A Bibliotherapy Guide
by LitTherapy

Find fiction prescriptions and feel better with books!
Hello from the LitTherapy team!

Here’s our definition of bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is all about feeling good with books: reading great novels, stories and poems to help us through difficult situations, feelings and ways of thinking.

It’s about nurturing our sense of wellbeing and feeling better about ourselves. Reading is one of the best ways to relax and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet too (Mindlab International at the University of Sussex have said it can even reduce stress by 68%).

What’s more, reading fiction is one of the easiest ways to relate to others when we feel isolated. Also, as we get to know characters, we get to know ourselves.

Bibliotherapy is a lifelong companion to all those who welcome it. You don’t have to sign-up for anything or hit rock-bottom before you consider it, simply pick up a book.

We think bibliotherapy should be social

At LitTherapy, we know how handy bibliotherapy can be. However, we’re convinced that making it social is even more powerful. By sharing and discussing books, we can get through problems together and share our experiences. Also, what better way to find our future favourite books?

It’s important to remember:

Bibliotherapy is NOT a replacement for therapy and professional help. While it can be a great way to help you out with day-to-day problems, if you’re suffering from persistent, or severe, low mood, anxiety or other mental health issues, we persuade you to seek out the help that’s available first. Check out Mind.org.uk or contact your GP for more.
Bibliotherapy? What can I use it for?

Ever picked up a lighthearted novel when you’re feeling down? Unexpectedly found solutions to your own problems in a novel? Taken a detour to the bookshop on a difficult day? Well, you’ve indulged in a bit of bibliotherapy already!

You can use bibliotherapy for:

- Everyday problems, e.g. struggling with procrastination before an exam
- Difficult feelings, e.g. feeling homesick
- Challenging situations, e.g. having a disagreement with someone at work
- Preparing for a big day
- Anxious feelings or low-mood (alongside professional help for more serious issues)

Briefly jot down some answers to these questions:

What have I been stressed about lately? *(managing anxiety)*

________________________________________________________________________

Is there a problem going on in my life that I’d like to be able to solve? *(solving problems)*

________________________________________________________________________

Have I been feeling worn-out and overworked? *(overcoming exhaustion)*

________________________________________________________________________

Have I been getting enough time to relax? *(overcoming exhaustion)*

________________________________________________________________________

How well do I know myself, my dreams and my goals at the moment? *(knowing yourself)*

________________________________________________________________________

What negative feelings have I been facing in the last two weeks? *(depression/low mood)*

________________________________________________________________________
Let's compare bookshelves

The book I’ll always remember relaxing with on holiday is…
*The Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson

The book I’ve recommended most to other people is…
*Where’d You Go, Bernadette?* by Maria Semple

The book I’ve always wanted to read again is…
*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

The character I can relate to most is…
*Elizabeth Bennett in Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

The book I have fondest memories of reading is…
*Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* by Louis de Bernieres

So, what's important to you in a novel?

- Reading an uplifting, positive novel that makes me feel good
- Finding something I can relate to, even if it’s less positive
- Escaping from reality into some really great writing

Based on the books you’ve listed above, consider:

Are there any you’d like to re-read?
Are there any books by the same author you haven’t read yet?
Which books would you like to find similar ones to?
Let's put a bibliotherapy plan together

Now it’s time to put our thinking into practice and create a bibliotherapy plan for you. Turn back to page 3, where you answered some questions about what’s going on in your life and how you’re feeling. Think about your answers, and check which of the following you need a bit of work on:

- Solving problems
- Overcoming exhaustion
- Managing anxiety
- Knowing yourself
- Depression and low mood

We’ll start with these in the table below. You might want to prescribe yourself books for each category, or just focus on one, two or a few: it’s all up to you.

In the Books to re-read column, turn back to page 4 and think about which books you said you’d like to read again. Also, browse the categories on LitTherapy.com to jog your memory: you might come across a long-lost novel which is waiting to be picked up again!

Next, in the Authors to explore column, note down some favourite authors you’d like to read more of. Finally, browse LitTherapy to fill in the New books to try column, or look at the A-Z list towards the end of this guide for inspiration.

Example Fiction Prescriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Books to re-read</th>
<th>Authors to explore</th>
<th>New books to try</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solving problems</td>
<td>Some Sherlock Holmes short stories</td>
<td>Arthur Conan Doyle Robert Galbraith</td>
<td>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Stieg Larsson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming exhaustion</td>
<td>Wordsworth’s poetry</td>
<td>Bill Bryson</td>
<td>Edward Thomas’s poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing anxiety</td>
<td>Captain Corelli’s Mandolin</td>
<td>Jonas Jonasson</td>
<td>The Elegance of the Hedgehog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing yourself</td>
<td>Matilda by Roald Dahl</td>
<td>Alexander McCall Smith</td>
<td>Wild by Cheryl Strayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression and low mood</td>
<td>The Uncommon Reader by Alan Bennett</td>
<td>Stephen Fry</td>
<td>Notes from a Small Island by Bill Bryson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now it’s your go. There are a few empty rows in case you’d like to add some different feelings, situations or problems too.

