

“Wellbeing Through Reading”: The Impact of a Public Library and Healthcare Library Partnership Initiative in England

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Résumé de l'article

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Methods – The program developers ran 15 monthly sessions at the Library of Birmingham. These were advertised using the Meetup social media tool to reach a wider client base than existing library users; members of the public who had self-prescribed to the group and were actively seeking wellbeing. A health librarian selected wellbeing-themed short stories and poems and facilitated read aloud sessions. The Library of Birmingham provided facilities and a member of staff to help support each session.

Results – A total of 131 participants attended the 15 sessions that were hosted. There was a 95% response rate to the questionnaire survey. Of the respondents, 91% felt that sessions had helped them to engage with all of the Five Ways to Wellbeing. The three elements of Five Ways to Wellbeing that participants particularly engaged with were Connect (n=125), Take Notice (n=123), and Keep Learning (n=124).

Conclusion – The reading program proved to be successful in helping participants to experience multiple dimensions of wellbeing. This project presents a new way of evaluating a bibliotherapy scheme for impact on wellbeing, as well as being an example of effective partnership working between the healthcare sector and a public library.

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Research Article

“Wellbeing Through Reading”: The Impact of a Public Library and Healthcare Library Partnership Initiative in England

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Abstract

Objective – This project sought to build upon a reader development tool, *Many Roads to Wellbeing*, developed by a health librarian in a mental health NHS Trust in Birmingham, England,

by piloting reading group sessions in the main public library in the city using wellbeing-themed stories and poems. The aim was to establish whether a “wellbeing through reading” program can help reading group participants to experience key facets of wellbeing as defined by the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

Methods – The program developers ran 15 monthly sessions at the Library of Birmingham. These were advertised using the Meetup social media tool to reach a wider client base than existing library users; members of the public who had self-prescribed to the group and were actively seeking wellbeing. A health librarian selected wellbeing-themed short stories and poems and facilitated read aloud sessions. The Library of Birmingham provided facilities and a member of staff to help support each session.

Results – A total of 131 participants attended the 15 sessions that were hosted. There was a 95% response rate to the questionnaire survey. Of the respondents, 91% felt that sessions had helped them to engage with all of the Five Ways to Wellbeing. The three elements of Five Ways to Wellbeing that participants particularly engaged with were Connect (n=125), Take Notice (n=123), and Keep Learning (n=124).

Conclusion – The reading program proved to be successful in helping participants to experience multiple dimensions of wellbeing. This project presents a new way of evaluating a bibliotherapy scheme for impact on wellbeing, as well as being an example of effective partnership working between the healthcare sector and a public library.

Introduction

Events in recent years have threatened to erode healthy environments that promote wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increases in chronic loneliness that have continued to manifest beyond the lockdown periods (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2023). The visibility of an increased sense of community spirit at the start of the pandemic has given way to old fractures and tensions between different societal groups, resulting in a sense of decreased social cohesion (Abrams et al., 2021). The cost-of-living crisis in the UK has forced some people to reduce activities that are protective of mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2023), and 44% of public libraries have experienced an increase in usage of services that aim to help people through this crisis (Libraries Connected, 2022). In the World Health Organization constitution, the definition for health includes physical, mental, and social wellbeing rather than it being defined as solely a state without disease or disability. Good mental health means having the capacity to connect, cope, and thrive (World Health Organization, 2022). The World Health Organization recommends a multi-sectorial approach to mental health and wellbeing in recognition that services and support in addition to clinical treatment are usually required (Ibid.). Health libraries are actively looking for opportunities to work in partnership with public libraries in order to address the objectives of the ‘Knowledge for Healthcare’ national strategy for NHS funded libraries in England. Resources are being increasingly stretched across both the healthcare service and public library sectors (CIPFA, 2022; The King’s Fund, 2022), and partnerships allow both to achieve the common goal of community wellbeing with a wider pool of resources from both sectors. The project described in this study is one example of such a partnership. The reading program described in this paper was planned and took place in pre-COVID times but the literature review synthesizes evidence up to 2023.

The primary author and a psychiatrist at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust initiated the [Many Roads to Wellbeing collection](#) of reading suggestions comprising stories and poems. This work was in response to a need for those in clinical practice to easily find helpful stories to direct users, patients, or the public to that encourage self-reflection about improving wellbeing. Once the collection launched, feedback from clinical colleagues in the organization suggested that using these types of materials in reading groups would likely be more beneficial to the wellbeing of participants than reading alone.

