



# SCIENTIFIC BULLETIN

OF THE INSTITUTE OF  
MENTAL HEALTH

09:2024

## CONTENTS:

- **EDITORIAL**  
*Nađa P. Marić*
- **OUR RESEARCH**  
*Milica Vlasisavljević et al.*
- **CASE STUDY**  
*Milutin Kostić et al.*
- **GUEST OF THE BULLETIN**  
*Dragan Popović*
- **A PROMISING PROJECT - CEREBRO**  
*Milorad Dragić*
- **MASTER'S THESIS**  
*Aleksa Stamenković*
- **ABOUT THE BOOK CLUB AT THE INSTITUTE**  
*Petar Vuković*
- **NEWS FROM THE WORLD**  
*Experiential accounts of mental disorders in adolescents and Absolute and relative outcomes of psychotherapeutic treatments for eight mental disorders*
- **SCIENCE AND ART**  
*Rest for the soul, Boris Milošević and Nikola Rančić*

## EDITORIAL

Have you noticed a warmer, more vibrant cover? Wondering where it comes from? The answer can be both simple and complex. The simplest one is that at the Institute of Mental Health, nurturing artistic activities has been going on for as long as the Institute has existed. Many records testify to this — on the walls of the Institute, we can see the murals of Serbian expressionist and symbolist Lazar Vujaklija (1914–1996), while in the halls and corridors, we observe the sculptures of Ratko Vulanović (1941–2023). We fondly remember the sounds and atmosphere of choir performances from the Temple of Saint Sava (2020), Melodi (2018), Braća Baruh and Ars Vocalis choirs (2016), which are just some of the long-running Wednesday Cultural Circle activities.

Art comes to the Institute, but it is also created there. The works collected by Prof. Ljubomir Erić, arranged like film sequences in the hallway of the Institute's Dpt. for Research and Education (photo), illustrate the creativity of our service users and help us all to better understand each other and to connect. What else is expected from a „corner for the soul,“ which every psychiatric and healthcare institution should be? What is the purpose of science if not for the good of the soul?

The relationship between art and science is a captivating and complex interplay that has attracted creators and scholars throughout history. Although they may appear to be distinct disciplines, art and science are more interconnected than one might initially perceive. Art, often associated with creativity, imagination, and aesthetic expression, and science, characterized by logic, observation, and empirical evidence, share a deep connection that transcends their apparent differences. Together, they form a symbiotic relationship, influencing and enriching one another in ways that expand the boundaries of human understanding and creativity.



At their core, both art and science are methods of exploring the nature of the world. While science seeks to understand and explain phenomena through rigorous observation, experimentation, and analysis, art explores the world through subjective interpretations, emotions, and sensory experiences. Although different, art and science can intersect, with art bringing scientific concepts closer to the public, while science inspires artistic innovations. Both contribute to our intellectual and cultural development, enriching our lives and broadening our civilizational perspectives, while also raising numerous ethical questions that accompany each development (versus „progress“). In these questions lie the challenges of our existence within an era.

For all the aforementioned reasons, both simple and complex, from this issue onward, the Bulletin will make space for the art created under the roof of the Institute. This body of work is not small and cannot be contained within the Bulletin. Therefore, for everything that does not fit into its pages, we wish to find its place on visible walls, in busy halls, or between the covers of best-seller books that hold far greater significance than our minimally circulated Bulletin.

Prof. Nađa Marić Bojović

(the image on the front page is owned by assist. prof. Bojana Pejušković, MD, PhD)

## ● Our research

Milica Vlasisavljević, MD, and colleagues

A research team from the Institute of Mental Health in Belgrade, consisting of Milica Vlasisavljević, MD (first author), clin. asist. Vanja Mandić-Maravić, MD, PhD, clin. asist. Roberto Grujičić, MD, Sanja Leštarević, MD, Jelena Vasić, MD and prof. Milica Pejović Milovančević (lead researcher), published a paper in April 2024 in the *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*. The paper presents the study entitled titled “Differences in needs and availability of healthcare, education and social protection between school-age children and youth with autistic spectrum disorder and their families in Serbia”, which is part of Milica Vlasisavljević’s doctoral thesis. The doctoral candidate and colleagues analyzed disparities in access to healthcare, education, and social support for youth with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in Serbia, as well as the challenges faced by their families. The paper provides significant insights into the specific needs of young people aged 15-30 with ASD, an age group often overlooked in previous research.

Individuals with ASD and their families face significant stigmatisation, lack of support, and barriers to accessing healthcare and social services. A previous study by Pejović-Milovančević and colleagues in 2018, focusing on the needs of parents

of school-aged children with ASD, revealed that over 90% of respondents considered additional support in educational institutions and at home to be essential, as well as improved communication with service providers. Parental frustration due to limited access to services emerged as a key issue that requires a broad multi-sectoral approach for resolution. Although such an approach is critical for these individuals not only in childhood but also throughout adulthood, no research to date has addressed the status of care, support, and needs of adolescents and young adults with ASD in Serbia.

