyspareunia;
Vaginismus

Summary

Object. – Bibliotherapy is a concept which leads us to consider the wide range of actual therapeutic approaches. The originality of bibliotherapy lies in the fact that the use of a writing (brochure, manual, book...) constitutes the central element of the help intervention.

Methodology. – A review of the literature about the different types of bibliotherapeutic books, about the way these books are used, as well as about the levels of contact with the therapist will be presented. The reflection will thereafter focus on scientifically validated books dealing with female sexual dysfunctions.

Results. – Bibliotherapy as treatment for sexual dysfunctions does not equal traditional sex therapies, but it offers an interesting and effective alternative for a specific target audience and a complementary tool to traditional methods.

Discussion. – Different factors influencing the effectiveness of the bibliotherapeutic tool are discussed. Some reflections are also proposed to try to determine the profile of the women to whom the bibliotherapeutic tool may be advised.

Conclusions. – It is noticed that there exists only a few bibliotherapeutic tools which have been validated for sex therapy. The promotion of further research in this field would therefore be highly pertinent in view of the positive results of previous studies.

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Introduction

In the field of sexology, there is marked interest in the use of bibliotherapy as a tool. The extent of this interest can be assessed in relation to the number of publications on this subject in the various different fields of sexology: psychology (PsycInfo database), education (ERIC database) and medicine (Medline database). In these three databases, the keywords used were (“bibliotherapy” and “sexual”).

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Table 1 Articles published on the bibliotherapy.

| | Psychology PsycInfo | Education ERIC | Medicine Medline |
|--|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| “bibliotherapy” | 761 | 611 | 319 |
| “bibliotherapy” – “sexual” | 49 | 19 | 21 |
| Percentage of the use of the bibliotherapy in sexology compared to its use in the various sphere of activities (%) | 6.4 | 3.1 | 6.6 |

The results of this research gave the number of publications respectively as 49 for PsycInfo, 19 for ERIC and 21 for Medline. Using the single keyword “bibliotherapy”, as [Pehrsson Dale and McMillen \(2005\)](#) did some years ago, we get 761 articles in PsycInfo, 611 in ERIC and 319 in Medline. The use of bibliotherapy in sexology therefore corresponds to a percentage ranging from 3.1% to 6.6% in all the fields of action in psychology, education or medicine ([Table 1](#)). These figures are significant given all the topics covered such as anxiety, obesity, depression and so on.

Typology of bibliotherapy

The main characteristics in the use of this kind of guided reading for therapeutic purposes are three-fold:

- the need to read the written material ([Bajos et al., 2008](#));
- application of the contents ([Bergsma, 2008](#));
- assessment of progress ([Bornstein et al., 1984](#)).

To achieve these objectives, the content may be of different kinds.

Information content

This relates to manuals which list information on sexuality. The classic works include “The New Hite Report” ([Hite, 2002](#)) and *L'enquête sur la sexualité en France* ([Bajos et al., 2008](#)). A series of encyclopaedias aimed at explaining sexuality to children, adolescents or their parents have also sold extremely well. This kind of information provides readers with reference points and enables them to dispel myths and false beliefs. In some cases, the point of these manuals is to explain the factors responsible for creating or continuing the reader's problems.

Education content

The bookshops are full of books entitled “How to be the best lover?”; “How to make love all night” and other such “How to...” titles. These are practical guides, crammed with sexual advice of extremely variable quality. We can find suggested exercises, often of a behavioural kind, lists of questions to consider, situations explained in detail or clinical cases from which the reader can draw inspiration and so on. Such tools require additional involvement by encouraging introspection.

Fiction content

Imaginative literature may also trigger awareness and cause the reader to make changes. In a metaphorical guise, the reader can obtain advice and gain in knowledge from the story of the main character. Without imposing a response, such works relate to human behaviour through fiction, poetry, drama, biography and autobiography and play on identification of the reader. While feeling less lonely, the reader can follow the journey of the main character. In the field of sexuality, there is erotic literature which can stimulate the erotic imagination of the reader with the added effect of arousing sexual desire ([Hubin et al., 2008](#)) or even a bibliotherapeutic tool, specially designed for the treatment of premature ejaculation ([Carr and Sutter, 2001](#)), which tells the fictional story of a man undergoing treatment for premature ejaculation.

Forms of bibliotherapy

Sexological self-help tools

Studies to assess the effectiveness of bibliotherapeutic tools in sexology tend to focus on improvements in the sexual response of subjects ([Gould and Clum, 1993](#); [Marrs, 1995](#); [Van Lankveld, 1998](#)). Moreover, psychologists maintain that these self-help resources have a harmful effect on between only 1 to 3% of their patients ([O'Conner and Kratochwill, 1999](#); [Norcross et al., 2000](#)). In fact, this usage is perfectly suitable for people who would like to become more familiar with the issues that concern them or even the idea of treatment.

Point of departure or end of traditional sex therapy

In a study of the treatment of premature ejaculation ([De Sutter et al., 2002](#)), 75% of the subjects maintained that their difficulties had completely disappeared as a result of bibliotherapy. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances, reading on its own is not enough to resolve the problems. It therefore acts as a point of departure for more complex therapy. In a study by [Catania et al. \(1990\)](#), 88% of participants who made use of traditional sex therapy had first turned to self-help. Psychologists estimate that 93% of their patients have been helped by self-help books and 69% by reading autobiographies ([Norcross et al., 2000](#)). In the same kind of way, bibliotherapy could also be suggested as a way of gently bringing work with a

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