Feedback from potential reading group facilitators working in clinical settings, such as occupational therapists and nurses, indicated that they struggled to find time to source appropriate reading material and construct session plans that would enable them to facilitate sessions successfully. The librarian therefore designed session plans to support any potential facilitators in rolling out reading group activities.

Loneliness is known to be a problematic issue in the UK with recent data showing that over a quarter of adults feel lonely always, often, or some of the time (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Therefore, providing opportunities for participants to connect with each other was central to this project. Public library spaces can help to support community wellbeing with their wide range of reading resources and community events for social engagement. Therefore, in partnership with the Library of Birmingham, the authors decided to facilitate monthly reading group sessions in a public library setting. The mental health librarian selected wellbeing-themed short stories and poems from stock available in local public libraries and volunteered to facilitate read aloud sessions that used the Five Ways to Wellbeing as a framework.

The Five Ways to Wellbeing is a set of evidence-based actions to improve people's wellbeing (Aked et al., 2008), which has been adopted by a number of mental health charities and health services in the United Kingdom. The five elements comprise Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give.

The aim of the reading group sessions was to enable members of the general public to experience the Five Ways to Wellbeing through engagement with the sessions in a public library setting. Bibliotherapy initiatives in the Library of Birmingham have traditionally been based around consumer health information and cognitive behavioural therapy-based self-help books for mental health, so this provided an opportunity to explore a new method for supporting reading for wellbeing by making use of poetry and short stories.

The Library of Birmingham provided a room and a member of staff to support each session. Sessions were facilitated during 2018-2019. Fifteen "short story and poetry reading group" sessions were advertised using the Meetup social media tool (Appendix A). The aim was to draw a broader client base to the library; members of the public who had self-prescribed to the group and were actively seeking wellbeing.

The sessions were two hours long, including a break in the middle, and structured in two parts with a short story and a poem. The material was selected on the basis that it addressed themes around human coping skills or suggested potential ideas about how to manage emotions and circumstances to enhance mental wellbeing. The short stories were a mixture of real-life accounts and fiction. The facilitator started each session by offering an introduction that aimed to create a safe space for expressing differing thoughts and opinions in the discussions. The facilitator then read the short story aloud, pausing at pre-planned points where discussion questions were offered to participants, several of which were designed

to help attendees reflect upon wellbeing themes in the story. The decision to have the facilitator do most of the reading aloud was intended to help make the group more inclusive for those with limited literacy skills (Frude, 2005; Naylor et al., 2010; Simpson et al., 2020). Following a short break, the poem was read aloud two or three times by the facilitator and volunteer participants and then discussed in the group. The group then learned about the Five Ways to Wellbeing with the facilitator talking through an associated handout. The handout also included signposting information about The Samaritans charity, which provides a 24-hour confidential helpline to those struggling with mental health issues, and local talking therapies services provided by the mental health service.

Literature Review

The concept of bibliotherapy or using reading to heal the mind is not a new one. A library in Alexandria has above its entrance an inscription from about 300 B.C.E. claiming “The healing place of the soul” (McCulliss, 2012). Bibliotherapy can be divided broadly into two types of reading content: self-help books and fiction or poetry. This second type of bibliotherapy is often referred to as creative bibliotherapy.

Self-Help Schemes

One of the most widely known self-help bibliotherapy schemes in the UK is the national Reading Well Books on Prescription scheme, which was founded by a clinical psychologist in response to the demand for psychological therapies exceeding provider capacity (Frude, 2005). The scheme proved popular and in high demand. The self-help books were made available through the public library service and promoted by general practitioners. The national initiative is now managed by the Reading Agency, a UK charity dedicated to promoting reading. Indeed, the Reading Well website states that 99% of English library authorities now operate one of these schemes as part of their Universal Public Library Offer. Self-reported effectiveness of the scheme is high from those using the service (Ingham, 2014; Trier et al., 2019).

High-level evidence also reports the benefits of self-help bibliotherapy, especially for depression. One systematic review of randomized clinical trials concluded that bibliotherapy is cost-effective, resource-efficient, and non-stigmatizing compared to other treatments and that it seems to be effective in alleviating depression symptoms in the adult population in the long-term period (Gualano et al., 2017). A randomized trial that evaluated the impact of family physicians prescribing a self-help book for depression compared to treatment as usual found that the self-help book performed just as well as treatment as usual as an intervention for depression (Naylor et al., 2010). Both treatment groups experienced a significant reduction in depression symptoms, but the self-help book intervention was more cost effective. The authors hypothesized that the bibliotherapy intervention may also lead to fewer side effects compared to antidepressants. Another randomized clinical trial found that a self-help book improved mild depressive symptomatology and that this outcome was maintained at follow up compared to placebo (Moldovan et al., 2013).