The research by Vlasisavljević and colleagues is the first systematic mapping of service availability for young people aged 15-30 with ASD in Serbia, with a particular focus on the transition from childhood to adulthood. The study aimed to determine the basic needs of these individuals and their families in Serbia, map available support services, and analyze the differences in needs and service availability between school-aged children and adolescents/young adults.

The sample consisted of parents/caregivers of young people with ASD (n = 85), recruited from the database of the Institute of Mental Health in Belgrade. The Caregiver Needs Survey was



employed, which includes four sections: demographic characteristics of parents/caregivers, demographic and clinical characteristics of their child, experiences with provided services (involvement in various treatments, experiences with the educational system and day-care centres), and parents’/caregivers’ perceptions of key issues and priorities in the care and support of children with ASD. The results were compared to a previous study from 2018, which used the same assessment tool and included a sample of 231 parents/caregivers of school-aged children with ASD.

The findings indicated that during adolescence and early adulthood, the use of most support services significantly decreased, while pharmacotherapy became the primary treatment modality (psychotropic medications were prescribed significantly more frequently to individuals aged 15-30 years – 60% compared to school-aged children – 44%,  $p < 0.05$ ). These findings may point to a lack of information regarding available services or a lack of tailored treatments for young people with ASD after completing their education.



The study also emphasized the need for improvements in inclusion within the educational system, as only a small number of young people with ASD utilized the support of personal or teaching assistants.

Both studies revealed that most families (70%) receive monthly financial support from the Republic of Serbia. Parents/caregivers of young people aged 15-30 with ASD relied more on professionals and other parents, while they used the internet less frequently as a source of information, compared to parents/caregivers of school-aged children from the younger population study ( $p < 0.001$ ). This could indicate an improvement in communication and trust between families and service providers over time. Additionally, parents/caregivers of the older population with ASD (15-30 years) reported fewer issues with lack of information, waiting lists, service availability and costs, compared to parents/caregivers of school-aged children ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Between 2018 and 2023, significant changes took place in Serbia that improved the support system, including the publication of new Guidelines for Screening, Diagnosis, and Interventions for Children with ASD, as well as the launch of the Caregivers' Skills Training developed by the World Health Organization. While progress in law and public policy reform is evident, families of individuals with ASD continue to face substantial challenges in accessing social, healthcare, and educational services.

The authors recommend conducting a national mapping of the support network as the first step towards identifying and addressing the most urgent needs of families with ASD in Serbia. These recommendations underscore the importance of tailoring support to the specific needs of adolescents and young adults, particularly in the transition to adulthood.

## ● CASE STUDY

Assist. Prof. Milutin Kostić, MD,  
PhD, and colleagues

*The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, the official journal of the American Society of Clinical Psychopharmacology, has been present for 85 years now. The first issue was published in 1939 and ever since the journal has been gaining a reputation as a source of clinical information on topics relating to mental health and disorders. Its target population includes psychiatrists and other health professionals and associates pursuing research and keeping abreast with developments in diagnostics and treatment. Clinical domains of special interest include affective disorders, psychotic disorders, anxiety, addiction, posttraumatic stress disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In January 2024 our Ass. Prof. Dr Milutin Kostić and his colleagues published a case report entitled: „Suicidality Emerging From Rapid Venlafaxine Discontinuation: A Challenge–Dechallenge–Rechallenge“.

### Which observation inspired this report?

A controversy relating to the association of suicidality and the use of antidepressants has been around and discussed in scientific circles for quite a while. The initial assumption was that with simple mitigation of depression, the drugs should consequently and unquestionably lead to a reduction of the rate of suicide, the worst consequence of depression. Unfortunately, randomised controlled and ecological studies not only failed to confirm this correlation but showed that there was a chance of an opposite effect, i.e. that antidepressants increase the risk of suicide. This is, fortunately, a clinically uncommon outcome. However, this makes it scientifically very inconvenient to study and conduct a specific causative study. Therefore, definitive conclusions cannot still be drawn. Nevertheless, certain findings show that even if antidepressants increase the suicide rate (which has not been proven, not even



on the hypothesis level), they do not exert the effect linearly, but primarily on the occasion of initiation of drug treatment and possibly its withdrawal.

