

Read for Your Mental Health
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May is National Mental Health Awareness Month. It is a reminder, especially in the stress of a pandemic, to be aware of our own state of being and to be compassionate to the inner struggles of others around us. There are many well proven methods to provide boosts to your mental fortitude. Regular exercise is consistently shown to boost important chemicals in the brain to contribute to our mental and emotional wellness. Sleep is another important factor in maintaining awareness of and motivation for our moods and attitudes. A healthy diet provides the brain with the necessary nutrition for healthy function and helps to stave off brain impacting diseases. One activity that you may not have connected with improving your mental health is, you've probably guessed, reading.

Even though the idea of helping people's mental health through reading, called bibliotherapy, has been around since the 1960s, it is really in the past 15 years that medical and psychological research have shown the benefits of reading in more detail. The benefits of reading towards intellectual growth, informed decision making, and lifetime earnings are long established, but what does reading literally do to our brains? Modern technology is starting to give us some glimpses into just how powerful reading can be.

It turns out that when we are actively reading, our brains get all fired up. Reading, especially fiction, causes increased activity across multiple areas of the brain. In addition, it can strengthen neural connections in areas of the brain associated with processing emotion and sensory input. Reading has also been shown to slow or prevent cognitive decline in older adults. Reading about the experiences of others or even characters in fiction can actually enhance our empathy, the ability to understand one another and recognize our shared human experience.

It is amazing to me that our wondrously complex minds can be so impacted by the organized formation of shapes on paper. It reinforces for me the power of reading in helping us be, well, human. Even the most advanced artificial intelligences cannot make personal connections with the written word in an emotional way. Reading can't make them happy or sad. It can't satisfy or produce angst. For us though, reading allows our mind to connect to the words, ideas, and feelings of others who we may never have even met.

While preparing for this article, I read many quotes by famous persons about the power and impact of reading. Not surprisingly, there were too many to be included. As librarians, we hope you will take advantage of your freedom to read and the benefits it can bring to your life. We would love to see you in the library, and we're happy to connect you to your next book, that in turn, may just connect you more to yourself and what it is to be human.