Another two studies that identified important recovery outcomes demonstrated how partnerships between healthcare services and public libraries can be utilized to deliver effective bibliotherapy schemes. Participants in one of the schemes were prescribed self-help reading materials by healthcare workers. Those who benefitted from the scheme reported feeling empowered by the active involvement in their own recovery provided by engaging with the bibliotherapy activity (McKenna et al., 2010). The other study reported that the bibliotherapy intervention was successful in helping to alleviate mild to moderate mental health issues when delivered in the community through a public library service (Macdonald et al., 2013). Public libraries are trusted institutions (Audunson et al., 2011; Ingham, 2014; Varheim, 2017) that

are accessible to all as a space for contemplation and wellbeing (Philbin et al., 2019; Pyati, 2019). Research has shown that reading groups that aim to enhance mental health are seen as non-stigmatizing when they are based in the neutral environment of a library (Shipman & McGrath, 2016). In their systematic review about bibliotherapy practices in public libraries, Zanal Abidin et al. (2021) make a call for greater collaboration between the public library and healthcare sectors as a way to achieve the common goal of improved public wellbeing, utilizing the unique skillsets of professionals in both sectors to set up bibliotherapy programs.

Creative Bibliotherapy

There has also been interest in the literature in the benefits of creative bibliotherapy groups where fiction or poetry is discussed with others. Connecting with fiction and poetry in reading groups can result in a more personalized experience in meeting individual needs due to the open approach of any reading-related discussions as compared to talking therapies, which may more narrowly focus only on targeting negative thought patterns (Fearnley & Farrington, 2019). Instead of restricting the notion of bibliotherapy to only self-help materials designed to cure a disease, a broader interpretation allows that any book helping a reader to feel less alone or calmed and soothed by way of escapism is valuable to mental wellbeing (McCaffrey, 2016). A recent systematic review of bibliotherapy interventions found that the value of autonomy is a common theme as individuals experience a feeling of empowerment by engaging in the bibliotherapy process to enhance their own mental health (Monroy-Fraustro et al., 2021). However, the simple act of reading fiction alone may not be enough to be considered a therapeutic activity but reflection and discussion of the work may enable it to aid wellbeing (Carney & Robertson, 2022). Bibliotherapy is not without risks as selected reading materials could be triggering to participants and disagreement in discussion could occur, but the facilitator can help to mitigate these issues by creating a nurturing environment where a diversity of opinions is welcomed (Blundell & Poole, 2022).

Considering good mental wellbeing as involving healthy interactions with others and living a purposeful life also enables bibliotherapy to enter the realm of public health so that broader societal concerns such as loneliness can be addressed (Corcoran & Oatley, 2019). Loneliness is increasingly identified as a public health issue. Systematic review data shows strong associations between loneliness and all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease, and poorer mental health outcomes (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). Public libraries have already been involved in providing extensive activities to help to alleviate loneliness (Gielgud, 2018; Leathem et al., 2019; Shared Intelligence, 2017; Peachey, 2020; Vincent, 2014). Over 80% of respondents in a recent report indicated that use of the library helped them to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2020).

The Reader Organisation is a national UK charity that has developed a Shared Reading model where fiction and poetry is read aloud in a group and then discussed. The Shared Reading model has demonstrated benefits for several groups of people with varying sociodemographic characteristics and healthcare needs. Reading groups for participants with dementia resulted in a positive impact on quality of life that was maintained at follow up (Longden et al., 2016). People with dementia who were involved in other reading groups using the model showed evidence of lower symptom scores after the intervention, as well as gaining an opportunity for meaningful interaction with others beyond routine care (Billington et al., 2013). A more recent study further added to the evidence base for dementia by showing how these reading groups can improve communication, mood, and behaviour, offer opportunities for self-expression and help create a sense of identity for people with dementia (DeVries et al., 2019).

Studies have also reported favourable outcomes for people with other types of mental health issues. Participants in one study provided feedback that the use of fiction in these groups allowed them to escape to a less distressed moment in time and that the groups were experienced as a safe space to discuss difficult emotions indirectly through the reading material (Shipman & McGrath, 2016). Participants in another study reported feeling that the quality of social interaction was better in the reading circle they attended as it brought individuals together compared to opportunities they had to socialize with others in an open room (Pettersson, 2018). Outcomes included increased self-confidence, an increase in social connections, a beneficial effect on psychological wellbeing, and a greater desire to continue with reading as an activity as a consequence of participating in the reading circle. Another bibliotherapy program facilitated in an acute inpatient psychiatric setting made use of autobiographies with the theme of a lived experience of mental health issues (Eisen et al., 2018). Evaluation data indicated that the program helped participants to increase their sense of hope and self understanding. A study of a reading group in Denmark with mentally vulnerable young people as participants found that the group provided attendees with a regular source of social connection with peers without being focussed on their illness (Christiansen & Dalsgard, 2022). This allowed the expression of identities that were unrelated to their diagnosis.

