

## **BIBLIOTHERAPY IN BULGARIA: A STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS, APPLICATION AND EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

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### **Abstract**

This report summarizes the activities and results implemented during the second phase of the project "Study of Attitudes towards the Therapeutic Potential of Reading in Atypical Situations for the Individual". The main focus of this phase is the conduct of an empirical study among library professionals in Bulgaria, aimed at investigating the level of knowledge, understanding and practical application of bibliotherapy in a library environment, as well as the development and popularization of bibliographic and educational resources focused on bibliotherapy. The project demonstrates a significant contribution to increasing the information provision and systematization of knowledge about bibliotherapy, strengthening the connection between science, academic education and practice, as well as popularizing the therapeutic potential of reading among library professionals and the general public. The results of this project are of key importance for the development of library science and practice, providing new knowledge and solutions in the service of society.

**Keywords:** *Bibliotherapy, Bulgaria, project, ULSIT.*

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### **1. Introduction**

The project launched in 2020 entitled "Study of Attitudes towards the Therapeutic Potential of Reading in Atypical Situations for the Individual" financed by the National Science Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria with Contract No. KII-06-H45/2 from 30.11.2020, led by Chief Assist. Prof. S. Eftimova–Ilieva, PhD is innovative for Bulgaria for the following reasons:

- Focus on atypical situations – most research on the therapeutic effect of reading has focused on standard contexts such as psychotherapy or educational settings. This project explores how reading can affect an individual in circumstances that are unusual for them (e.g. isolation, social change, crises, stressful events).
- Individual attitudes – while existing research analyzes the general benefits of reading, this project delves into people's personal perceptions and emotional responses in specific situations.
- Interdisciplinary approach – combines psychology, literary studies, and cognitive science to offer a more complete picture of the impact of reading on mental health.

***The relevance of the implemented project is related to:***

- The dynamic and uncertain world – in the conditions of global changes (pandemics, wars, economic crises), people increasingly find themselves in unforeseen life situations. The project can offer new coping strategies through reading.
- Growing interest in bibliotherapy – reading is now seen as a therapeutic tool, but its potential in extreme and atypical circumstances has been little explored.
- Mental health and prevention – the topic of mental health is becoming increasingly important, and reading can be a cheap and accessible way to improve emotional well-being.

***Contribution in the future:***

- Developing new therapeutic approaches – the study may provide guidance for using reading as a psychological tool in crisis situations.
- Personalized strategies – the results can help individualize the reading process according to the emotional and cognitive state of the individual.
- Education and social policy – it can influence the way schools, hospitals and institutions use reading to support people in vulnerable situations.

This project will not only contribute to expanding knowledge about the therapeutic effects of reading, but will also provide practical guidance for improving mental health through literature.

## 2. Results

In the first stage of the project, a nationally representative study was conducted with an author's survey instrument aimed at analyzing the perception and use of the therapeutic functions of reading in atypical situations among the population in Bulgaria.

The results of the study unequivocally confirmed that reading performs a significant adaptive and regulatory function in dealing with atypical and crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The data showed that books are not only a source of information and emotional support, but also a means of psychological stabilization, reducing anxiety and maintaining cognitive and emotional resilience. Among the main conclusions of the study are:

- Increased frequency of reading during periods of crisis – a significant share of respondents reported an increase in time spent reading during the pandemic as a form of coping with stress and uncertainty.
- Diversity in preferred genres – while some respondents seek comforting and inspiring literature, others turn to popular science or fiction that helps them escape from the disturbing reality.
- Reading as a mechanism for emotional regulation – books have been found to help reduce psychological distress and support the processes of self-reflection and emotional adaptation.

These results not only confirm the therapeutic potential of reading, but also highlight its role as an accessible and effective tool for mental health in conditions of social isolation, crises, and other atypical life circumstances. In the future, individual differences in the perception of reading as a therapeutic practice, as well as the factors that determine its effectiveness in different demographic and psychological profiles, can be actively worked on.

