BIBLIOTHERAPY AND THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS AS MENTAL HEALTH FACILITATORS

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Abstract
The increasing problem of mental health, especially among students, requires a relevant and accessible nonclinical intervention approach. One method that is believed to provide positive results is bibliotherapy, especially in the context of libraries as community centers. This article discusses the role of librarians in supporting nonclinical mental health through the application of developmental bibliotherapy in educational libraries. This study adopts a qualitative method with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 44 scientific articles (26 international and 18 national) published between 2015 and 2025. The findings show that developmental bibliotherapy has the potential to provide initial psychosocial support, which includes the development of emotional literacy skills, coping techniques, and stress and anxiety reduction, especially among students. Librarians play an important role in compiling reading materials, providing access to reflective information, and creating a safe space to support mental well-being without overstepping their non-clinical role. This study also highlights various ethical and professional challenges related to the limitations of librarians' roles, user privacy protection, and the need for interprofessional training and collaboration. These findings make an important contribution to the bibliotherapy literature and provide practical suggestions for service development and mental health literacy improvement for librarians in educational libraries in Indonesia. This article contributes to the development of library science and mental health studies by offering a conceptual synthesis of the role of librarians as nonclinical facilitators in supporting psychological well-being through bibliotherapy.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, mental health, role of librarians, university libraries, developmental bibliotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders are increasing rapidly and are becoming a pressing issue, both globally and in Indonesia. Based on the results of the Indonesian National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS), as stated by Globarius (2022), an estimated one in three adolescents

in Indonesia experience mental health problems. These results are summarized in a literature review entitled "Efforts to Improve Adolescent Mental Health Through Stimulating Psychosocial Development in Adolescents." This figure indicates a high prevalence rate, especially in higher education environments that are full of academic pressure. These findings are also reinforced by a study (Mawaddah, 2023). This condition indicates that mental health treatment requires interventions that focus beyond formal clinical services. Community-based intervention approaches are important because they are more accessible, affordable, and low-cost (Kurniawan & Sulistyarini, 2016). This approach is relevant considering the limited number of mental health professionals and the persistent social stigma against individuals accessing mental health services. Against this background, libraries have strategic potential as community-based spaces that support mental health through the application of bibliotherapy. In the context of library and information studies, the library in this article is considered a social therapeutic space, a public space that not only offers access to information but also provides non-clinical psychosocial support through empathy-focused literacy activities.

Several recent studies confirm the successful effectiveness of bibliotherapy in the modern era. For example, a study by (Arthur 2024) revealed that an organized bibliotherapy program on campus reduced students' anxiety levels by 58% within four weeks. Research by (Morin and Lavertu 2025) highlights the importance of selecting reading materials that align with an individual's emotional needs, which can significantly improve mental well-being. These findings align with this research article, but previous research has not thoroughly explored the role of librarians as facilitators in implementing bibliotherapy in campus libraries, including ethical aspects, professional training needs, and potential collaboration with clinical staff. This article aims to fill this gap by reviewing safe, effective, and targeted developmental bibliotherapy practices for students facing high academic stress. However, many previous studies still consider bibliotherapy as an individual intervention, and few have conceptually analyzed how librarian involvement, professional skills, and ethical guidelines contribute to the effectiveness of bibliotherapy within the institutional context of libraries.

In this context, the role of public institutions close to the community, such as libraries, is needed to contribute to providing early psychosocial support and raising awareness of the importance of mental health. One form of non-medical intervention that has long been recognized and remains relevant today is bibliotherapy. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek biblion, meaning "book," and therapeia, meaning "healing" (Fatmawati, 2017). This concept dates back to Ancient Greece, when libraries were known as "the healing place of the soul." The term bibliotherapy was first introduced by Benjamin Rush in 1815 and later popularized in the library field by S.M. Crothers in 1916. In the context of libraries and modern society, the bibliotherapy that is widely applied is developmental bibliotherapy, namely the use of reading materials to help individuals develop themselves, prevent emotional problems, and solve problems in everyday life.

