University library introduces bibliotherapy for student wellbeing

At least one in three people will struggle with their mental health at some point in their lives but reading can help bring relief, explains LAURA ENNIS.

Information is many things. Books, films, audio recordings, and media of all kinds help us to do our jobs, learn new skills, and even relax of an evening. They can also help us to be happier and healthier. Reading, watching, or listening to advice and personal stories can help us overcome experiences, thoughts, and feelings that can be stressful or uncomfortable.

Bibliotherapy is the use of the written or spoken word as a therapeutic treatment. This might include shared reading, spoken-word events, books-on-prescription, and self-help reading. At Edinburgh Napier University Library in Scotland, we recently developed a bibliotherapy collection, delightfully christened Shelf Help (bit.ly/2rsqnDf ). The project was developed in collaboration with our Student Wellbeing and Inclusion team, which includes counsellors and professionals with a background in assisting those with disabilities and specific learning disabilities. Sadly, it can be a couple of weeks between a student requesting to see a member of staff and their actual appointment. The self-help reading is a good ‘stop-gap’ in the meantime.

It was important that the collection of items included not only self-help reading, but also works of fiction, graphic novels, music, podcasts, films, documentaries, and even apps. A lot of the existing material in our collection that deals with mental health is written from a practitioner perspective, which isn’t appropriate for individuals. So fiction and autobiographies needed to be represented in our recommended reading as well. While we had plenty on depression, stress and anxiety, I was somewhat saddened to discover that our collection had almost nothing on bullying, AD(H)D, or LGBT+ identity for example. With recommendations chosen in consultations with students, the Student Wellbeing and Inclusion team, and colleagues, this was quickly remedied.

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