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Reading and Health Benefits

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Abstract

Introduction: A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. According to scientists, reading offers very tangible benefits for our health except for life cultivation, formation of a person's soul and broadening of our horizons.

Purpose: This review aims at delving into the effects of reading and studying in order to promote health and quality of life.

Review methods: The material of the study has been recent articles concerning the subject. They have been mainly found via electronic databases Medline, Google Scholar and the Hellenic academic libraries Link (HEAL-Link). 30 reference sources were included.

Results: Reading is a most beneficial exercise for our brain and mind as it could help the human brain perform all its functions as properly as possible. When people read on a regular basis, they force their minds to think more; as a result, it enables reader to be more insightful. It should be noted that reading is a complex process during which, we use both hemispheres of the brain. At the same time, the Corpus Callosum, which is the tissue that connects the two hemispheres, is activated. Thereby, it contributes to a better exchange of information between them. Reading can be beneficial even for the respiratory or cardiovascular system owing to the fact that it activates the frontal lobe, from which all the automatic functions of the body, such as breathing or the heart function, depend on.

Conclusion: Generally, a book seeks nothing, in return, from the reader, as it patiently waits to offer its information, take a person out of a predicament and transport a reader to magical worlds.

Keywords: Reading; Spare time; Reading books; Health

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Introduction

Leisure time is an essential chapter in human life. It is a period of time spent not only out of work but also without housework. It is the time period before or after daily routines, such as eating, sleeping and working [1]. A person can engage in activities that may result in cultivation of human values and spiritual elevation through discussion, study and thought, through the pursuit of knowledge, of dialectic, political and cultural enlightenment [2,3].

In their spare time, young people usually choose the TV and the computer that are common entertainment and training modes, for they do not only help people relax and entertain but also they are key factors in shaping adolescents' personality of character [4].

Regarding young people's spare time, study that is pursued mostly on educationalists' or parents' demand, or study that gets freely on their own initiative can be integrated. The first case includes homework, remedial courses and foreign languages, while the second case includes the independent reading of books, newspapers and magazines, aimed at keeping informed or entertained due to the fact that their instructive role is secondary [5,6].

Reading is a most beneficial exercise for our brain and mind as it could help the human brain perform all its functions as properly as possible. When people read on a regular basis, they force their minds to think more; as a result, it enables reader to be more insightful [7].

Actually, it is manifested that reading is a complex process during which, individuals use both hemispheres of their brain. At the same time, the Corpus Callosum, which is the tissue that connects the two hemispheres, is activated. Thereby, it contributes to a better exchange of information between them. Reading can be beneficial even for the respiratory or cardiovascular system owing to the fact that reading activates the frontal lobe, on which all the automatic functions of the body, such as breathing or the heart function, depend on [8,9].

According to scientists, reading offers very tangible benefits for our health except for life cultivation, formation of our soul and broadening of our horizons [10].

Purpose

This review aims at delving into the effects of reading and studying in order to promote health and quality of life.

Review Methods

Recent articles on the subject have been mainly found in Medline and Google Scholar electronic databases and the Hellenic academic libraries Link (HEAL-Link). They have been the material of the study, with the following keywords: reading, leisure, reading books and health. The language of the articles was the criterion for exclusion of articles except for Greek and English. Review articles and research ones have been found in the above-mentioned electronic databases for the preparation of the specific bibliographic review. Also, search via electronic databases (<http://google.com>) as well as finding information from scientific books have been performed. Finally, 30 reference sources were included.

Benefits of Reading Books

The benefits of reading are manifold and actually, they are substantiated through scientific research. Without the book, no man will know his course over the centuries. Libraries are "the memory of mankind" as books contain all the memorable events of the past. Obviously, any nation that does not know their history is doomed to extinction and spiritual lethargy because knowledge is power [11].

The book leads significantly to the completion of human personality. Readers gain valuable knowledge about the course of life and their imagination could be excited. It is a means of entertainment and, it generally appears as the person's best friend. It keeps individuals company throughout hours of boredom and loneliness [12].

Books are not just a means of entertainment, art and delving into people's spiritual horizons, but it is also a valuable tool to solve many kinds of problems people face in their lives [13].

Reading, as experts support, can help us fight obesity, relieve stress or even prevent Alzheimer's disease [14].

In particular:

1. **It helps the brain be protected:** According to scientists from the Neuroscience Center of Baltimore "who searched 112

employees at a factory in Canada that had high levels of lead in their blood due to prolonged exposure to the substance, the workers who were avid readers had suffered the least damage to their mental health and they sat more successfully the mental tests that the researchers submitted" [9].

