

The Rise of Superhero Therapy: Comic Books as Psychological Treatment



www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/17/the-rise-of-superhero-therapy-comic-books-as-psychological-treatment.html



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A band of renegade therapists has been treating patients with something a bit unorthodox: superheroes. Just think of them as the Justice League of comic book treatment.

A young boy sits in a psychologist's office, playing with action figures in a sand tray. There's an epic battle on the horizon, one that crosses traditional DC/Marvel lines. On one side there's Batman, Spider-Man, and Superman. On the other, there's an unpredictable fire-breathing dragon, with big eyes and sharp teeth. In an attempt to vanquish the monster, the superheroes step in and pummel him, knocking him to the ground. The dragon, now dangling by a claw from the edge of the sand tray, is on the cusp of defeat. But then comes a faint glimmer of hope: Wonder Woman swoops in to save the day, rescuing the monster from his bullies.

For that boy, the dragon is a filter, a way of depicting the impulsivity and loneliness he faces outside the confines of a doctor's office. Wonder Woman represents his mother, the one constant in his life.

We're all aware of the basic transformative properties of popular culture—namely, its ability to cheer you up, to make you laugh, and to make you cry. But the thought of using comic books, superheroes, and other mythical creatures as a legitimate psychological treatment—like that boy and his psychologist did with the dragon and Wonder Woman—is something that still exists on the fringes, kept alive by a small group of therapists. To them, heroes like Superman are more than entertainment, they're a way to understand and analyze our deepest fears. Thanks to the work this group has done over the last year—from presenting at conferences to teaching courses at

respected psychology schools—comic book treatment has been able to gain more recognition and slowly move into the circle of mainstream psychology. Now they just need it to stay there.

Dr. Patrick O'Connor has been incorporating geek culture into his sessions since 2010, while he was working with kids in foster care. The idea came to him after thinking about the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson—better known as Batman and Robin—and how Dick came to live with Bruce after his family was killed, essentially becoming the billionaire's foster son.

"I began to wonder what stories would be out there of Batman and Robin comic books that maybe my kids would relate to," O'Connor tells *The Daily Beast*. "Anything about 'You're not my real dad,' or 'I shouldn't have to listen to you,' but then listening to that guidance and maybe starting to buy into that relationship—to try to learn from somebody who's more experienced but also cares for you and your well being."

O'Connor eventually found himself over at Graham Crackers Comics, a chain in the Chicago area, looking to explore his idea further. He figured he would search for *Batman* titles first, since that's what initially brought him to the store, but where to go from there? Well, if he planned on introducing stories into sessions with patients, he knew that he would need to use *complete* stories. So he began hunting for sequential issues, finding packs of *Spider-Man*, *Steel*, and *Hawkman* along the way. Then he got to reading. Keeping a word document by his side, O'Connor would record the things the heroes or villains would go through—recurring themes like "facing fear," "losing a loved one" or "being different." His notes eventually formed the basis of [Comicspedia](#), an online database filled with hundreds of individual comic book summaries and their respective psychological focuses. But more than that, his research paid off in his sessions.

"I noticed that, naturally, not only did the kids get excited about it and started looking forward to therapy, it really brought out a lot of stuff that they wanted to talk about—a lot of deep issues," O'Connor says. "It made the relationship between my clients and myself a lot richer."

Josué Cardona, a counselor in North Carolina, had a similar epiphany three years ago, when he was interning at a hospital in New Jersey, working with children ages 8-11. The hospital owned a Nintendo Wii, which he wanted to integrate into the kids' therapy. However, the program's director was reluctant. That incident motivated Cardonna to find as much information about how things like video games could be put to good use.

"I was seeing this and I said 'Wait a minute. How come we're not encouraging kids to talk this way? Why are we telling them to not talk about it in those terms and to talk about it in other terms, when this is how they feel most comfortable?'" he says.

Eventually, Cardonna decided to launch [Geek Therapy](#), a website about how geek culture is "saving the world." The site included a curated news section, along with a weekly podcast (O'Connor has been a guest). Cardonna then began integrating comic books into his therapy sessions, which, as O'Connor discovered, helped his patients express emotions they hadn't before.

While some in psychology may consider O'Connor and Cardona's techniques cutting edge, they are far from the first ones to suggest such an idea. One of the earliest was [Lauretta Bender](#). Though she is best known for developing the Bender-Gestalt Visual Motor Test, she is also a pioneer when it comes to publicizing the therapeutic properties of superheroes.

As Dr. Lawrence Rubin details in his 2006 book *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, Bender saw first hand the positive effects a comic could have while she was treating kids at Bellevue Hospital. In 1941—a mere three years after the first *Superman* issue hit newsstands—Bender [published an article](#) with Reginald Lourie, detailing how a superhero story could assist in a therapist's ability to treat patients ages 10-12.

Thirteen years later, Bender was asked to testify at a hearing that looked to quell public criticisms regarding comics—specifically, whether they were destroying children and causing them to commit crimes. That accusation sounds rather outrageous, but remember, this was during the J. Edgar Hoover paranoia era in America, when everything was being labeled a menace to society. Nevertheless, Bender knew the criticisms against Batman, Superman, and other crusaders in tights were bogus, and she looked to beat them back. Congress would eventually side with her viewpoints. In the hearing’s report, released in 1955, it stated “comic-book reading is not the cause of emotional maladjustment in children.”

While mainstream comics are no longer considered the nefarious instigators they once were, they still lack an extensive fully funded study that proves their therapeutic attributes to non-believers—which is surprising considering the studies that *do* exist for things like art, narrative, and music therapies. As Steve Kuniak, a counselor who uses video games in his sessions, explains, that’s partially due to a generational divide of older professionals who can’t get around the idea of something like a game or comic being able to help a patient in any official capacity. However, Kuniak is hopeful for the future, stating this type of therapy is still “in its infancy.”

Thank You!