In the course of work in the outpatient department, a patient came to first author Kostic MD and told him that she had never had any suicidal thoughts or intentions and that she had started private treatment for her depression. Over a short period (6 months) she stopped her medication abruptly on two occasions, and both times she developed suicidal thoughts, which were on the second occasion accompanied by a serious attempt with medication overdose, after which she decided to change her doctor and came to the Institute. The author recognised a very important phenomenon and wrote to Martin Ploedrl with whom he worked on another research project since he was aware of his expertise in suicidality and its causes. He recommended posting the case on Twitter. After that, Michael Hengartner messaged and suggested that this was an exciting case that deserved to be published as a proper paper. The patient was in the loop about the writing process the whole time and even had been presented with the final version of the draft to confirm that it accurately describes how it all transpired. She gave written informed consent for both the Twitter post and the published paper.

#### **What does this case report show?**

It would be difficult, even dangerous on multiple levels to design a randomized controlled study of abrupt withdrawal of antidepressants

to establish whether this increases the risk of suicidality. Having this in mind, any conclusion in this matter will depend on case reports, and this one is currently the most convincing since the effect is confirmed in the same patient on two independent time points (that is the explanation of the title: challenge-dechallenge-rechallenge).

We conclude that all patients have to be advised not to withdraw antidepressants abruptly (in this particular case the drug was venlafaxine) and that the process has to be very slow, particularly after a longer period of use. Future lines of research should focus on better and safer models of antidepressant therapy tapering (withdrawal) with the least possible side effects (suicidality being the most serious of all). Potentially, but tentatively, this adverse effect may throw some light on the neurobiology of suicidality.



## GUEST OF THE BULLETIN

Dragan Popović, proto-presbyter and doctoral candidate at the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Orthodox Theology

### BIOETHICS OF DEATH

#### How did you decide to focus on the topic of the bioethics of death?

As a „necessary“ field of social engagement, the field of bioethics deals with ethically problematic situations in the areas of preserving and improving human health and life. In this context, death is only one of the issues that arises not only from humanity's direct involvement in the dying process but also from the incorrect understanding and relationship toward this phenomenon. On the other hand, as an element that is not only significant but also largely defining for the way human existence is shaped, death is indirectly present in most bioethical issues. I write about this in my book (*Bioethics of Death*, 2022), where I do not directly address the issue of death, but discuss it in relevant core problems such as organ transplantation (assumed consent and brain death). Additionally, in the book, I point out that, aside from the psychosomatic dimension, there is also a spiritual dimension of death that stems from the separation of man from God.

Therefore, anything that leads to it, no matter how ethically good and correct it may seem from the perspective of improving human life and health, is at the same time completely unacceptable in Orthodox bioethics. Part of the book is also dedicated to Peter Singer's utilitarianism and the problem of his understanding of death and ethical evaluation of killing, particularly in the context of bioethical issues.

This further confirms the fact that the fundamental difference between Christian and any other anthropology (which is at the core of all bioethics) is contained in the attitude toward death: on one hand, Christians have an identity-defining belief in the Resurrection and Eternal Life, while on the other, non-Christian anthropologies find this entirely unacceptable.

#### How does bioethics help us better understand values related to life and death?

I will try to answer by giving a few examples. First, from the



source Matica srpska, author Dragan Lučić

perspective of Christian anthropology, human life begins at the moment of conception when the soul, a life-giving force of divine origin, is added to the body. This indisputable fact in Christianity implies that any threat to human life at any stage of its intrauterine development must be treated as homicide, which makes abortion an unacceptable medical treatment. On the other hand, human death is represented through the separation of the soul from the body, which brings into question the phenomenon of brain death. Namely, without questioning its origin and purpose, we point out that cardiopulmonary activity in a brain-dead person—regardless of its artificial support—is a reliable sign that the soul has not yet left the body. For Orthodox bioethics, this is sufficient reason to reject brain death, despite what is considered true in modern medicine. These examples highlight the opposition between Christian and medical anthropology in the field of bioethical evalua-

tion of life and death, which can be difficult to overcome. For the Church to deviate from its own anthropology would mean abandoning the truth of its own existence and effectively abolishing itself, while it is even less likely that modern medicine would renounce its position on the topic. On the other hand, this is less important for Orthodox Christianity in principle, since throughout the history of the Church, it has been accompanied by conflict with worldly values, which have proven to be ephemeral and, consequently, untrue. For the Church, the value of life is reflected in death as a passage to Eternal Life, which is why its insistence on respecting anthropological truths is not about imposing but about bearing witness to anyone “who has ears to hear.”