In connection with the project's assessment of library professionals' knowledge and application of bibliotherapy, an empirical study was conducted to assess the level of awareness, understanding and application of bibliotherapy among library professionals in Bulgaria. The study included a survey method, interviews and analysis of practices in various libraries – public, school, university and specialized. The survey was conducted among a wide range of library professionals from all regions of the country in order to ensure a nationally representative sample. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with librarians who have experience or are interested in bibliotherapy programs.

Main results and conclusions reached:

- Limited awareness of bibliotherapy – a significant percentage of respondents are not familiar with the theoretical foundations and methods of bibliotherapy. A small number of specialists have participated in training or have used bibliotherapy purposefully in their practice;
- Lack of systematic implementation – although some librarians intuitively use reading as a form of support for readers (for example, in working with children with learning difficulties, the elderly or people in social isolation), these practices are not structured and are not perceived as bibliotherapy in the classical sense. The main obstacles to the implementation of bibliotherapy include insufficient training, lack of specialized materials and limited resources for training;
- Positive attitudes and interest in additional training – the majority of respondents express interest in additional training in bibliotherapy, especially regarding its practical applications in different social contexts. A need has been identified for the development of methodological guidelines and specialized training for librarians to prepare them for the effective use of bibliotherapy in their practice.

There is a need for systematic training and awareness raising, and the development of training programs for library professionals will be a key factor in integrating bibliotherapy into libraries. It is necessary to develop methodological resources - the creation of manuals, online courses, and specialized literature that will help promote and implement bibliotherapy in practice.

Pilot programs in libraries – it is advisable to implement experimental projects in several libraries to implement bibliotherapy practices and share experience and good practices. Based on these results, it is planned to expand the research and create practical models for implementing bibliotherapy in libraries, with the aim of establishing it as a sustainable practice in support of readers.

In addition to these two studies, a number of other surveys were conducted related to various elements of bibliotherapy: Audio and E-Books: Alternative in Time of Pandemic; Educational Initiatives to Stimulate Reading among Young People; Educational Role of the Children's Illustrated Book through the Child's View; Examination of Good Practices in Teaching Bibliotherapy in a University Environment; How Books Help Children Understand and Find Their Way in This New Reality; Reading as a Key Factor for Personality Development of Adolescents; Study of Attitudes towards Bibliotherapy among Students of Library and Information Studies in Bulgaria; Study of the Attitudes and Interest in Listening To Audiobooks among Students at Elementary And Secondary Education Levels In Bulgaria in English Language Learning; The Healing Books - through the Eyes of the Writer; The Place of Bibliotherapy in the Field of Continuing Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria; The Place of the Library in a Period of Crisis; The Possibilities and Role of Audiobooks as A Medium in Learning English as A Foreign

Language; Using Books to Support the Processes Associated with the Perception of Loss in Children (Garvanova, 2021; Genova, 2022; Mincheva, 2021; Mukanova, 2022; Parijkova, 2021).

Improving the quality of information provision and systematization of knowledge on bibliotherapy issues were also among the goals of the project. Within the framework of the project, targeted work was carried out to improve access to scientific and applied information in the field of bibliotherapy, which led to significant results in several areas:

- **Creation of a national bibliography on bibliotherapy.** A detailed bibliographic study of scientific, popular and specialized publications related to bibliotherapy in Bulgaria has been carried out. The first systematized bibliography of Bulgarian publications on the topic has been prepared, which includes articles, monographs, scientific conference reports and dissertations. The bibliography has been published online on the project website, which will facilitate access for researchers, librarians, psychologists and other interested specialists.
- **Preparation of an international bibliography.** A systematic review of the scientific literature published by leading international authors in the field of bibliotherapy has been conducted. The bibliographic resources include key studies and monographs by established scholars, which provides access to the latest trends and research paradigms in this field. This resource creates a basis for comparative analysis between the Bulgarian and international scientific contexts.
- **Popularization of bibliotherapy as a scientific and practical discipline.** Online and face-to-face discussions have been held on the application of bibliotherapy in various social and clinical contexts. Publications and reports presented at scientific conferences have been prepared, which contribute to the establishment of bibliotherapy as an important field in the science of reading and psychology.

