

**Existential Psychopathology:**  
**course for students of the second, professional level of training**  
**existential therapists of the International Institute of existential**  
**Consultancy (MIEK)**

At the opening ceremony of the 6th Congress of the European Federation for Existential Therapy (FETE) in Rome, Prof. Ernesto Spinelli, in his welcoming address, drew our attention to the following:

“...In recent years, it seems to me that existential therapy has moved too deeply into the world of psychotherapy. So much so, that the way it presents itself, the way other models and approaches in psychotherapy perceive us—has become too similar to everything else. In doing so, we have lost our radicalness. We have not moved far enough to the outer edge of the very periphery where we should be. We have, to a large extent, lost our radical voice. And in my view, this is not only sad, but dangerous. Dangerous because psychotherapy, in its dominant form, is undergoing radical, albeit unwanted, changes”.\*

In our opinion, these changes consist in psychotherapy becoming overly formalized, filled with more and more conventions and restrictions, while offering fewer opportunities for real therapeutic help—the kind of help our clients truly need.

Clinical psychiatry, for its part, has been distant from patients practically since its inception. The clinical approach has always focused on symptoms and diagnoses, whereas the person—along with their experience and emotional suffering—was often ignored and left without the help they truly required. In modern psychiatry, however, we are now witnessing a shift: young psychiatrists are increasingly striving to address the real needs of patients. Nevertheless, our

experience working with competent psychiatrists shows that even they are often unfamiliar with alternative approaches to treating mental disorders.

To bridge this gap between therapists and patients suffering from various mental disorders, we—the teaching faculty of the International Institute for Existential Consultancy — have developed our own specialized course, *Existential Psychopathology*, which we offer instead of the traditional clinical propaedeutics at the second, professional level of our training program. In this paper, I will briefly present our existential view of psychopathology and the course itself. I hope this article will contribute to the broadening of existential understanding of mental disorders and to the search for alternative ways to offer therapeutic help to our clients. I also hope it will encourage the exchange of experience in teaching psychopathology during the professional training of existential therapists.

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Course**

The theoretical part of our course is based on two fundamental existential principles: **de-universalization** and **complementarity**. We believe that:

“No theory can fully describe a situation. Every concept or theory only captures a part of it. A theory about a person never describes the whole person. It describes only a fragment of their life at a given stage—nothing more. The understanding we gain is always local. It is a local theory that captures one aspect of life at that moment. Another theory captures another aspect... No theory—no matter how brilliant (whether psychological, psychiatric, philosophical, or anthropological)—can encompass the life of even a single human being. All understandings are partial. But together, like a patchwork quilt, they may offer us some kind of explanation. But only together”.\*\*

From this perspective, we introduce our students to what we consider the most important existential approaches to understanding and treating mental disorders. These include the theories and therapeutic practices of **Karl Jaspers**, **Ludwig Binswanger**, **R.D. Laing**, **Antoni Kepiński**, and **Arnhild Lauveng**—each of whom, in our view, offered their own “local theory” of the nature of mental

suffering and developed a unique therapeutic praxis. Below, we briefly justify our choices.

### **Key Thinkers and Contributions**

Anyone familiar with psychiatry knows Jaspers' foundational work *General Psychopathology*. Yet many psychiatrists have never even heard of his equally important book *Strindberg and Van Gogh*, in which Jaspers clearly demonstrates the limitations—and even futility—of the classical approach to mental illness, advocating instead for a focus on treating the person.

**Ludwig Binswanger** was the first psychiatrist to integrate psychotherapy into the treatment and rehabilitation of patients in his sanatorium. This marked a breakthrough in psychiatric care, especially since the most severe cases from all over the world were sent to Binswanger—and many recovered.

Although **R.D. Laing** rejected the “anti-psychiatrist” label, his radical view of mental illness and his successful therapeutic communities placed him in opposition to mainstream psychiatry. His claim that his patients' mental disorders were not “illnesses” was revolutionary and contributed to his marginalization within the field.

**Antoni Kepiński** was the first psychiatrist in Eastern Europe to actively use psychotherapy in treatment. He also helped popularize the **existential** approach to psychotherapy.

**Arnild Lauveng** is a Norwegian clinical psychologist—and the only known Dr. of psychology to have recovered from what was considered an incurable form of schizophrenia. In her books, Lauveng offers a unique analysis of her painful experiences. Her first book describes symptoms from within, as a patient, while the second reflects on those same experiences from the perspective of a clinician.

## **Practical Foundations: The Method of Dr. A. Alekseichik**

The practical component of our course is based on the clinical experience of **Dr. Alexander Alekseichik (Lithuania)**, whose therapeutic method over five decades developed into what is now known as **Intensive Therapeutic Life (ITL)**.

A central principle of this approach is:

**“90% psychotherapy, 10% pharmacology”.**

In the past, our students completed clinical internships in the Department of Neuroses and Borderline Disorders at the Republican Mental Health Center in Vilnius, under Dr. Alekseichik’s guidance. Since this opportunity is no longer available, the internship now takes place through our MIEC *Helpline*. During their work on the line, students regularly interact with callers—many of whom suffer from mental disorders—and receive clinical supervision from practicing psychiatrists.

Dr. Alekseichik often says:

“Better to see once than to hear a hundred times; better to do once than to see a hundred times.”

Guided by this principle of **experiential learning**, we offer our students practical exercises in which they recall either personal experiences of altered states or significant encounters with people experiencing mental distress. In triads, they explore how to approach such cases using the frameworks of Jaspers, Binswanger, Laing, Kępiński, and Lauveng.

Moreover, each student in our program has personal experience with ITL, as the first, therapeutic level of professional training at MIEC is conducted according to the principles of **Intensive Therapeutic Life**.

## **Conclusion**

In our view, the **existential perspective** on mental disorders moves them beyond the **purely biological dimension** where clinical psychiatry tends to contain them. Instead, it opens access to the **social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions** of our clients’ lives—and at times, even to the **dimension of the**

**miraculous**, as introduced into the modern existential discourse by Prof. Andrey Gnezdilov.

This expanded view offers greater possibilities for professional support and significantly reduces the pharmacological component in the treatment of mental suffering—thus presenting a genuine alternative to the clinical model.

\* Spinelli, E. "Unmet Needs of Existential Therapy"

// Opening remarks at the opening ceremony of the VI Congress of the European Federation for Existential Therapy - Rome: 21.05.2025.

\*\* Yeselson, S. "The Future of Psychotherapy and the Dialogue of Cultures"

// Lecture at the IX World Congress on Psychotherapy - online: 28.06.2020.