Evidence from Shared Reading groups that were facilitated in a doctor's surgery and mental health drop-in centre showed that participants experienced a reduction in depressive symptoms after the intervention as measured by a validated tool for depression (Dowrick et al., 2012). One study compared the impact of a Shared Reading group with a tour group type activity to pinpoint whether the bibliotherapy group had any unique benefits (Longden et al., 2015). The participants in this study were experiencing or were at risk of mental health issues, social isolation, or unemployment. The results showed that, in comparison to the tour group activity, the Shared Reading group participants were able to express and share a broader range of emotions and also had more opportunities to value both similar and different experiences in response to the texts read, contributing to a richer emotional experience.

In another study, residents in an Australian care home appreciated the opportunity to think for themselves in the reading group and to divert their minds away from their healthcare conditions (Bolitho, 2011). Other studies evaluating creative bibliotherapy groups for older adults found that they led to greater opportunities for social interaction provoked by the reading material (Seymour & Murray, 2016), encouraged self-expression and led to feelings of empowerment through creating a safe space in the group (Chamberlain, 2019) and helped to elevate feelings of confidence and self-esteem in participants (Malyn et al., 2020).

Research Gaps

Many of the existing research studies on arts and wellbeing tend to focus on visual arts, rather than literary interventions (Malyn et al., 2020). Existing research studies of this type also tend to have very small sample sizes. There is a research gap with regards to partnership working between public libraries and health services (Macdonald et al., 2013). The extent of the role public libraries could play in helping to promote community wellbeing has not been adequately acknowledged by policy or decision makers (Hudson, 2019; Shipman & McGrath, 2016; Philbin et al., 2019) despite the fact that public libraries already receive high volumes of health-related enquiries and would appear to be natural partners for the healthcare sector (Whiteman et al., 2018). There is also a need to evaluate how public libraries are supporting health, as impact data is frequently not being gathered, leading to public library contributions to community health being underappreciated (Lenstra & Roberts, 2023).

The current study aims to address some of these research gaps, including a larger sample size than previous studies. It presents a new way of evaluating a bibliotherapy scheme for impact on wellbeing as well as being an example of effective partnership working between the healthcare sector and a public library.

Aim

To determine the extent to which a wellbeing through reading program can help reading group participants to experience the Five Ways to Wellbeing elements.

Methods

The researchers designed a feedback survey containing a mixture of open- and closed-ended questions (Appendix B), and facilitators used it at the end of each session. The survey primarily aimed to measure whether reading group sessions had an impact on the wellbeing of participants. Therefore, the researchers decided to base the key questions around the Five Ways to Wellbeing and ascertain whether respondents felt that they had experienced any of them during their reading group activity attendance. To encourage confidence that their individual responses were anonymous, respondents were prompted to place their completed evaluation forms into an evaluation bag left in the corner of the room.

Statistics were calculated for all closed-ended survey responses. Free text responses were picked through and deductive coding using the Five Ways to Wellbeing was used for these, as it was a subject area with previous knowledge or theory (Bowling, 2023). Inductive coding was used to conduct a thematic analysis for the remaining comments to find any additional themes emerging from free text survey responses. The benefit of using this approach for the remaining data was to allow for the construction of new categories (ibid.) that did not fit with the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

Results

There were 131 participants attending in total across the 15 sessions facilitated. Of these, 125 participants completed feedback forms for a response rate of 95%.

Aggregated data shows that 91% of the respondents felt that the sessions had helped them to engage with all five of the Five Ways to Wellbeing (Figure 1).