Through the collected bibliographic resources and the activities carried out, interest in bibliotherapy has been increased in academic and professional circles. The creation of accessible bibliographic resources represents an important step towards the institutionalization of bibliotherapy as a scientific and practical discipline in Bulgaria. The scientific base provided will facilitate future research, training and applied activities in the field. In the long term, this resource can be expanded and updated, which will support the development of bibliotherapy as an important tool for psychological support and personal development. These results demonstrate the sustainability of the project and its contribution to the building of a scientific infrastructure in the field of bibliotherapy in our country.

The project implemented targeted activities to integrate bibliotherapy and related disciplines into academic education, focusing on the preparation of students for Bachelor's and Master's degrees in library and information sciences. The process included updating the curriculum, developing new academic materials, and promoting research in this area:

- **Updating and integrating bibliotherapy into academic disciplines.** New learning modules and topics were developed that broaden and deepen the understanding of bibliotherapy, library psychology, and pedagogy. Existing curricula were updated, introducing interdisciplinary approaches linking library science with psychology, pedagogy, social sciences, and medical humanities. The courses were enriched in:

*Bibliotherapy* - expanded learning content with an emphasis on methods for bibliotherapy work in various institutional and social contexts.

*Library Psychology* - including topics about the impact of reading on cognitive and emotional development.

*Library pedagogy* - integrating bibliotherapy approaches in working with children and adults.

*Accessibility to information for people with specific needs* - inclusion of bibliotherapy techniques to support people with disabilities and social difficulties.

*Policies to stimulate reading* - an analysis of bibliotherapy strategies as a tool for promoting reading.

*Bibliophilism* – expanding topics related to the cultural and aesthetic role of books in a therapeutic context (Eftimova, 2021).

- **Introduction of new academic resources and practical training.** New teaching materials have been developed, which include bibliotherapy case studies, methodological guidelines, and practical guidelines. Interactive teaching methods have been introduced, with students participating in bibliotherapy work scenarios, analyzing real cases, and developing projects related to the application of reading in a therapeutic environment. Practical seminars and workshops with students have been organized, demonstrating bibliotherapy techniques and analyzing its application in various social groups. Pilot practical classes have been carried out in libraries, where students have the opportunity to apply bibliotherapy methods in a real environment.
- **Promoting scientific research and publication activity.** Course and thesis papers have been developed with a focus on bibliotherapy and its applications. Doctoral students and undergraduates are involved in scientific research aimed at analyzing bibliotherapy approaches and their impact on various reader groups. Publication activity is stimulated, with students and young scientists being encouraged to participate in scientific conferences and publish in specialized journals. The

development of young scientists and doctoral students who continue to work on topics related to bibliotherapy and its interdisciplinary dimensions is supported.

- **Continuing education opportunities for library professionals.** Professional development training programs have been created for librarians who want to integrate bibliotherapy into their practice. An online training platform is in the process of being prepared that will offer courses on bibliotherapy and related topics for the continuing professional development of library professionals. The realization of this sub-goal led to a significant enrichment of the academic content, creating conditions for building a new generation of library professionals who have broader competencies and are prepared to use bibliotherapy as an effective tool in their practice.

In the future it is planned to:

Expand curricula by introducing specialized modules and electives in bibliotherapy. Develop new research projects in the field of bibliotherapy, involving doctoral students and undergraduates. Collaborate with libraries and social institutions for the practical application of bibliotherapy techniques. This initiative strengthens the connection between science, education and practice, ensuring sustainable development of bibliotherapy in Bulgaria and creating opportunities for future research and innovation in the field.

The last element of the project was the popularization of bibliotherapy in Bulgaria. The popularization of bibliotherapy in Bulgaria was carried out through a wide range of scientific and practical initiatives, including participation in conferences, organization of scientific forums, publication activity and digital presentation of the project. The goal was to disseminate knowledge about bibliotherapy, both among the scientific and professional community, and among the general public.