#### **What is your understanding of Peter Singer’s influence on life and death issues?**

Singer is unequivocal in his positions, leaving no room for interpretation or subjective views. Since he does not acknowledge the existence of God, he is an outspoken opponent and combatant against Christian ethics, considering it the last line of defense against utilitarianism, whose victory, in his view, is only a matter of time. As a naturalist, he views life and death as purely biological processes, without any spiritual reference. The pinnacle of his philosophical-ethical system, which I have thoroughly analyzed in my book, is the concept of a „person.“ Based on arbitrarily established criteria, he not only equates the rights of humans and animals to life but even gives some animals

priority over certain humans. For example, animals such as a „mature and grown“ chicken or pig, by fulfilling the criteria of personhood, have a greater right not to be deprived of life than, for example, a newborn or unborn child, as they do not meet Singer’s criteria for personhood. According to him, it is ethically acceptable to take their life if it would cause more pleasure than pain to their relatives. His ethical postulates are dominant in contemporary Western ethics and guide certain medical interventions that are recognized as bioethically problematic.

#### **What will be the topic of your doctoral thesis?**

The title of my doctoral thesis, which is in the final stages of preparation, is *The Experience of Pain in the Philokalia*. The *Philokalia* is a collection of patristic texts (from the 4th to the 14th century), compiled at the end of the 18th century as a reaction to the secular spirit of the new Hellenism and Enlightenment of the educated Greeks of that time (mostly schooled at modern Western humanistic and rationalist universities), with the effort to resist this spirit, unknown to Orthodoxy. The texts are mostly ascetic in nature and point to the proper way of human existence in the Church, which is equated with the purpose and goal of human existence in general. In these texts, I explore the phenomenon of pain, which I observe in a broader sense as an uncomfortable, tense, traumatic psychosomatic experience of human insufficiency, closely related to ancestral sin and the loss of the grace-filled, spiritual communion with God.

These states, summed up in the term *odýni* (=pain), are directly opposed to the concept of *idoní* (=pleasure), through whose dynamic relationship the entire history of the relationship between man and God is revealed. In the first, introductory part of the thesis, I investigate the historical relationship between humans and pain, from Pre-Socratic antiquity to the present day in two directions: theory (philosophy) and practice (medicine).

#### **What message would you convey to young researchers interested in exploring similar topics?**

Although objectivity is given in scientific research, I believe that in contemporary research, the field of theological thought is unjustly neglected. Without theology, research cannot be complete, and thus not objective. This is particularly true in our society, where the Orthodox Christian ethos is deeply rooted, regardless of the degree to which it is known or unknown. This can best be seen in the dominant sense of belonging and the relationship of trust towards the Orthodox Church, which are widely present in our social community.



## ● A PROMISING PROJECT

**CEREBRO** (<https://cerebro.rs/>)

assist. Milorad Dragić, PhD, RA

Basic research is very important for understanding the effectiveness and tolerability of the methods used in the clinic and is necessary to advance the practice. Transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) is a method that has been used for decades, not only for therapeutic purposes in psychiatric disorders, which is closest to the readers of the Bulletin but also for diagnostic purposes, particularly in the realm of neurological disorders and diseases. The project CEREBRO - CHARACTERIZATION OF CEREBRAL INTERSTITIAL FLUID SECRETOME FOLLOWING INTERMITTENT THETA-BURST STIMULATION-DECIPHERING THE NEUROCHEMISTRY OF BRAIN STIMULATION is currently underway at the Faculty of Biology in Belgrade. It is funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia "PROMIS 2023" (Project No. 10824) call and will last until 2026. Dr. Milorad Dragić, Assistant and Research Associate from the Center for Translational Neuroscience at the Faculty of Biology (Department of General Physiology and Biophysics) of the University of Belgrade, discusses the project for the Bulletin.

**Why did you choose "theta-burst" stimulation, and what is known so far about its impact on cerebrospinal fluid secretion in animal models?**

Since 1987, when Barker and colleagues introduced repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) as a research tool, interest in this non-invasive brain stimulation method has grown significantly. Among various protocols, intermittent theta burst stimulation (iTBS) stands out for its shorter duration and similar effectiveness to traditional methods. Theta waves, linked to learning and memory, originate from 4-7 Hz neural activity in the hippocampus, and this pattern is associated with long-term potentiation (LTP), which has driven its use in rTMS for humans. Despite its benefits in improving learning, and memory, reducing neuroinflammation, and enhancing motor function in neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's, the underlying mechanisms are still unclear. The CEREBRO project aims to identify growth factors, cytokines, and chemokines released after stimulation, helping optimize protocols for clinical use.

**Are there similar studies in healthy humans? In clinical samples?**

There are numerous studies on healthy subjects, showing that rTMS increases motor cortex excitability and improves some aspects of cognition, as well as on patients suffering from various neurodegenerative diseases (Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease) and psychiatric conditions (depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, and panic disorders). The reported effects range from significant improvements to no effects at all. The literature contains a great deal of „noise“ due to the application of different protocols, the duration of stimulation, and the stage of the disease when rTMS is initiated, resulting in highly heterogeneous reported effects. So far, the FDA has approved the use of rTMS for depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and chronic neuropathic pain, and since 2018, the iTBS protocol has been approved for the treatment of depression. Additionally, there are strong therapeutic indications that rTMS has positive effects on bipolar disorder, Tourette



syndrome, generalized anxiety disorder, and various motor disorders. However, there is a lack of information about what kind of changes can be observed at the level of inflammatory factors that would be measured from blood or cerebrospinal fluid.