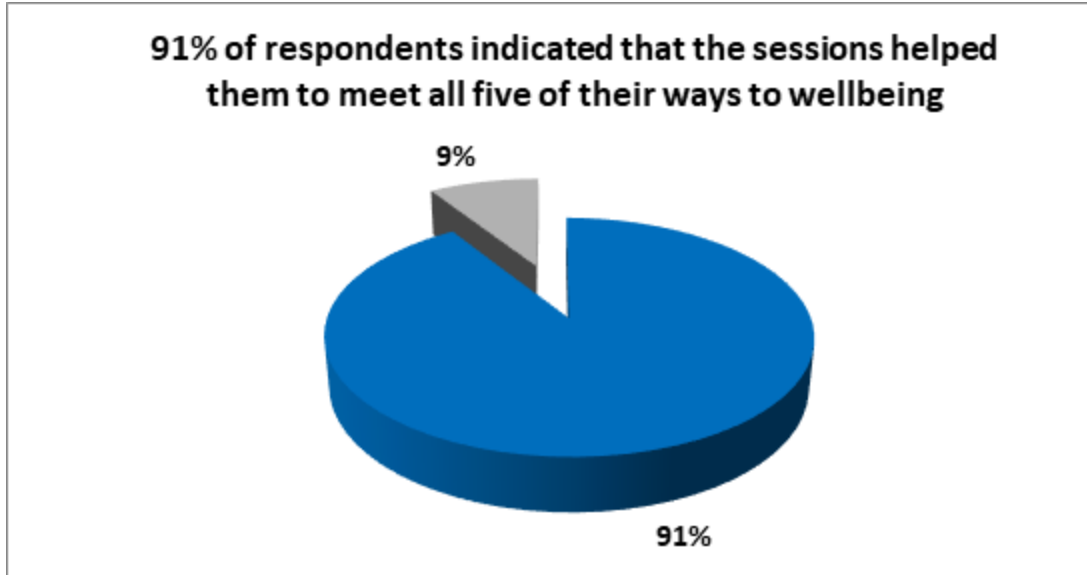


Figure 1
Engagement in all the Five Ways to Wellbeing elements.

Evaluation Feedback About Each of the Five Ways to Wellbeing

Figure 2 shows that participants engaged with all elements of Five Ways to Wellbeing. Connect, Take Notice and Keep Learning received the most additional comments in the free text responses.

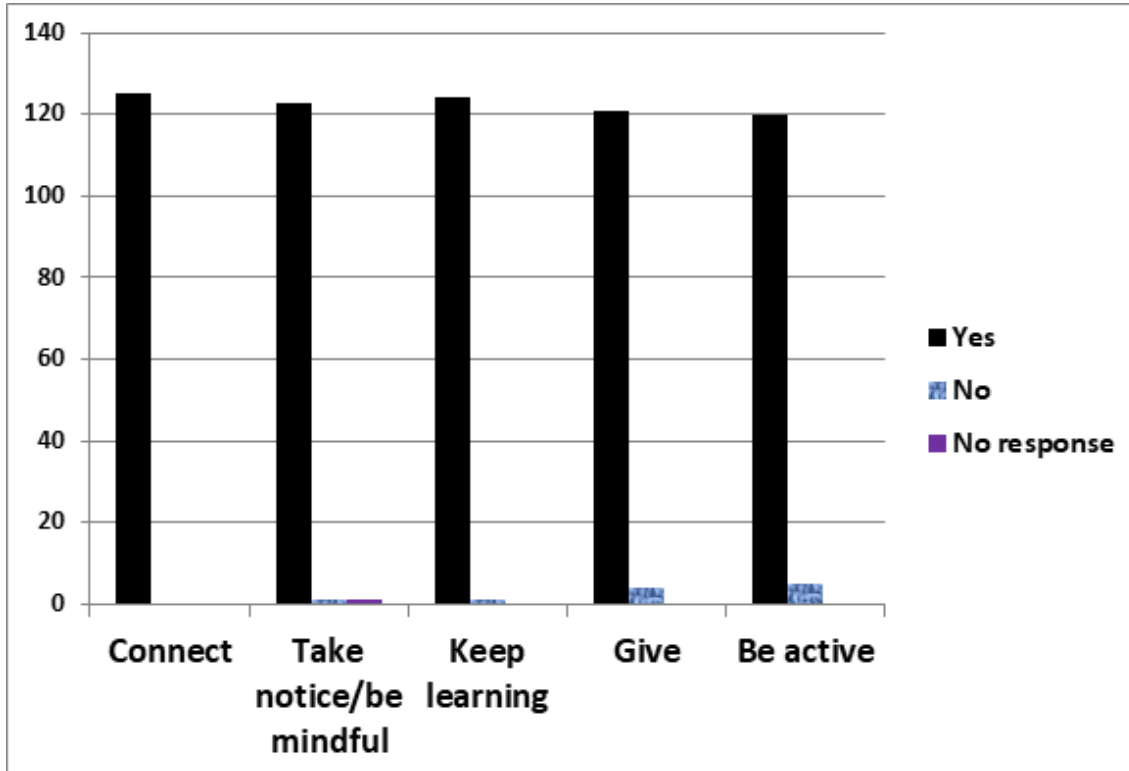


Figure 2
Engagement with each of the Five Ways to Wellbeing by 125 total respondents.

1. Connect

All 125 respondents felt that the session helped them to connect with others and Connect was the strongest theme from the analysis of free text responses with 71 references to this aspect. Several respondents expressed pleasure that the session provided them with an easy way to meet new people and engage in meaningful discussions with them. Some commented that the discussions reminded them of their common humanity with others through the sharing of similar memories or experiences. A few respondents as demonstrated by the following quotations were able to use the sessions to help build their social confidence:

“I enjoy how the story brings together a group of people who don’t know each other together. They become aware of things, instances past that may connect them. We realise that we are all people making our way in the world.”

“It was good to share experiences with others in the group. It brought back memories I’d forgotten and we could recall similar experiences. There was a lot of laughter and this did a lot for my wellbeing!”

Those who already enjoyed literary activities when alone reported even greater enjoyment of consuming stories and poems in the company of others in a group. Attempts to create a safe space for discussion were successful as respondents commented on experiencing a non-judgemental atmosphere where they could contribute to discussions freely, without fearing criticism of their interpretations of the literature. Participants also reported benefiting from general social conversation before and after the sessions as well as during breaks. As one respondent in the current study commented:

“These types of sessions are ideal to someone like me who is mostly stuck indoors in isolation from the outside world.”

2. Keep Learning

Keep Learning was the second most commented upon element with 43 respondents remarking on it. Participants commented upon how their learning came from others, particularly through the varying interpretations that different group members made of the stories and poems during the discussion activities. Some reported feeling validated when their views matched those of other participants, but they also experienced a greater breadth of perspective in hearing differing opinions. Learning also came from new words or phrases and the discovery of a new author.

A few participants commented on their intention to look up an author or poet newly discovered during a reading group session. More than half of all participants stated that they felt encouraged to access more stories (84 respondents), more poems (86 respondents), and make more use of public libraries (69 respondents). Some participants admitted that they usually find poetry to be difficult or dense but discovered that they enjoyed exploring the meaning of a poem in a group setting where group members could support each other in their learning and understanding. The following quotations provide representative comments:

“It was a kind of learning to find out that other people have different interpretations of a poem, and that my viewpoint isn’t the only one.”

“I do not usually interact with people I do not know about life struggles; or poems ... learning others' contributions were often enlightening.”

3. Take Notice or Be Mindful

A total of 34 respondents commented upon the Take Notice (or Be Mindful) element, the third most important element in the results. Some respondents commented on how the session itself encouraged concentration through having to listen carefully to the story and poem in order to engage with group discussions. This helped to divert the minds of participants from difficult life experiences, ranging from everyday stress to a bereavement, as indicated by these participant comments:

“Mindful – allowed me to relax and set aside stressors for a little while.”

“I was able to be mindful while others were talking and notice any judgements I was making.”

“Thank you for telling us to turn off our phones – it helped to stay mindful.”

The setting meant that some respondents had the opportunity to use the physical space at the Library of Birmingham to engage in mindfulness, taking in the herb garden on the roof terrace during break times or focusing on the views.

4. Give and 5. Be Active

The two remaining ways to wellbeing were Give and Be Active, and they received 18 and 13 comments respectively, so they were the two least commented upon elements. Regarding opportunities to give during the session, respondents commented upon contributing in a number of ways: by offering their viewpoints during discussions, by becoming a spokesperson to summarize and report back discussions for their small groups, and by volunteering to read the poem aloud. Some participants also mentioned actively listening and giving each other time and attention as forms of giving:

“We gave our time to each other and listened.”

“I helped to include someone else in the discussion.”

Some respondents felt they had been active whilst travelling to the location of the reading group sessions. For most of the sessions, the room was located on the seventh floor of the library so some respondents, as the following comment shows, chose to go up the stairs instead of taking the lift:

“Because library is in a pedestrianized area we are active in getting here!”

Themes From the Free Text Comments

Reflections on Wellbeing Themes in the Reading Material

Some respondents chose to use the evaluation form to express their personal reflections on the wellbeing themes in the stories and poems and the meaning that they took away from these. For example, one of the respondents expressed gratitude for some of the experiences they had had in childhood in response to a short story, while another participant gained a deeper perspective of their own values and what helps

and hinders in their life. Personal reflections such as the following on self-care, contentment, and life goals were also made:

"I thought the poem was really interesting and thought provoking. It reminded me how important it is to re-connect with yourself, to treat yourself with love and care."

