

The many benefits of reading

Studies show it combats loneliness, reduces stress

By Jill Fuller

Almost every Friday on the Bridges Library System's Facebook page, we host a "Friday Book Chat" and ask a reading/book question for others to answer, such as "Which book character inspires you?" or "What's your favorite reading spot?" Last week, we asked, "How did reading benefit you in 2020?"

One person responded: "Books took me to places I wasn't able to travel to this year." Another response was: "Reading is my passion, but this past year, it has also been my distraction from the virus, the election, and too much nonsense in our world." Someone else said: "It kept me sane. It allowed me to escape the topsy-turvy world for at least a few hours each evening." What would your answer be?

The responses we received have a common theme: reading is an escape, an open door, a safe space. It's also beneficial for our mental health. A 2009 study at the University of Sussex found that reading can reduce stress by up to 68%, and works better and faster than other relaxation methods, like listening to music. In addition, a study published in "Perspectives on Psychological Science" found that reading fiction allows readers to increase our empathy and compassion for others, especially for those who are different from ourselves.

Even more striking is that fiction "creates a deep and



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immersive" simulation of social interaction, thus helping us feel less alone. Reading, in other words, is a form of companionship. What a beautiful thing to hear after a year of missing our loved ones.

If you are looking for company, here are three ways to embrace reading as a healthy hobby in 2021:

■ Start at the library. Whether you browse the library shelves and book displays, request items through our online catalog, use curbside pickup to take home a stack of books, or ask a librarian for reading recommendations, the library is your #1 stop for books and other reading material. Plus, it's free! Check out what's available on the CAFÉ catalog at www.cafelibraries.org.

■ Try new ways of reading. There's no "wrong" way to read. Ebooks, audiobooks,

non-fiction, magazines ... they all count. Listen to audiobooks as you drive or do dishes. Keep an ebook on your device so you can read instead of scrolling social media. You can try both ebooks and audiobooks with your library card by using the free Libby app or going to wplc.overdrive.com.

■ Create a reading goal. Read in a genre you've never tried before. Seek out authors with different life experiences. Pick a certain number of books to enjoy this year. A challenge can make reading more fun!

Here's to a new year, good company, and new books to discover!

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