2. **It helps people reduce stress:** According to a recent research from the University of Sussex, "even 6 minutes of reading a day is enough to reject the 2/3 of the daily stress a person faces. "Getting lost" within the pages of a book leads to absolute relaxation. Especially, according to experts, reading a book before bedtime is an activity that relaxes people and helps them deal with any stressful factors." Indeed, this method is considered very effective in treating anxiety [8].
3. **It helps concentration:** The regular reader of books acquires the ability to pay full attention to what he does and think practically, in an effective and objective way. It also develops the ability to make decisions and solve problems [8].
4. **It helps people combat insomnia:** The habit of reading books before sleeping helps regulate the body clock and send the signal to the brain that it is time to sleep [8].
5. **It helps dementia prevention:** The agitation caused to the brain due to reading may help prevent brain disorders including Alzheimer's disease. Researchers from the Mayo Clinic "in the US studied the daily habits of 200 people from 70 to 89 years with mild memory disorders, during different life stages. They found that middle-aged readers who devoted time to reading and other creative pursuits, such as handicrafts, faced 40% less risk of experiencing further memory impairment or Alzheimer's" [8].
6. **It helps treat strokes:** Reading, according to experts, makes the brain able to withstand any harm – even strokes-because it "obliges" readers to use alternative synapses, in other words, connections amongst brain neurons.
7. **It helps obesity prevention:** Experts from Duke's children's Hospital found that reading literary books can help obese kids slim down. "Scientists gave one novel titled "Lake Rescue" (saving the Lake) to obese girls aged 9-13 years old, who had already followed a slimming program, so as to read it. The novel was chosen carefully by pediatricians specifically for this purpose. The book's heroine was an obese girl with a very strong personality. After reading the book, the girls adopted a healthy lifestyle and managed to lose weight and reduce body mass index (BMI) after 6 months" [8].

Instructions for good reading

1. It is a prerequisite for constructive reading the chosen book be pleasant. For example, unless a person likes poetry, he must choose crime fiction.
2. The categories of books an individual reads can alternate, depending on his mood. As he does not have the desire for the same food every day, the same goes for reading. So, tastes ought to be adjusted according to the mood a person is in at that moment.

3. A reader should choose a quiet place with good illumination where he feels at ease.
4. A reader has to keep the book in the proper distance from his eyes so that he does not get tired because of reading. The ideal distance is 25-30 cm [8].

The book is anxiolytic. The book is not just an awakening from spiritual lethargy or a body of endless knowledge and information but it still offers mental and physical health; something that nowadays is very important.

Reading as a Treatment - Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy, although relatively unknown in Greece, is an existing technique, which is constantly becoming more and more popular. It is a method that has been established in the course of time in different sciences and arts and it aims at one thing: it helps people overcome all their personal problems, even health ones, every inner turmoil that often blocks their everyday lives and makes them feel sorrow, pessimism and loneliness through difficulties [15,16].

In particular, the term of bibliotherapy includes a variety of ways in which books can be used as a therapeutic aid to solve personal problems, guided by a specialist [17]. It is a medium through which literature is used to help people experience emotional and social difficulties [18].

The idea is not new. Inscriptions are, not only in Greece as the one of ancient Thebes, the other in the monastery of St. John the Theologian, but there are also abroad, such as in Switzerland, in the Stiftsbibliothek in St. Gallen. The inscription at the entrance of the ancient library of Thebes, which wrote "Place of care of the soul", states the common belief that reading books helps boost mental balance of a human being [19]. Indeed, Aristotle believed that reading benefits the emotional health of the reader [20].

The method of bibliotherapy is distinguished in four types due to its different objectives due to its applicability in many fields [21]:

1. **Clinical bibliotherapy:** Clinical bibliotherapy is used in the mental health field and engages in a more specific and targeted intervention to psychiatric patients [21].
2. **Developmental or otherwise, preventing bibliotherapy:** It can be used even at school for students to develop their personal skills and tackle learning difficulties [22].
3. **Reading bibliotherapy:** It is a method that functions as a self-assisting method for the reader while it is separated from communicative/interactive bibliotherapy, which is based on the conversation among readers as a fertile and constructive dialogue is produced [22].

4. Finally, **communicative/interactive bibliotherapy:** It is defined as the process of guided meetings whose aim is to assist participants to externalize emotions and respond cognitively to selected literary texts [17].

Bibliotherapy plays an important role because through this process, emotional change, personal improvement and development of the reader involved are promoted. It also helps people to enter mentally and emotionally into a safe experimental environment around interpersonal relationships [23].

The possibility of self-healing is potential when a reader reads a book. The treatment that is achieved through reading books belongs to the domain of psychoeducation. Psychoeducation helps people learn and understand what happens and why that happens. This procedure has only beneficial effects for anyone who suffers. Thereby contributing to rehabilitation of people's health, health promotion and protection. Thus, when someone reads about his illness, identifies himself; they can better control their reactions and concerns. Also, their fears reduce noticeably [24].

Well, bibliotherapy as a clinical treatment, appeals to people of all ages (the young, the old, children) that have a problem and need help to deal with it. However, it can work as a preventative measure just like preventive measures individuals take in order to avoid suffering from a virus. Psychoeducation seeks to develop people's self-esteem and prevent any problematic behaviour [25].

Conclusion

Reading is a dynamic act in which the reader is actively involved and has much relevance to thinking processes. It is a complex process because it combines both cognitive and mental functions of the person through the use of language, the ability of perception, processing and interpretation of the text, the ability to render meaning, etc. [24,25]. Bibliotherapy helps people solve emotional and psychological feelings, learning difficulties, and understand the world and their own [26].

Although there is a predominant view that young people should not be overloaded with excessive and laborious homework, which deprives them of the right to rest, enjoy, and exercise their interests freely, readers use their minds more, and thus, people become more insightful [27,28].

Generally, a book seeks nothing, in return, from the reader, as it patiently waits to offer its information, take a person out of a predicament and transport a reader to magical worlds. Let books give the gift of reading to people and their beloved ones; individuals must remember that a book can be a game, treasure, happiness and celebration [29,30].

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