**What are your main research questions, and have you received any answers so far?**

rTMS stands out because its positive effects extend beyond the duration of stimulation – patients with depression can remain symptom-free for up to a year after six weeks of stimulation. This suggests long-lasting changes in neural networks and brain neurochemistry. CEREBRO project poses two key questions: which molecules are released after stimulation and how long do the changes persist? Answers to these questions will help clinicians optimize protocols and understand the therapeutic effects, as well as uncover new therapeutic possibilities.

Our newest results in healthy animals show that seven days of iTBS leads to significant changes at the synaptic level, including improved efficien-

cy and mechanisms of synaptogenesis and long-term potentiation. Additionally, changes were observed in the secretome, particularly in proteins that regulate synaptic plasticity, neuron survival, and extracellular matrix remodeling, which are crucial for the formation of new synapses.

**Who will you be collaborating with on the project?**

Currently, we are collaborating on the project with the Vinča Institute of Nuclear Sciences – National Institute of the Republic of Serbia, the Faculty of Medicine of the Military Medical Academy at the University of Defence, and we hope to establish cooperation with the Institute of Mental Health, where a TMS Laboratory is soon to be opened. Among our international partners, we are working intensively with Paris-Saclay University, which is part of the National Institute for Health and Medical Research of the Republic of France, ranked 12th in the world and 1st in Europe on this year's Shanghai ranking list.

**What do you consider the main challenges, and when might clinically relevant results be expected?**

The main challenge of the project is methodological, as it involves sampling the brain's intercellular fluid from awake animals without disrupting the blood-brain barrier for 6 to 12 hours. Thanks to the support of the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia and the acquisition of state-of-the-art equipment, the execution of these methods has been made possible. Given the positive effects observed in healthy animals and the minimal side effects of rTMS, we plan, in collaboration with the Institute of Mental Health, to conduct a study on healthy subjects to investigate the seven-day effect of iTBS on learning and memory processes, which will be the first step towards translating our findings to the clinic.



## ● MASTER'S THESIS

Aleksa Stamenković, MSc in  
Psychology

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Aleksa Stamenković is a psychologist with a master's degree working at the Special Hospital for Addiction Diseases in Belgrade – Department for Treatment of Psychoactive Substance Dependence. He recently defended his master's thesis titled “The role of personality and family relationships in understanding addictive behavior” at the Faculty of Philosophy – Department of Psychology, under the supervision of assist. prof. Ivana Peruničić Mladenović (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade; Institute of Mental Health in Belgrade).

**How did you choose the topic of studying the role of personality and family relationships in understanding addictive behavior? What was known on this topic in the literature before your research began?**

I have a general interest in chronic and complex psychopathology, which led me to this research topic. Through discussions with Professor Peruničić Mladenović, the idea for the study took shape. Over the past twenty years, the literature has revealed significant differences in personality traits between individuals with addiction disorders and those without. Specifically, individuals with addiction disorders often score higher in neuroticism and lower in traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Additionally, it has been observed that families of individuals with addiction disorders tend to be less functional, regardless of the family functioning model applied. Despite this, few studies have explored how individuals with addiction disorders perceive their parents' parenting styles. The existing findings suggest that these individuals are more likely to describe their parents' styles as authoritarian and/or permissive.

**What is the main research question in your master's thesis, and what were the main hypotheses?**

The main goal of the research was to explore whether addiction disorders in individuals can be predicted based on their personality structure, family functionality, and perceived childhood parenting styles. Additionally, the study aimed to evaluate the added significance of family functionality and parenting styles when personality factors are considered. The hypotheses proposed were that addiction disorders could be predicted from these three sets of variables, that each set independently explains a significant portion of the variance in addictive behavior, and that, when combined, all three sets of variables contribute significantly to the overall explained variance of addictive behavior.

**What was the study design, and how was the sample collected?**

The study employed a correlational design with a convenient sample. It included patients diagnosed with various addiction disorders who were receiving treatment at the Clinic for Addiction Disorders at the Institute of Mental Health, the Special Hospital for Addiction Diseases in Belgrade, and the Psychiatric Department of the General Hospital in Jagodina. The control group consisted of participants recruited via social media who did not have any addiction disorders.

Personality was assessed using the Six-Factor Personality Model – HEXACO. Family functionality was evaluated according to the Circumplex Model, which includes three dimensions of family functioning: cohesion, adaptability,

and communication. The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale IV (FACES IV) was also utilized. Parenting styles were analyzed based on Diana Baumrind's theory, which identifies three prototypical styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) was used to measure these parenting styles.

