

Book reading relieves stress

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Hard on the heels of my column about the value of music therapy comes a new report demonstrating that book-reading relieves stress even more effectively.

Apparently, it's the mix of relaxing and concentrating. Unlike art, music or theatre, book-reading demands total involvement, which is what achieves the important effect of escapism - literally 'losing yourself' in a book. You are lifted into a different world, partly of your own making. You are having to imagine for yourself the faces and voices, the rooms and their décor, the fictitious towns and villages. This complete distraction has been found to relax the tensions in the muscles and the heart, more effectively than other activities - awakening creative powers that would otherwise be quite dormant, thus refreshing and stimulating the mind.

The therapeutic value of reading had not especially occurred to me until I had to counsel one of the talent-scouts for a first-division football club, who was suffering stress because he felt that the game was being damaged by corruption.

Kenneth told me that he had entered the profession out of a genuine love of the sport but he'd started to detect unethical conduct. Then after an anonymous benefactor had donated a loan, he began to receive coded instructions to praise the footballing skills of this man's teenage son.

Kenneth studied the young fellow's performance with extra care, but could detect no sign of first-division quality. With deep reluctance, he compromised with a report that omitted most of the negative aspects. But he immediately felt that he'd compromised his own integrity and that lowered his self-esteem.

His descent into depression was swift, and I was soon attending him at a convalescent home, where I noticed a couple of novels left lying around the room. One of them was a fairly predictable story of a small-town girl arriving in New York and eventually conquering Wall Street.

The other was an old Thomas Hardy classic about a farm community on the South coast of England, living under the threat of an invasion by Napoleon.

I handed him the first one, thinking an easy read would take his mind off things. But he shook his head. Book-reading wasn't in his culture. Yet when I returned the next week, I was surprised to find him nearly at the end of the Hardy novel.

He said he'd started reading it as an endurance test - perhaps with a suggestion of self-punishment - purely because it looked difficult. Then he slowly found himself getting involved with the characters and wanting to know what happened next. It was literally the first time he had ever read a novel, and it did indeed awaken an unused part of his mind. On my advice, he quit the football world and invested in a small holiday boarding-house - notable for the interesting choice of novels to be found in all the lounges and bedrooms.

Key points : Therapeutic effect

- Reading can relieve stress better than music, walking or tea-breaks
- 'Escapism' rapidly eases the tensions of mind and body
- Readers of fiction benefit from stimulating the imagination.

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