### My Fiction Prescriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Books to re-read</th>
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</table>

Continue filling in the table with books and authors as you think of them.
Reading time is your time

Now that you have a list of books awaiting your attention, let’s plan how you can make the most out of your reading time.

My Reading Plan

My next book is going to be...

I’m reading this for (e.g. a feeling, situation or problem)...

I’m going to treat myself and...

☐ Settle down in a cozy reading nook where I won’t be disturbed
☐ Pour myself a warm hot chocolate, tea or coffee to enjoy with my book
☐ Take a trip to a local cafe or park to enjoy my reading time
☐ Ask a friend to read the book at the same time as me
☐ Write down my thoughts on the book in a reading journal or blog
My Reading Journal

To make the most of your reading time, try writing down your thoughts on the book, how it’s affecting your feelings, and how it can relate to you and your life. You could buy a journal particularly for your reading, or simply write down some thoughts here:

Since starting the book, I’ve felt…

Less anxious, like I have more time for myself, more optimistic about the future, the same

I can relate to these characters…

Boo Radley, because he’s quite isolated

The book’s made me think that…

I should maybe spend more time outdoors like the characters do

I’m really enjoying the fact that…

The book is set in South Africa, a place I’ve always wanted to visit

Although I don’t like this about the book…

It’s quite long - maybe I should try something shorter next
Finding your next novel

With each book you read, you find out more and more about your reading tastes. After finishing a book, ask yourself...

Next, I'd like to read something:

- Funnier
- More serious
- Longer
- Shorter
- More relatable
- More imaginative
- From a different era
- From a new genre
- By the same author

Candidates for my next book include:


By thinking this through, you’ll understand more about how you’re feeling and what books will match your present feelings and position in life.
Making reading a habit

Now that you’ve started nourishing yourself with a bit of bibliotherapy, the next step is making it a habit. Here are some ideas of how to make it happen:

- **Make a list of the books you've always wanted to read**, or the books you've heard good things about. Carry it with you.
- **Always carry a book with you**. Choose one that you actually enjoy reading, and one that isn't too hard to read small amounts of at a time. Remember to read while you're waiting for appointments, public transport, or during any empty time slots. If the book you're carrying isn't one you look forward to reading, change it.
- **Dedicate set times to reading**. Perhaps before lunch, while the kettle is boiling, or in bed before you call it a day.
- **Start a book blog**. Share your literary meditations with others. This is time consuming, but it adds another level to your reading.
- **Set goals**, but don’t make reading a chore.
- **Keep records**. Try Goodreads, or perhaps a reading journal.
- **Read compelling books**. And don't worry about "guilty pleasures".
- **Don't be afraid to give up** on a book. If you don't find yourself wanting to read beyond the first fifty pages, don't force yourself.
- **Make it a shared activity**. Read at the same time as your partner, or read aloud to your kids.
- **Think about how much TV you watch**.
- **Schedule bookshop or library visits**. Make this a regular part of your week, and allow yourself to look forward to quietly browsing through recent paperbacks or your favourite genres.
- **If you find an author or genre you love, find more**. Read series, prequels, and similar texts.
- **Make reading a joyful experience**. Settle down with a cup of tea and a biscuit, and class it as dedicated time to treat yourself.
- **Find your reading nook**. Make it comfy, quiet, and free from distractions (laptops and phones included).
- **Learn to immerse yourself** in a good book. After getting the important things done for the day, let yourself focus solely on a good book. Remember that minor chores can wait.
A-Z Bibliotherapy Recommendations

To get you started, here are some recommendations for a variety of different feelings and situations.

Look through the categories that apply to you and see if any books grab your attention. Maybe you’ve read something by the author before, or perhaps you’ve heard good things from friends about a certain book. Put a note next to any books that you think might help you out.

You can consider doing a bit of research into the books you shortlist to make sure they’re right for you - there are so many reviews and blog posts available online. Also, to find more books, check out the fiction prescriptions on LitTherapy.