This approach differs from clinical bibliotherapy, which focuses more on treating severe emotional disorders through professional therapy. Various studies have shown that reading can be an effective form of psychological therapy. A meta-analysis by Marrs (Ardiansyah, 2019) entitled "The Role of Librarians in Developing Information Literacy in the Muhammadiyah University of Makassar Library" demonstrated that self-guided bibliotherapy has a positive impact on depressive symptoms at a low cost and with broad reach. Research in Indonesia has also demonstrated similar results. For example, a case study conducted by Dwi Utami et al. (2024) found that using philosophical books reduced stress levels (64.8%) and anxiety (71.6%)

in final-year students writing their theses. These findings reinforce the idea that reading serves not only to obtain information but also as a means of emotional recovery and psychosocial support.

In this context, libraries are transforming from mere information centers to spaces that contribute to the mental well-being of their users (Fatmawati, 2017). This transformation demands a new role for librarians. They no longer function solely as collection managers, but also as empathetic information facilitators, capable of assisting users, and fostering emotional literacy (Zuraida, 2023). Librarians need to master interpersonal communication skills, be sensitive to users' psychosocial needs, and be able to select appropriate reading materials. The current state of students, who frequently experience academic pressure, makes the application of bibliotherapy in the campus environment increasingly relevant. In this context, libraries can function as safe spaces for students to calm down through guided and reflective reading activities (Agustina, 2015).

The success of developmental bibliotherapy in libraries depends heavily on librarians' ability to select and organize reading materials appropriate to users' needs. According to Agustina's 2015 article, Hannigan identified this competency as an important soft skill in bibliotherapy. However, to carry out this role ethically and effectively, professional training and clear practice guidelines are necessary (Andena et al., 2023). Therefore, this article discusses in depth how librarians can act as facilitators of mental health through the implementation of developmental bibliotherapy, by reviewing the ethical framework, professional training needs, and potential collaboration with clinical experts to ensure the services provided remain safe and accountable. Based on these gaps, this article positions libraries from the perspective of library science as a social therapeutic space, and librarians as non-clinical facilitators who play a role in the practice of developmental bibliotherapy. With this conceptual approach, the article not only summarizes previous empirical findings but also builds a theoretical synthesis regarding the role boundaries, professional competencies, and ethical implications of librarians in supporting literacy-based mental health.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used was a qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). This research method was chosen because it focuses on conceptual and interpretive review of various scientific sources discussing the role of librarians in mental health and bibliotherapy. The results of this SLR approach will then be used to obtain supporting data, understand the research problem, and formulate a conceptual model (Susanto et al., 2021). The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach is used to synthesize previous research findings to gain a deeper understanding of the role of librarians in facilitating mental health through bibliotherapy, particularly in supporting users' psychological well-being (Ridwan et al., 2021).

This research process is divided into several stages. The first stage identified relevant literature by reviewing scientific journals, research reports, and articles. The literature search was conducted using scientific databases such as Harzing's Publish Or Perish, Google Scholar, and Semantic Scholar. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords: bibliotherapy, bibliotherapy, mental health, and the role of librarians. Second, the literature was selected based on its relevance and relevance to the topic, with publication dates from at least the last 10 years (2015-2025). This search resulted in 44 articles, consisting of 18 national and

26 international articles, all meeting the inclusion criteria and originating from peer-reviewed journals. The selection of these 44 articles was based on the principle of conceptual saturation, which indicates that the analyzed literature demonstrates recurring and consistent thematic patterns related to the role of librarians, bibliotherapy practices, and nonclinical limitations. Therefore, this number was deemed sufficient to construct a representative conceptual synthesis without sacrificing analytical depth.

Unlike a traditional SLR, all collected literature was verified for relevance before downloading, eliminating duplication of articles, which was minimized through initial screening and manual verification. Third, the selected literature was analyzed using content analysis techniques. Literature analysis was conducted through a thematic categorization process by grouping research findings into several main themes, namely: (1) forms and approaches to bibliotherapy, (2) reported psychological impacts, (3) roles and competencies of librarians, and (4) institutional contexts of bibliotherapy implementation. The synthesis process was conducted interpretively to identify patterns, gaps, and differences in focus between national and international research. Next, the relationships between themes were analyzed interpretively to build theoretical synthesis arguments. Through these stages, this Systematic Literature Review is expected to produce a comprehensive conceptual synthesis regarding the role of librarians as facilitators of mental health through bibliotherapy in the library environment. The flow of the systematic literature review (SLR) research implementation is presented in Figure 1 in more detail below:
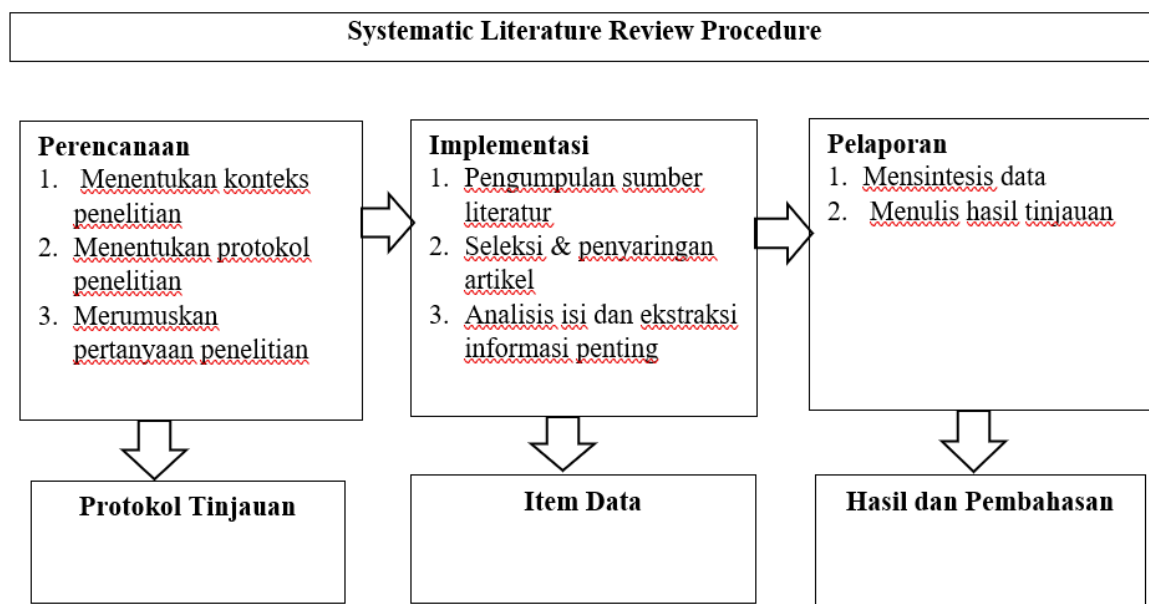

Figure 1. Flowchart of Systematic Literature Review (SLR) implementation based on PRISMA 2020

The implementation flow of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) in this study was designed by adapting the PRISMA 2020 principles and the conceptual systematic review approach, as presented in Figure 1. Through these stages, the systematic literature review can produce a comprehensive conceptual synthesis regarding the function of librarians as facilitators in mental health through bibliotherapy in the library environment. (Page et al. 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bibliotherapy as Nonclinical Support

Various literature studies have shown that bibliotherapy is considered an expressive therapy that utilizes individual interactions with books or other reading materials as a means of reflection, meaning-making, and supporting emotional recovery. As revealed in the literature findings (Solikin) entitled "Bibliotherapy as a Technique in Guidance and Counseling Services," reading activities in the context of bibliotherapy are not passive but rather systematically directed to help readers connect the reading content to their personal experiences. This process provides a space for individuals to better understand themselves, channel repressed emotions, and develop new insights that can influence attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to become more adaptive.

Based on the literature review, research findings indicate that bibliotherapy consistently has a positive impact on individuals' psychological well-being, particularly in terms of emotional management, self-awareness, and reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression (Nazi, Ali, and Akhouri 2023). National studies generally position bibliotherapy as a reflection tool that is easily accessible in educational settings and libraries. On the other hand, international studies, particularly those using experimental designs and randomized controlled trials, have shown that bibliotherapy can produce significant and measurable psychological changes in both clinical and nonclinical contexts (Yontz-Orlando 2017). Although most studies demonstrate the positive impact of bibliotherapy, the approach and focus of the results vary from study to study. International studies generally emphasize the effectiveness of bibliotherapy (Monroy-Fraustro et al. 2021) using quantitative indicators, such as reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress scores, and the long-term sustainability of the intervention's impact (Lin 2024). Meanwhile, national studies focus more on the subjective experiences of users, the reflective value of reading, and the preventive role of bibliotherapy in addressing academic and social stress. These differences indicate that the effectiveness of bibliotherapy is not universal, but is strongly influenced by the intervention design, support methods, and the institutional context in which it is implemented. These findings are supported by a systematic analytical review conducted by Glavin and Montgomery (2017), which showed that creative bibliotherapy, particularly in the context of trauma and PTSD, produces variable results across studies, emphasizing the importance of intervention design, facilitation methods, and limiting the role of non-clinical practitioners in its practice.

Bibliotherapy is characterized by its simplicity, affordability, and flexibility, making it accessible to a wide range of communities (Nur Nafisa et al., 2024). Unlike clinical interventions that require expertise and a formal therapy structure, bibliotherapy can be conducted independently or with minimal assistance. Therefore, bibliotherapy is relevant as initial support in mental health contexts, especially for individuals who have not or are reluctant to access formal psychological services (Zanal Abidin, Shaifuddin, and Wan Mohd Saman 2023). In the library context, developmental bibliotherapy is the most appropriate method. This approach positions reading as a medium for self-development, preventing emotional problems, and also as a form of strengthening individual abilities in facing the challenges of everyday life.

Developmental bibliotherapy is not intended to treat serious psychological disorders, but rather to help individuals understand emotions, improve coping skills, and broaden self-understanding (Hasfera, 2018). Thus, this method aligns with the educational and social functions of libraries as lifelong learning spaces. Findings in the literature written by (Rahmah,

2025) entitled "Designing a Bibliotherapy Book as an Educational Medium for Self-Loathing Behavior for Adolescents Aged 18 to 21 Years" show that bibliotherapy can have beneficial effects in various population contexts, especially for adolescents and younger adults. Many studies also note improvements in interpersonal communication skills, emotional regulation, and a reduction in negative behavioral tendencies after reading-based interventions, one of which is the literature findings written by (Silvia Rahmasela & Fitniwillis, 2023) entitled "The Effectiveness of Bibliotherapy Techniques in Building Interpersonal Relationships among Adolescents at the Sedekah Mulia Indonesia Foundation". Reflectively designed reading has proven effective in helping individuals recognize emotions, understand the root of problems, and find more positive alternative perspectives.

These findings have strengthened the understanding that books serve not only as sources of information but also as a medium that can support a person's emotional recovery process. However, in 2011, Cuijpers revealed in a literature study written by Alicia titled "Online self-help interventions are less effective in reducing depression: A meta-analysis," that meta-analyses have shown that the effectiveness of stand-alone bibliotherapy in reducing depressive symptoms is generally low to moderate, although statistically significant results are present (Yudiarso et al., 2023). These findings align with international research that considers bibliotherapy as a supportive, non-pharmacological intervention, not a substitute for professional mental health services. Monroy-Fraustro et al. (2021) state that bibliotherapy is most effective when viewed as a complementary form of psychological support that strengthens individual independence, reduces stigma, and is conducted within a firm ethical framework. Thus, bibliotherapy should be viewed as part of a literacy-oriented mental health support ecosystem.

The varying results from these studies can be understood through a developmental bibliotherapy approach, which differentiates bibliotherapy practice in libraries from formal clinical therapy. In this approach, reading is viewed as a reflective and preventative process, encompassing stages of identification, catharsis, and gaining new insights (Canty 2017). The goal of developmental bibliotherapy is to enhance emotional literacy, psychological resilience, and personal meaning, making it more appropriately considered a supportive intervention within a community framework, rather than an alternative to professional mental health services (Foresta 2021). These differences in approach demonstrate that bibliotherapy cannot be understood as a neutral and universal intervention, but rather as a contextual practice whose effectiveness depends heavily on service design and the role of non-clinical facilitators.

The Role of Librarians as Facilitators

Literature findings indicate that librarians' roles include facilitating access to reflective reading, curating thematic collections, and serving as non-clinical supporters in bibliotherapy practices. However, interpretations of these functions vary across studies. Research conducted at the national level generally emphasizes the social and educational aspects of librarians as providers of safe spaces and relevant information resources. Meanwhile, international studies emphasize the importance of maintaining professional boundaries, the need for more specific training, and cross-professional collaboration with mental health professionals to ensure that bibliotherapy practices remain ethical and safe (Giannakopoulou et al. 2022). Furthermore, experimental studies and randomized controlled trials (Hazlett-Stevens and Oren 2017) indicate that bibliotherapy therapy has a more meaningful effect when combined with targeted support, whether through regular follow-up, group meetings, or facilitated reflection by a

competent individual (Phul, Gorring, and Stokes 2024). These results emphasize the role of librarians as active facilitators, rather than passive providers of collections.