#### **What are the main results, and what role do personality and family relationships play in understanding addictive behavior?**

The results show that addiction disorders can be predicted with a classification accuracy of 81-82% based on personality and family relationships. Each set of variables independently accounts for a significant portion of addictive behavior. However, binary logistic models revealed that while demographic data and personality factors were considered in the first step, and family functionality or parenting styles were introduced in the second step, the changes in the percentage of the total explained variance of addictive behavior were not statistically significant. This suggests that family functionality and parenting styles do not significantly contribute to the explained variance in addictive behavior once personality is accounted for.

#### **What would you like to focus on in your future work on this research problem?**

In future research, it would be valuable to explore whether distinct subgroups with specific characteristics can be identified within the population of individuals with addiction disorders, based on personality traits and family relationships. For instance, one subgroup might include those prone to withdrawal, reliant on others for support, and with a negative self-image, while another subgroup might consist of individuals exhibiting impulsive and aggressive behaviors, and a negative orientation toward others. It would be interesting to see how these subgroups correspond to different types of addiction.

Additionally, applying interpretative phenomenological analysis and qualitative methodology could provide deeper insights into the psychological experiences of individuals with addiction disorders. This approach would aim to uncover how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world at large. Such un-

derstanding could enhance psychotherapists' ability to grasp the dynamics of psychological processes and interpersonal relationships in individuals with addiction disorders, leading to more tailored and effective treatments.

#### **What would you like to advise young researchers interested in similar topics?**

From a practical standpoint, it's important to recognize that data collection can be time-consuming, and using a more focused set of questionnaires may yield better results. Many patients with addiction disorders might be reluctant to participate or may withdraw during the study. Additionally, a substantial portion of the general population might be wary of issues related to addiction.

From a theoretical perspective, I would advise young researchers to approach the population of individuals with addiction disorders as a heterogeneous group, particularly regarding personality and family relationships. Identifying specific subpopulations within this group could help in developing tailored treatment protocols that address their unique needs.





## ● ABOUT THE BOOK CLUB AT THE INSTITUTE

Petar Vuković, MD

Among the educational activities offered by the Institute of Mental Health in Belgrade, the Book Club, which takes place on Wednesday at noon, occupies a special place. This activity is aimed at young doctors, psychologists, special educators, and social workers who have only recently started working in the field of mental health. However, its importance goes beyond the mere acquisition of clinical knowledge and contributes to the enrichment of overall professional experience. The topics discussed in the Book Club are not always directly related to psychiatry as a medical speciality, but the purpose of the club is precisely to broaden the horizons and promote both the personal and professional development of the participants.

The concept of the Book Club is based on the idea that young colleagues suggest titles at the beginning of each academic year that they would like to cover during the year. These titles can be books, films, series or plays that deal with topics relevant to psychiatry, but also more general topics that are inspiring and stimulating for collective reflection and discussion. Young colleagues are invited to select materials that interest them personally and that they believe can contribute to their professional and personal development.

Each topic is assigned one or more sessions, depending on the complexity and scope of the material. Book club participants read or view the selected titles in advance to prepare for the discussion. The discussion begins with the colleague who suggested the title. They usually give a brief overview of their reasons for the selection and their impressions of the work. This is followed by a free discussion in which the participants exchange ideas, comments and opinions, often building on each other's thoughts.

The atmosphere in the Book Club is informal, which favours openness and freedom of expression. Participants have the opportunity to express themselves in a benevolent environment, without fear of judgment, ridicule or belittlement, which allows for a sincere exploration of different opinions and ideas. Discussions often cover a wide range of topics, including analysis of characters from literary and cinematic works, reflections on social and philosophical issues, and consideration of problems through the lens of psychopathology. This type of atmosphere encourages the development of critical thinking and the constructive exchange of opposing views.

The initiative to found the Book Club at the Institute came from assist. prof. Milutin Kostić who was also the first moderator of the group discussions. His goal was to create a space for creative and intellectual exchange among young colleagues and to give them the opportunity to deal with topics that are not necessarily covered in standard education but are nevertheless of great importance for their professional and personal development. During the period when colleague Kostić was absent due to professional development, the leadership of the club was taken over by assoc. prof. Olivera Vuković, who further expanded and enriched the club's activities.

Numerous important titles were discussed at earlier meetings of the Book Club. Particularly noteworthy are the lively discussions on Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel "Brave New World", which deals with themes such as control and freedom, and Albert Camus' existentialist novel "A Happy Death", which deals with questions of meaning and existence. In addition, Ingmar Bergman's cult film "Autumn Sonata" and the more recent adaptation of "Shakespeare's

Macbeth” served as the basis for profound reflections on human nature and moral dilemmas. The club also organized a trip to the Yugoslav Drama Theater to see a performance of “Oedipus”, which further enriched the participants’ experience.