P= poem  
NF= non-fiction

overcoming abuse – these books may trigger if you’ve experienced trauma, so approach carefully

The Kite Runner - Khaled Hosseini  
Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption - Stephen King  
Once in a House on Fire - Andrea Ashworth  
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings - Maya Angelou  
The Bad Beginning - Lemony Snicket

Accepting yourself

The Little Prince - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry  
The Rosie Project - Graeme Simsion  
A Little Princess - Frances Hodgson Burnett

Dealing with addiction

Requiem for a Dream - Hubert Selby Jr.  
Candy - Luke Davies  
A Scanner Darkly - Philip K. Dick  
Naked Lunch - William S. Burroughs  
Trainspotting - Irvine Welsh

Have more ambition

The Complete Sherlock Holmes - Arthur Conan Doyle  
The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden - Jonas Jonasson

Managing anxiety
Haikus of Basho
The Unbearable Lightness of Being - Milan Kundera
Collected Poems - William Wordsworth
Collected Poems - Edward Thomas
The Turn of the Screw - Henry James
War and Peace - Leo Tolstoy
The Enchanted April - Elizabeth von Arnim
The Lake Isle of Innisfree - W. B. Yeats (P)
In Search of Lost Time - Marcel Proust
Howards End - E.M. Forster
The Elegance of the Hedgehog - Muriel Barbery

**Challenging childhoods**
Once in a House on Fire - Andrea Ashworth
Angela's Ashes - Frank McCourt
When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit - Judith Kerr
Oliver Twist - Charles Dickens
Lord of the Flies - William Golding
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings - Maya Angelou
Mister Pip - Lloyd Jones
The Wasp Factory - Iain Banks

**Defining right and wrong**
To Kill a Mockingbird - Harper Lee
The Great Gatsby - F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Merchant of Venice - William Shakespeare
A Certain Justice - P.D. James

**Managing and overcoming low mood and depression**
The Chronicles of Narnia - C.S. Lewis
Three Men in a Boat - Jerome K. Jerome
The Blandings Short Stories - P.G. Wodehouse
The Uncommon Reader - Alan Bennett
Captain Corelli's Mandolin - Louis de Bernières
When God Was a Rabbit - Sarah Winman
The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency - Alexander McCall Smith
All Creatures Great and Small - James Herriot
High Fidelity - Nick Hornby
Forrest Gump - Winston Groom
The Enchanted April - Elizabeth von Arnim
The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared - Jonas Jonasson
The Little Prince - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
The Funny Side: 101 Humorous Poems - Wendy Cope
Various Pets Alive and Dead - Marina Lewycka
The BFG – Roald Dahl
The Harry Potter Series - J.K. Rowling
Siddhartha - Hermann Hesse
The Silver-Linings Playbook - Matthew Quick
Selected Poems - Edward Thomas

Disability: understanding and helping others
House Rules - Jodi Picoult
Human Traces - Sebastian Faulks
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time - Mark Haddon
The Memory Keeper's Daughter - Kim Edwards
Forrest Gump - Winston Groom

Dealing with exclusion
Noughts and Crosses - Malorie Blackman
To Kill a Mockingbird - Harper Lee
Notes From Underground - Fyodor Dostoevsky
The Waves - Virginia Woolf
Jane Eyre - Charlotte Brontë
The Catcher in the Rye - J.D. Salinger
1984 - George Orwell
The Little Prince - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
The Great Gatsby - F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Lady of Shalott - Alfred Lord Tennyson (P)
Life of Pi - Yann Martel
Collected Poems - Emily Dickinson

Overcoming a fear of death
The Death of Ivan Ilyich - Leo Tolstoy
The Fault in Our Stars - John Green
The Lovely Bones - Alice Sebold
The Rain Before it Falls - Jonathan Coe
Life After Life - Kate Atkinson
One Hundred Years of Solitude - Gabriel García Márquez
The Elegance of the Hedgehog - Muriel Barbery
Tuesdays with Morrie - Mitch Albom (NF)

On growing up
Peter Pan - J.M. Barrie
The Catcher in the Rye - J.D. Salinger
The Perks of Being a Wallflower - Stephen Chbosky
The Harry Potter Series - J.K. Rowling
Life of Pi – Yann Martel
Kafka on the Shore - Haruki Murakami

Heartbreak and questions of the heart
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button - F. Scott Fitzgerald
Anna Karenina - Leo Tolstoy
Pride and Prejudice - Jane Austen
Looking for Alaska - John Green
The Love Letters - Madeleine L'Engle

Managing homesickness
Star of the Sea - Joseph O'Connor
A Game of Thrones - George R.R. Martin
Edward Thomas's "Home" poems (there are three)

Dealing with illness
How to be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers - Toni Bernhard (NF)
My Sister's Keeper - Jodi Picoult
The Secret Garden - Frances Hodgson Burnett
The Fault in Our Stars - John Green
The Enchanted April – Elizabeth von Arnim