"I thought both the short stories were really good as it makes you think about going after your dreams, what happiness means, being contented, moving on in life."

Respondents described stories and poems as meaningful, thought-provoking, and inspiring, with one respondent commenting:

"I also appreciate the wellbeing theme – too many thrillers and horrors in other book clubs – nice to have more mellow, enhancing reads."

Format of the Sessions

There were several positive comments about the format of the sessions, including comments expressing appreciation that no prior reading was required to fully engage with the session. In addition to this, respondents appreciated that intervals of space were purpose-built into the session to consider reflections about the readings, especially focusing on wellbeing themes regarding the human condition. Respondents thought that the format of the sessions was successful in encouraging active thinking through the question and discussion activities.

"The sessions easily covered the five ways to wellbeing. I loved the format in that you are able to turn up without any prior work."

"Thought it was very enjoyable: good to have to think and great to talk to others. Easier because of the fact we were discussing a story and poem rather than talking about ourselves. The latter would set an unwelcome context for some."

Improvement to the Sessions

One of the main feedback recommendations that was taken on board after the first couple of sessions was to lengthen the break time between the story and poem. This helped to create a more relaxed atmosphere, in keeping with the spirit of the sessions. Evaluation forms revealed that some participants were experiencing grief or mental health issues, so signposting to available support was introduced in a session handout. Participants expressed finding connecting to different members of the group particularly beneficial, so the organizers decided to swap some participants around on discussion tables after the breaks, allowing for a wider diversity of connections in the group.

Characteristics of Attendees

A large proportion (74%) of respondents had had some experience of depression or anxiety. Of these, 93% respondents reported that the session they attended had helped them to engage with all the Five Ways to Wellbeing. Of the respondents, 23% reported that they had experienced loneliness in the past few months. Only 6% identified as carers in this study.

In addition to this, 67% of attendees were female and 33% were male. Representation spanned the adult age groups with the least represented group being the youngest with only 4% of participants being aged 18-30 years. For the other groups, 39% of participants were aged 30-49 years, 29% of participants were aged 50-64 years, and 28% of participants were aged over 65 years.

Discussion

Similar to other studies highlighted in the literature review, this study also showed that participants particularly valued the interactivity of the reading group where they were able to share similar and differing opinions about the selected texts with each other in a safe space and learn from one another. Again, as suggested in the literature, the current study also found that use of short stories and poetry meant that participants were able to discuss wellbeing themes more broadly and flexibly based on the emerging themes in the texts, rather than only narrowly tackling negative thought patterns as groups based on cognitive behavioural therapy would do. The indirect method of encouraging these discussions through a poem and a story allowed participants to be more open in their conversations. Some respondents were surprised at the levels of meaningful conversation they had in the group, with people they had never met before. This was also expressed in the wider research with studies indicating that reading groups can lead to a broader sharing of emotions and thoughts compared to other types of group activities.

This current study adds to the evidence base with regards to a reading group activity that has been very successful in helping participants to feel connected to each other through their engagement in a group. Public libraries are ideal settings for such groups as it has been found that reading groups that meet in a library report a greater likelihood of encountering other groups meeting in the same location (Reading Agency, 2015), which could further enhance social connections. This was certainly the case in this study as what became evident as the sessions progressed was that some attendees were planning other library activities adjacent to their reading group session. The Connect element of the Five Ways to Wellbeing manifested very broadly with reading group participants not only connecting with each other in the group but also engaging with wider community activities available around them. This could have a particularly beneficial effect on people feeling socially isolated. Research shows a correlation between loneliness and both physical and mental disease, so reading groups could be an important public health intervention. Integration of learning about the Five Ways to Wellbeing into the reading group acted as a mental wellbeing promotional initiative as to simple but evidence-based actions participants could engage in to improve their personal wellbeing.

As a result of this study, a number of easy-to-use session plans have been created that are Creative Commons licensed so that others can easily replicate sessions and corresponding book sets have been purchased by the Library of Birmingham. The *Many Roads to Wellbeing* support materials have also been adopted in two different settings within Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, with good engagement from a range of multidisciplinary staff including nursing, medical, and peer support workers. These colleagues helped to test and adapt existing session plans to make them suitable for use with service users in a healthcare setting. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the materials were also used to facilitate Stories to Connect sessions online with NHS staff who were working remotely to reduce the workers' feelings of isolation (Gardner, 2022).

From the viewpoint of the public library, the partnership has resulted in a positive impact on staff development with the service. Public library staff from the Reader Services team were primarily on hand to assist with safety, comfort and to help with matters such as membership and lending opportunities.