One of the most recent innovations is the writing of essays on the titles discussed during the semester. This innovation has enabled participants to record important comments, ideas and conclusions from the discussions in short written form. The aim is to publish these essays in Serbian so that future colleagues can feel the atmosphere of the Book Club and gain insight into the discussions that took place. This practice not only helps to document the club’s achievements but also opens up communication with the wider professional and academic community.

Exciting new titles have already been selected for the coming semester, including the literary work “Heart of a Dog” by Mikhail Bulgakov, which deals with themes such as moral decay and change, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism”, which will facilitate a

discussion on the philosophical foundations of existentialism. In addition, the film “Girl Interrupted” and the series “Everything Calls for Salvation” provides an opportunity to understand contemporary social phenomena and their impact on the individual, particularly in the context of mental health.

The Book Club at the Institute of Mental Health does not fall within the traditional framework of education. Although it is not a traditional educational program, its value lies in the informal approach that encourages the creative exchange of ideas, critical thinking and looking at problems from different angles, leading to conclusions based on different points of view. This approach helps to develop more competent and empathetic mental health professionals who are willing to work in teams and respect the differing opinions of their colleagues. The club not only enriches the professional training of young colleagues but also provides them with valuable experience that will benefit them throughout their careers and lives.



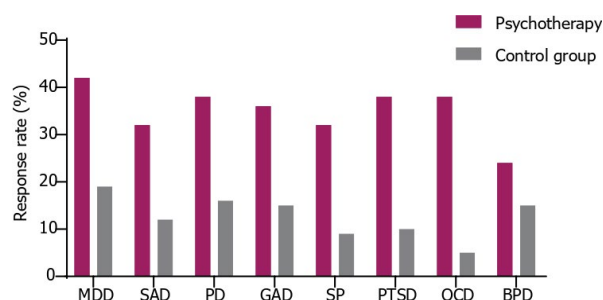
## NEWS FROM THE WORLD

### Absolute and relative outcomes of psychotherapies for eight mental disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis

Psychotherapy is the treatment of choice for most psychiatric disorders. Although the effects of psychotherapy have been extensively studied in numerous randomized controlled trials, there are only a relatively small number of meta-analyses comparing the effects of psychotherapy on different disorders. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Cuijpers et al. published in the prestigious journal *World Psychiatry* compared the absolute and relative outcomes of psychotherapeutic treatments for eight psychiatric disorders: Major depressive disorder (MDD), social anxiety disorder (SAD), panic disorder (PD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), specific phobias (SP), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and borderline personality disorder (BPD).

The authors emphasize that a broader approach encompassing several psychiatric disorders allows a direct comparison of the effect sizes of psychotherapy for different diagnoses. To facilitate interpretation of the results, treatment efficacy was expressed categorically as response rate (the number of patients with  $\geq 50\%$  reduction in symptoms divided by the total number of patients). The primary outcome was the absolute response rate, while secondary outcomes included relative measures such as relative risk (RR) and number needed to treat (NNT). The presentation of absolute rates for both the experimental and control groups allows for transdiagnostic comparability of psychotherapy effect sizes and eliminates the influence of different control interventions that may affect effect sizes when results are presented by relative measures.

Through a literature search, the authors identified a total of 111,886 studies, of which 441 met the inclusion criteria for the final analysis. Only randomized controlled trials that compared psy-



chotherapeutic treatments with one of three control interventions (waiting list, placebo pill or treatment as usual) in adults diagnosed through a structured diagnostic interview were included in the analysis. The absolute response rates to psychotherapy in the experimental groups were as follows: 42% (95% CI: 39-45%) for MDD, 38% (95% CI: 33-43%) for PTSD, 38% (95% CI: 30-47%) for OCD, 38% (95% CI: 33-43%) for PD, 36% (95% CI: 30-42%) for GAD, 32% (95% CI: 29-37%) for SAD, 32% (95% CI: 23-42%) for SP, and 24% (95% CI: 15-36%) for BPD. Response rates in the control groups ranged from 5% for OCD to 19% for MDD. The relative risk was statistically significant for all disorders except BPD, while the NNT for statistically significant results varied by disorder, ranging from 2.4 (for OCD) to 5.2 (for GAD).