Knowing yourself
Great Expectations - Charles Dickens
Life of Pi – Yann Martel
The Unbearable Lightness of Being – Milan Kundera
Leaves of Grass - Walt Whitman (P)
Wild - Cheryl Strayed (NF)

overcoming low self-esteem
Jane Eyre - Charlotte Bronte
The Last Runaway - Tracy Chevalier
Essays - Michel de Montaigne (NF)
Meditations - Marcus Aurelius (NF)
The Fry Chronicles - Stephen Fry (NF)

Dealing with loss
Luke and Jon - Robert Williams
The Toys - Coventry Patmore (P)
Toby's Room - Pat Barker
Home Burial - Robert Frost (P)
P.S. I Love You - Cecelia Ahern
Tolstoy and the Purple Chair: My Year of Magical Reading - Nina Sankovitch (NF)
Gilgamesh

on moving on
Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption - Stephen King
Star of the Sea - Joseph O'Connor
The Great Gatsby - F. Scott Fitzgerald
P.S. I Love You - Cecelia Ahern

Finding inspiration
Oh, the Places You’ll Go! - Dr. Seuss
The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it For Life - Twyla Tharp (NF)
Siddhartha - Hermann Hesse
A Tale of Two Cities - Charles Dickens
The Secret Garden - Frances Hodgson Burnett
A Room of One's Own - Virginia Woolf
One Hundred Years of Solitude - Gabriel García Márquez

Need for solitude
Walden, or Life in the Woods - Henry David Thoreau
The Solitary Summer - Elizabeth von Arnim
A Room of One's Own - Virginia Woolf

Life after Trauma (may trigger, particularly those marked with an asterisk)
Ulysses - Tennyson (P)
Birdsong - Sebastian Faulks*
Toby's Room - Pat Barker*
Regeneration Trilogy - Pat Barker*
The Perks of Being a Wallflower - Stephen Chbosky
Collected Poems - Wilfred Owen*
Mrs. Dalloway - Virginia Woolf** (if you have PTSD, approach carefully)
Hamlet - William Shakespeare
Slaughterhouse Five - Kurt Vonnegut*
The Horse Whisperer - Nicholas Evans
Mr Vertigo - Paul Auster
Beloved - Toni Morrison*
Remainder - Tom McCarthy
Healing without Freud or Prozac - Dr. David Servan-Schreiber (NF)

**Perfectionism**

Childhood, Boyhood, Youth - Leo Tolstoy
The Bell Jar - Sylvia Plath

**Persevering through hardship**

The Odyssey - Homer
The Count of Monte Cristo - Alexandre Dumas
The Horse Whisperer - Nicholas Evans
The House of the Spirits - Isabel Allende
Ithaca - Constantine P. Cavafy (P)
Life of Pi - Yann Martel
Half of a Yellow Sun - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
The Bookseller of Kabul - Åsne Seierstad
A Thousand Splendid Suns - Khaled Hosseini
The Help - Kathryn Stockett
Room - Emma Donoghue
The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas - John Boyne
The Garden of Evening Mists - Tan Twan Eng
The Handmaid's Tale - Margaret Atwood
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo - Stieg Larsson
Discourses and Selected Writings by Epictetus (NF)

**Questions of race**

On Beauty - Zadie Smith
The Help - Kathryn Stockett
The Color Purple - Alice Walker

**Search for beauty and meaning**

The God of Small Things - Arundhati Roy
War and Peace - Leo Tolstoy
"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" - W.B. Yeats (P)
The Alchemist - Paulo Coelho
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting - Milan Kundera
Siddhartha - Hermann Hesse
Momo - Michael Ende
Man's Search for Meaning - Victor Frankl (NF)
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values - Robert M. Pirsig (NF)
For more information on bibliotherapy, check out

**LitTherapy** - our bibliotherapy network and recommendation site

**Tolstoy Therapy** - Lucy from LitTherapy’s blog, including articles on her experience of using bibliotherapy for PTSD and anxiety

**Reading Psychology** - A great blog on the connections between reading, wellbeing and psychology

**The Reading Agency** - a brilliant charity helping everyone to become enthusiastic readers

Here’s some great research into bibliotherapy and reading

Fiction as a simulation of life and the benefits of making reading social:

Reading fiction as a way to improve our social skills:

“Losing yourself” in a book may change your behaviour and thoughts:

Reading as a way to reduce stress by up to 68%:
- *Research by Mindlab International* at the University of Sussex, March 2009

Reading as an activity associated with lower levels of dementia:

Reading can help you to be more comfortable with change: