

Bibliotherapy and Journaling as a Recovery Tool with African Americans with Substance Use Disorders

MICHAEL JOHNSON, MSW
JusticeQuade Institute, Southfield, Michigan, USA

This article describes the use of bibliotherapy and journaling as a recovery tool with African Americans with substance use disorders.

KEYWORDS *African-Americans, addictions, recovery, bibliotherapy, journaling*

Address correspondence to Michael Johnson, MSW, LMSW, JusticeQuade Institute, 30578 Southfield Road, Suite 252, Southfield, Michigan 48076. E-mail: jusquade@aol.com.

Bibliotherapy involves the therapeutic use of the content in books as therapy. A meta-analysis revealed that bibliotherapy in conjunction with other therapies can effectively reduce substance use (Apodaca and Miller, 2003). Bibliotherapy has been commonly used in conjunction with journaling. Journal therapy is the act of writing down thoughts and feelings to sort through problems and come to a deeper understanding of one's self and the core issues of one's life. Writing has been used as a recovery tool in addictions treatment for the past century (Kinney, 2006).

This author has developed a new model for working with African American clients with substance use disorders that integrates bibliography and journaling along with traditional treatment in order to help facilitate recovery. He often gives clients in early recovery homework assignments that involve assigned readings followed by journaling on those readings. These assignments are divided into several categories:

- Assignments to provide clients with basic recovery tools. Clients are asked to read chapters of the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous*, the Narcotics Anonymous basic text, and other books. Client may be asked to journal the insights they have gained by reading these texts, followed by discussions in future counseling sessions.
- Assignments that build hope. Many African American clients suffer from feeling of hopelessness (Bell and Evans, 1981). This hopelessness can be medicated by the use of alcohol and other drugs. Clients are often assigned chapters to read from biographies and autobiographies that are geared toward increasing hope. Examples include:

- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. This book tells the story of how Malcolm X went from a street hustler, pimp, and drug addict to a leader in long-term recovery.
- *Affena Shakur*. This is the biography of the mother of the slain rapper Tupac Shakur. The book tells the story of Affena Shakur's rise from poverty, imprisonment, and cocaine dependence toward long-term recovery. As a part of her recovery story, she is now director of the Tupac Shakur Foundation.
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Writers quickly discovered that Frederick Douglass was the first African American recovering alcoholic, who was involved in both the temperance movement led by Martha Washington, the nation's first First Lady and the temperance movement. Clients reading about the life of Frederick Douglass have made comments such as, "If Frederick Douglass was a recovering alcoholic, then those of us in recovery can't be bad people," or "It's nice to know that one of us has made such a difference in the world," or "If he could get sober without a 12-step group, what can I do with my own life?"
- Facing Life's Challenges. African American clients in early recovery face many challenges that can increase the risk of relapse. They are often assigned to read excerpts of biographies written about the lives of African Americans who faced more difficult challenges than they are currently facing, including notable individuals in history, such as Harriett Tubman,

Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Dubois, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Clients report in their journals that reading about the challenges faced by these great individuals in history lets them know that they are not alone in their struggles and that others before them have struggled and triumphed.

- Occupational support. As unemployment increases, so does drug use (Kinney, 2006). Drug use increases crime rates and the potential to receive felony convictions, which make it difficult to secure employment. The devastation that unemployment produces can trigger relapse (Kinney, 2006). African American clients in early recovery are assigned readings by successful African Americans who were able to succeed in spite of the odds. Examples include:
 - *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America*, the biography of Nathan McCall, which tells the story of how he rose from gang involvement and a life of crime to becoming a writer for *The Washington Post*. Clients reading his story report that they are inspired by the fact that his felony conviction did not keep him from achieving success.
 - Clients are assigned readings about Paul Robeson, who was a prominent singer, actor, playwright, professional athlete, orator, and activist. Clients learned that each time Robeson faced a roadblock, obstacle, ostracism, or racism, he would use one of his many talents in order to succeed.

- Exercises that increase self-love. Just as self-love can be a protective factor from self-harm, self-loathing and a negative racial identity can be a relapse trigger for African Americans (Bell and Evans, 1981). As Malcolm X stated, “The minute we started hating Africa, we started hating ourselves. You can’t hate the root and love the fruit” (Malcolm X, 1965). Clients who have been asked what this quote meant to them have often stated, “If I am to become sober, I have to work on loving myself.” They are often given assigned readings that speak of self-love, such as *The Community of Self*, by Na-im Akbar, Ph.D., *I Ain’t Much, Baby, but I’m All I Got*, by Jess Lair, Ph.D., and *World’s Greatest Men of Color*, Volumes 1 and 2, by J.A. Rogers. Clients are also assigned excerpts from writings about prominent Africans, such as Nelson Mandella, Shaka Zulu, and Imhopep.

Conclusion

In the early years of his life, Frederick Douglass was being taught to read by the wife of his slavemaster. When the slavemaster discovered what his wife was doing, he told her, “If you teach him to read, it will be hard to keep him a slave.” After her lessons discontinued, Frederick Douglass was still determined to learn to read. The slavemaster’s wife had taught him just enough for him to successfully induce white children to continue these lessons. Frederick would write a small word on a fence and ask a white child if he or she could top him by writing a bigger word. Then he would determine the meaning of the bigger word, until he gradually mastered the art of reading. Reading was a major part of his

liberation, and he expanded that liberation by writing his autobiography, written so well that many people during that era doubted that he actually wrote it. As the first prominent African American recovering alcoholic (White, Sanders, and Sanders, (2006), he has proved that reading and writing can be liberating for African Americans.

REFERENCES

- Apodaca, T.R., and Miller, W.R. (2003). A meta-analysis of Effectiveness of Bibliography for Alcohol Problems. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 59, 289-304.
- Bell, P. & Evans, J. (1981) *Counseling the black client: Alcohol use and abuse in Black America*. Minnesota: Hazelden Foundation.
- Haley, A. (1965). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*. New York: NY: The Ballantine Publishing Group.
- Kinney, J. (2006) *Loosening the Grip: A Handbook for Alcohol Information*, 8th Edition, Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- McCall, N. (1995). *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America*. New York, NY: Random House.
- White, W., Sanders, M., & Sanders, T. (2006, Oct.). Addiction in the African American community: The recovery legacies of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X. *Counselor*, Vol. 7.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Johnson, MSW, LMSW, is founder of the JusticeQuade Recovery Institute. He facilitates workshops and in-service trainings on chemical dependency issues covering early recovery, grief, acceptance, surrender, social skills, identifying the causes of relapse, cultural diversity, family issues, and eliminating job stress. He can be contacted at jusquade@aol.com.