The authors emphasized that this is the first meta-analysis to comparatively examine the effects of psychotherapy across eight psychiatric disorders using a clearly defined measure of treatment effectiveness. The results suggest relatively modest response rates to psychotherapeutic treatments for all disorders studied. Although most psychotherapeutic treatments showed greater efficacy compared to control groups, the majority of patients did not achieve  $\geq 50\%$  reduction in symptoms. These results suggest that it is often necessary to combine non-pharmacological and pharmacological treatments to achieve optimal treatment outcomes. In conclusion, the results emphasize the need for further research aimed at precisely defining the sequence of therapeutic steps in case of initial treatment failure, as well as the development of new, more effective therapies.



## The lived experience of mental disorders in adolescents: a bottom-up review co-designed, co-conducted and co-written by experts by experience and academics

In a recent issue of the Bulletin, we presented a methodologically interesting study on the experience of psychosis, in which the experiences of patients at different stages of the illness were examined. Using a similar approach, a recent article published in the prestigious journal *World Psychiatry* entitled „The lived experience of mental disorders in adolescents: a bottom-up review co-designed, co-conducted and co-written by experts by experience and academics“ examines the subjective experiences of adolescents with different psychiatric disorders. This study, co-designed and co-authored by experts by experience and mental health professionals under the direction of Paolo Fusar-Poli (London), takes a first-person perspective. The study provides a deeper insight into the way young people perceive and cope with mental health challenges. Psychiatric disorders often occur during adolescence, a crucial period for psychological development. Although early intervention is crucial, the care system is often fragmented, leading to a gap in the transition from child to adult care. The aim of this study was to address this gap by collecting first-hand accounts of the lived experiences of adolescents diagnosed with mood disorders, psychosis, ADHD, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and others. A systematic review of qualitative studies was conducted using the Web of Science and PubMed databases. The review covered a wide range of mental disorders and collected narratives from adolescents aged 10 to 19 years. The collected material was organized into thematic units describing subjective experiences, social interactions and engagement with the mental health system. The study also included workshops with young people from different cultural backgrounds to enrich the data with different perspectives.

The study confirmed that adolescents undergo significant changes in their identity, emotions and perception of reality. For example, mood disorders are characterized by a sense of alienation from their former self-image, while adolescents with psychosis experience distorted perceptions, hallucinations and paranoia. Neurodivergent adolescents (with ADHD or autism) often feel different from their peers, leading to problems understanding social interactions and

emotion regulation. Self-harm is often described as a means of gaining control over overwhelming emotions or feelings of emotional numbness. Adolescents with psychiatric disorders often report feelings of isolation and lack of understanding, especially from their families and peers. Parents emphasize that bullying by peers and teachers is a key factor in victimization and stigmatization, which they describe as „a phenomenon with more severe consequences than the disorders themselves.“ Nevertheless, peer support, especially from those facing similar problems, can play a crucial role in reducing feelings of loneliness and providing emotional comfort. While social media sometimes contributes to feelings of inadequacy, it often also serves as a platform for socializing and supporting one another. Receiving a diagnosis often triggers mixed feelings in young people: Some experience it as a relief, while others see it as a threat to their identity. Accessing mental health services is another major challenge. Emotional barriers such as fear of judgment and shame as well as organizational problems such as long waiting times and the gap between children’s and adult services further complicate the treatment process. The authors emphasize that positive experiences with mental health professionals — who show empathy and understanding — are crucial for improving treatment outcomes.

This study provides valuable insights for clinical practice, research and policy development. The authors emphasize the need for a more empathetic approach to youth-tailored mental health services that take into account the unique experiences of adolescents. Schools also need to provide more support by addressing bullying and promoting mental health through staff and student education. In addition, eliminating the discontinuity between adolescent and adult care is critical to maintaining continuity of care. This study emphasizes the profound and diverse experiences of adolescents with psychiatric disorders. By including their perspectives, this work provides a more comprehensive understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young people. The „bottom-up“ approach used in this study will also serve as a model for future research, emphasizing the importance of collaboratively designed studies that connect scientific findings to the lived experiences of patients and their families. Ultimately, the study calls for systemic changes to protect adolescent mental health, improve early intervention, ensure continuity of care and improve general societal understanding.

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## SCIENCE AND ART

### Rest for the soul

Palmotićeva is a retreat for my soul,  
If you don't believe it, come and find  
something of your own.

For some, it's hard, for others a delight,  
Because there, work and discipline reign  
in sight.

Sometimes it's tough to wake up early,  
But after coffee, everything goes  
smoothly.

Breakfast and therapy are always at the  
same time,  
Then the group session – no room for  
doubt in line.

In occupational therapy, we find a way  
anew,  
Thanks to Cveta, who shares topics too.  
After lunch, there are no obligations,  
But with friends, we always find conver-  
sations.

Doctors and nurses are top of the class,  
Always there to lend a saving hand in a  
flash.

The path to a healthy soul isn't easy or  
plain,  
So you must be determined and brave  
through the pain.

If you seek salvation, pure and true,  
Come and listen, we'll guide you through.

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