In the context of developmental bibliotherapy, librarians play a crucial role as key non-clinical facilitators, bridging users with reflective reading resources. The implementation of bibliotherapy in the library environment has required changes and development in the role of librarians. Librarians no longer function solely as collection managers but also as facilitators of information and emotional literacy (Agustina, 2015). This changing role reflects a shift in the library's function, from being a repository of information to a social space that addresses the psychosocial needs of its users. Librarians play a highly strategic role in providing relevant reading materials to users as part of the facilitator role in developmental bibliotherapy (Conzizca & Saputra, 2025). This role begins with collection curation, which involves selecting and categorizing literature on topics such as mental health, self-development, and emotional well-being.

Appropriate curation allows users to find reading materials that meet their needs without disclosing their personal circumstances, reducing feelings of awkwardness and stigma. Beyond curation, librarians also play a role in facilitating access to and utilization of information resources. Librarians play a role in assisting users in navigating relevant and credible information through reading recommendation services, thematic exhibitions, and the development of targeted reading lists as part of supporting information literacy and user well-being (Morin & Lavertu, 2025). Thus, librarians in this context function as literacy mediators, ensuring that the information users access is not only available but also meaningful and reflective.

Librarians also play a role in facilitating safe and non-judgmental reading-based group discussions (McCaffrey, 2016). Therefore, such reading-based discussions, particularly among adolescents and students, can enable the exchange of experiences, emotional validation, and social learning through narrative. Therefore, the librarian's role in these discussions extends beyond providing psychological interpretations, but also fosters positive and open discussions (De Vries et al., 2017). In line with this, Susanti Agustina has discussed in her journal entitled "The Concept of Bibliotherapy in Library Science" that the role of librarians as bibliotherapy facilitators requires adequate mastery of non-technical skills. Emotional literacy, empathy, interpersonal communication skills, and sensitivity to the diverse backgrounds of users are important skills that can enable librarians to build supportive professional relationships while maintaining the boundaries of their non-clinical roles. This finding strengthens the position of librarians not as therapeutic actors, but as mediators of emotional literacy who work within the professional and ethical boundaries of library institutions.

Challenges of Professionalism and Ethics

Susanti Agustina also stated in her journal that although bibliotherapy offers various opportunities for libraries to support mental health, its practical application presents ethical and professional challenges that require serious consideration. The main challenge lies in defining the boundaries of the librarian's role so that their functions do not exceed their professional capabilities. Librarians need to recognize that they are not mental health professionals and do not have the authority to make diagnoses, clinical assessments, or therapeutic interventions. Therefore, librarians should act as facilitators through readings that encourage reflection, rather than as therapists or counselors in bibliotherapy practice.

Therefore, to avoid ethical risks for users and the institution, it is crucial for librarians to understand and maintain these role boundaries.

In addition to role boundaries, protecting user confidentiality and privacy is also a crucial ethical aspect. Hasfera, D, discusses in her journal, "Bibliotherapy: Counseling Guidance Services in Libraries," that the principles of confidentiality and respect for individual autonomy must be applied in interactions within bibliotherapy services, especially when involving personal discussions or recommendations. Therefore, libraries need to create a safe, inclusive, and stigma-free environment so that users feel comfortable utilizing these services (Kusuma Wardhani, 2024). Therefore, in the context of implementing bibliotherapy in libraries, which presents ethical and professional challenges, specialized training for librarians is increasingly important (Sara, 2025). Through this training, librarians will not become therapists but will equip them with a basic understanding of mental health, non-clinical service ethics, and appropriate referral procedures. To ensure that bibliotherapy services are implemented responsibly and sustainably, collaboration with professionals such as psychologists or campus counselors is also essential (Nafisa Salsabila, 2024).