- **Participation in scientific conferences and presentation of the project.** Members of the team presented reports and scientific research at national and international conferences focused on bibliotherapy, reading as a therapeutic tool and the role of libraries in social support. Emphasis was placed on: the theoretical foundations and development of bibliotherapy in Bulgaria; the empirical results of the national representative survey on the perception of the therapeutic functions of reading; analysis of good bibliotherapy practices from international experience, etc.
- **Organization of scientific forums and events.** Roundtable on Bibliotherapy; National Scientific Conference with International Participation "Bibliotherapy in Bulgaria - Opportunities and Prospects" - research and good practices from Bulgaria was presented with the aim of stimulating the development of bibliotherapy in our country. A scientific collection of conference reports was published, which serves as a valuable source of information for specialists and researchers.
- **Publication activity: scientific publications and methodological resources.** An important part of the popularization of bibliotherapy was the publication of scientific research, methodological materials and educational resources. A monograph on bibliotherapy summarizes the results of the project, presents the theoretical aspects of bibliotherapy and analyzes its application in library practice. A teaching aid, intended for students and library professionals, includes practical guidelines and examples for the use of bibliotherapy.
- **Scientific articles and reports** – published in specialized Bulgarian and international publications, which contributes to the wider dissemination of the topic and its establishment in academic circles. The project established bibliotherapy as a relevant and promising field in library and social sciences in Bulgaria. Thanks to scientific forums, publications and digital presence, the topic received deserved attention and laid the foundations for future initiatives, research and practical applications in the library environment.

### 3. Conclusion

The main hypothesis of the project was that bibliotherapy is poorly interpreted in a scientific-theoretical and practical-applied aspect in Bulgaria, that it is not widely known and used in the library environment, and that it is necessary to stimulate the application of the therapeutic potential of reading in atypical situations. In the course of the study, empirical studies were conducted, scientific and practical initiatives were organized, which allowed to analyze the real situation and confirm the validity of the hypothesis.

#### 1. *Lack of systematic research and low awareness*

- The nationally representative study showed that although reading is intuitively used as a form of coping with crisis situations, the conscious application of bibliotherapy is poorly known among both librarians and the general public.
- There is a lack of structured methodologies and systematized resources for bibliotherapy in Bulgarian library practice, which proves that the topic has so far been episodically researched and applied.
- The results of surveys with library professionals showed a low rate of professional training in bibliotherapy issues and insufficient integration of bibliotherapy programs into library services.

### 2. Significant potential for the application of bibliotherapy in the library environment

- The results of the study showed that the population perceives reading as a coping mechanism for stress, social isolation, and personal crises (for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic). This supports the idea that bibliotherapy has the potential to be purposefully implemented, but an expert framework for this is lacking.
- Training activities conducted with librarians and students showed that with appropriate training, librarians can effectively apply bibliotherapy methods in their work.

### 3. Successfully laid foundations for the popularization and future development of bibliotherapy

- The organization of the national scientific conference and the roundtable with the participation of experts, librarians and researchers created conditions for a broader discussion of the topic and helped integrate it into the scientific and professional discourse.
- The creation of a website and the publication of scientific works (monograph, collection of reports, teaching aids) provided librarians and researchers with access to scientifically based information and methodological guidelines, which will facilitate the future development of bibliotherapy in Bulgaria.
- The inclusion of bibliotherapy in the curricula for library and information science students ensures its long-term development and integration into library practice.

The main hypothesis was confirmed, as it was found that bibliotherapy is poorly developed in Bulgaria, but has significant potential for development. The project laid a solid foundation for future research, popularized bibliotherapy and created practical mechanisms for its implementation in the library environment. In the long term, the project created prerequisites for new fundamental scientific research that will contribute to the deeper theoretical and practical application of bibliotherapy in Bulgaria. The present project has proven that bibliotherapy is a valuable but underdeveloped resource in Bulgaria, which has serious potential for application in library practice, social work and psychology. The study found that although reading is intuitively used as a means of coping in difficult life situations, the targeted and systematized application of bibliotherapy is poorly known and developed both at the theoretical and practical level.

In the modern world, marked by stress, social challenges and global crises, bibliotherapy provides an accessible, effective and long-term means of emotional and psychological support. Its development in library practice and education will contribute to improving the quality of life, social inclusion and cultural development of society. Thus, the project not only proves the importance of bibliotherapy, but also sets a direction for its future establishment as an integral part of library and social activities in Bulgaria.

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