

- 1. Mark your confusion.**
- 2. Show evidence of a close reading.**
- 3. Write a 1+ page reflection.**

Nerd Alert: Reading is Good For Your Health

Source: Jen Christensen. CNN.com, July 21, 2016

Clients who seek solace by pouring their hearts out in Alison Kerr Courtney's office don't get rewarded with a Xanax or Prozac prescription. Instead, they walk away with a reading list.

The founder of BiblioRemedy isn't a licensed therapist, nor is she currently an English teacher, although she did work as one for 10 years in France, and has spent years shelving books at the library and in bookstores.

Courtney is a kind of book whisperer.

For as long as she can remember she's had a knack for matching people with books that fit with their intellectual interests. But some clients want more when they make an appointment with her at her office in Lexington, Kentucky.

What they seek is a kind of bibliotherapy. It's a growing trend where people tell empathetic listeners like Courtney their goals or problems. Courtney then suggests books that can help them clarify their goals, work through an emotional issue, or may even help them turn a page to start a newer, healthier life chapter.

"I've had clients dealing with grief issues, for example. I pair them up with books I think will most help in their specific situation," Courtney said.

A recent client dealing with grief told Courtney how much her recommendations helped. Typically Courtney suggests five to seven books. The client said she read every one, except for the ones dealing specifically with grief.

"Not everyone is ready for certain books, and that's OK," she said. "They may get there eventually and the other books may help with that process."

Books can literally change your life and they don't all have to come from the self-help shelf to work. Fiction may actually be more powerful, according to a new study running in the journal Trends in Cognitive Sciences. Books such as Judy Blume's "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," or "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," or Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," may teach you about complicated topics such as racism, poverty, teen angst, bullying, sexual orientation or other issues, but they may do even more. They could help you know your own heart and others'.

"People who read fiction may understand people better than others," said Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychology professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. He's also an award-winning novelist. "A work of fiction is a piece of consciousness that can pass from one mind to another and that reader can make it their own."

Books can work as a kind of "moral laboratory" as the scholar Jemeljan Hakemulder calls it, or they can act like the mind's "flight simulator," as Oatley describes it. Reading can help you safely test how you feel about certain issues or people, without your having to experience something directly.

Oatley believes the novels that help people best are the ones that "help us understand the characters from the inside," rather than more plot-driven novels. That means we can learn from a book that's a part of the literary cannon, such as Virginia Woolf's "Mrs Dalloway," equally as well as we can learn from popular fiction such as "Harry Potter."

Spending quality time with these characters as you relax on the beach or sit propped up on bed pillows is more than mere escapism. Reading these books may enhance your emotional intelligence.

That means reading books could improve your love life, your family life, your relationships at work.

That's because as you learn about Mrs. Dalloway's worries as she shops for flowers or you witness Harry Potter struggle to control his powers in front of his neglectful muggle family, you contrast that experience with your own.

The characters' experiences "can be internalized to augment everyday cognition," according to the study.

In other words, as you read, you think, "'This person does this and it reminds me of this person I know,' and when you think deeply in that way, you get better at empathizing with others," Oatley said. Even if you may never throw the perfect London party or you never meet a moody teenage wizard.

Lab tests seem to show this.

People who have been reading fiction test higher for empathy. Other brain studies of people who listen to a story with intense emotion show a physical response. Their heart rate changes and brain scans show the area that corresponds with emotion lights up, as if the person was experiencing that emotion personally.

Earlier studies have shown that reading can actually develop neural networks in your brain that can help you understand even more complex thought.

Even if you are not a big reader, there's still hope.

Past studies have shown serial television programs that are character driven such as "The West Wing" or "The Good Wife" also "can help you better understand what we human beings are up to," Oatley said. Other studies have shown watching character-driven sitcoms can lessen a viewers' prejudice.

Natalie Phillips, an assistant professor of English at Michigan State University, said this current study about fiction is exciting and seems to fit with some of the early data she's gotten from her own lab tests on readers.

Research on this topic, she said, is only the "tip of the proverbial iceberg." There is still so much more to learn about what fiction can do for us. She does caution that more lab work needs to be done to see if the empathy someone has for a character extends to others beyond the book.

"Because people are feeling something as they read, doesn't always lead to more positive relationships with someone," she said. "However, this research marks one of the crucial first steps in that direction toward understanding the intricate cognitive processes involved in literary reading."

Oatley believes reading can help our emotional development in large part because humans are highly social creatures.

You can be as smart as Sherlock, but to get along well in this life, you really do need to understand people emotionally. And you can't be as emotionally unavailable as Mr. Darcy throughout much of "Pride and Prejudice."

You have to learn the lesson Jane Austen is trying to teach with that book, Oatley said: To love people, you really have to know them. Perhaps you can do that best by living by the book.

"People say you only get one life," Oatley said. "But I say read fiction and you can live many lives in one."

Possible Response Questions:

- Has a book ever helped you to think about an issue in your life? Explain.
- Reading literature builds empathy. Discuss why this is important.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.