The staff also expressed a desire to observe and shadow the session, so they could develop a similar program. Public library staff did embark on facilitating their own book club with encouragement and support from the health librarian. This was the first time that the mostly reference team had attempted to facilitate a book club for adults.

Limitations of this study include that the results relied upon a self-reporting tool for wellbeing in which some participants may have been reluctant to report not engaging with some of the Five Ways to Wellbeing. The facilitator attempted to encourage honest answers under the cover of individual anonymity within the group, but the aforementioned limitation of self-report measures may have had some impact on results. This study had a high response rate, but future studies may wish to use online and postal evaluation to mitigate the limitations of this method. The evaluation tool could also be improved by quantifying some of the Five Ways to Wellbeing better. For example, it was difficult to quantify when respondents had said they had been (physically) active as a result of attending the session. This was due to the feedback form only allowing participants to select from a binary YES/NO response. A Likert-type scale would have allowed participants to specify how much they felt they had engaged with the various elements of the Five Ways to Wellbeing. The phraseology of the question relating to the subsequent public library use also needed refining to include those who were already heavy users of the service.

Whilst the reading program took place before the global pandemic, the findings are arguably even more relevant in the post-COVID population, given the evidence they present about enhancing mental wellbeing and loneliness. These are now key concerns being discussed by more recent reports due to the impact of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis on population health.

Conclusion

Reading group attendees engaged with all of the Five Ways to Wellbeing to different degrees with the most significant outcome the benefit of connecting. Research shows that loneliness has negative health impacts, and this initiative can be used to help isolated individuals connect with other people by actively encouraging conversations. Attendees felt a sense of community in sessions through interacting with different people, so this initiative could be useful as a tool to help build a sense of social cohesion. Findings suggest that this project has the potential to support wider social prescribing initiatives, and session plans are available so other facilitators can easily replicate the reading group sessions.

The Five Ways to Wellbeing evaluation tool proved effective in capturing a range of impacts, and in itself raised awareness of how to improve wellbeing. Mental health has traditionally been neglected in public health initiatives but introducing the Five Ways to Wellbeing to the group was an easy way to provide some evidence-based self care techniques to participants.

Studies show a research gap in the area of partnership working between public libraries, and health or third sector services and this study provides encouraging evidence of what can be achieved together. This project has demonstrated the power of partnership where capacity, resources, and expertise are pooled together to benefit the health and wellbeing of the local population.

Author Contributions

Anita Phul: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft **Hélène Gorrington:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **David Stokes:** Resources, Writing – original draft.

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Appendix A

Themes of Stories and Poems Used to Promote Short Story and Poetry Group Sessions

Session one: choices
Session two: breaking barriers
Session three: decisions
Session four: outside in
Session five: reacting
Session six: letting go
Session seven: strong tides
Session eight: being
Session nine: small moments of sunshine
Session ten: being yourself
Session eleven: the everyday classroom
Session twelve: connecting
Session thirteen: eye of the storm
Session fourteen: finding meaning
Session fifteen: journeys and dreams

Appendix B

The Evaluation Survey

Evaluation Form

I am trying to evaluate whether these sorts of short story and poetry reading groups have any impact on the wellbeing of attendees. I am using the 'Five steps to wellbeing' model to base my main questions on.

1. **Did this session help you to do any of the following today?**
 - a. **Connect** – talk to or interact with other people in the group?
Yes [] No []
 - b. **Take notice/be mindful** – were you able to do this while focusing on the activity today?
Yes [] No []
 - c. **Keep learning** – did you learn anything from the story, the poem or any of the discussions?
Yes [] No []
 - d. **Give** – do you feel you have given others something in this session today? For example, this could have been by contributing to the discussions.
Yes [] No []
 - e. **Be active** – Consider how you travelled to the session.
Yes [] No []
2. **If this session did help with any of these wellbeing factors, please write a bit more about this, perhaps choosing the one/s that had most importance for you and giving a bit more detail.**

3. **Has this session encouraged you to do any of the following more?**
(Please tick all that apply, if any)
 - a. Read/listen to more stories []
 - b. Read/listen to more poems []
 - c. Make more use of public libraries []

4. **Please tell us a bit about yourself so we can measure if these sessions might be helpful to any particular groups of people: -**
 - a. I am a carer []
 - b. I have had experience of anxiety or depression []
 - c. I have experienced loneliness in the past three months []

5. **Any other comments about the session today?**

Thank you very much for your feedback! Your responses and comments are much appreciated.