By integrating national and international research findings, this article emphasizes that bibliotherapy is a practice grounded in literacy and has a solid scientific foundation, and is highly relevant for development in library environments. Theoretically, the results of this study indicate that bibliotherapy in a library environment can be considered not only as a reading-based intervention, but as a socio-therapeutic practice that is closely related to the mediative function of librarians, the institutional context of the library, and the ethical relationship between librarians and users. Therefore, the success of bibliotherapy is influenced not only by the content of the reading, but also by how librarians support the reflection process, maintain non-clinical role boundaries, and create a safe space for users. This study shows that librarians can play a significant role in supporting users' mental health, as long as bibliotherapy is carried out as a non-clinical practice, conducted ethically, and integrated within a collaborative network with other professionals. Therefore, this study not only proves the effectiveness of bibliotherapy, but also enriches the discussion in the discipline of Library and Information Science about the changing role of librarians in the context of mental well-being.

CONCLUSION

Theoretically, this study strengthens the role of libraries as social therapeutic spaces and emphasizes the role of librarians as crucial individuals in implementing non-clinical mental health support through developmentally focused bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy, specifically developmental bibliotherapy, is a non-clinical approach with the potential to support mental health through the use of reflective reading in the library environment. This approach enables individuals, particularly students, to understand their emotions, develop coping skills and manage emotions in the face of challenges, and independently improve their psychological well-being. With its accessibility, low cost, and minimal stigma, bibliotherapy can be a relevant form of initial support to complement formal mental health services.

However, the practice of bibliotherapy in libraries also presents ethical challenges that require critical examination. The findings in this article are relevant as a basis for developing library-based bibliotherapy services in Indonesia, particularly in higher education settings. Therefore, to implement bibliotherapy in libraries, the role of librarians is transformed into facilitators of emotional literacy, conducted professionally and ethically. Librarians play a role

in curating reading materials, providing access to information, and creating safe spaces for users, without exceeding the boundaries of their non-clinical roles (Karki et al. 2024). Bibliotherapy can be a relevant strategy in Indonesian higher education libraries to address limited counseling services and student mental health issues (Sharma and Tandon 2023). Theoretically, this article contributes to expanding the study of library and information science by positioning bibliotherapy as part of emotional literacy practices and psychological well-being for users. The conceptual framework developed adds depth to the discussion regarding the transformation of the librarian's role from information providers to literacy-based mental health advocates, particularly within the context of academic libraries in developing countries like Indonesia.

In line with the conceptual limitations of this study, a more empirical and applicable follow-up research agenda is needed. Practically, the findings in this article can serve as a reference for university libraries in designing bibliotherapy services integrated with information literacy programs and services for users. These practical implications include the need to increase librarian capacity, develop ethical guidelines for bibliotherapy services, and strengthen interprofessional collaboration with counselors, psychologists, and other mental health professionals to ensure services remain non-clinical and accountable (Lenstra and Roberts 2023). However, this article still has several limitations because it is conceptually based on the literature and therefore does not examine the in-depth implementation of bibliotherapy empirically in the field. Therefore, future research is recommended to develop more empirical and focused studies, such as case studies on the implementation of bibliotherapy in university libraries, experimental or qualitative research on user experiences, and evaluations of the effectiveness of the librarian's role as a bibliotherapy facilitator in supporting student mental health.

SUGGESTION

Based on the literature analysis presented in this article, several suggestions can be put forward for developing bibliotherapy in library contexts, particularly in high-skill library environments. First, it is recommended that libraries begin developing developmentally based bibliotherapy services by curating reflective reading collections, creating themed reading lists, and providing comfortable and safe reading spaces for patrons. This service can be seen as non-clinical mental health support that is both preventative and promotive. Second, it is crucial for librarians to undergo ongoing training that covers emotional literacy skills, interpersonal communication, and an understanding of the fundamentals of mental health and the ethics of non-clinical services. This training is essential to strengthen librarians' positions as facilitators of bibliotherapy without violating professional boundaries and clinical responsibilities.

Third, collaboration between libraries and mental health professionals, such as psychologists or counselors, is highly recommended, particularly in developing service guidelines, establishing referral mechanisms, and managing ethical risks. This collaboration aims to ensure that bibliotherapy is implemented in libraries in a safe, responsible, and sustainable manner. Fourth, future researchers need empirical research that examines the direct application of bibliotherapy in libraries, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. This further research is expected to be able to evaluate the effectiveness, practical challenges, and impact of bibliotherapy on the psychological well-being of visitors in more depth.

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