



A treatment approach that puts the family at the centre takes patient and family interaction into account. When family members receive the support they need, they can in turn provide better support for the patient.

“This is also about attitudes,” says Kletthagen. “We have to be willing to involve families and recognize that they’re an important resource for the patient.”

#### **An intruder in the family**

People suffering from depression are downcast and have less energy and capacity for activities and enjoyment. Things that were previously important for the person no longer have special significance, and self-esteem and confidence plummet. Symptoms vary, but for many, severe depression may also lead to suicidal thoughts.

“It can take awhile between the start of symptoms and the start of treatment. Depression can sometimes seem like an intruder in the family, and relatives may live in perpetual fear of their loved one committing suicide,” says Kletthagen.

Close family members often feel powerless. They are struggling with mixed emotions such as fear and anxiety, but also irritation and anger. The ensuing guilt and living with such hard feelings over time can be an ordeal.

#### **Confidentiality creates a barrier**

Often professional confidentiality precludes involving family members and dependents in treatment. When it comes to mental health problems like depression, the disease itself can make relationships difficult, and many patients are reluctant to share information with others.

Kletthagen emphasizes that healthcare professionals must comply with policies and procedures, but she believes they need to be more sensitive to families’ needs.

“We may think they have enough information, but the family may not perceive it the same way,” says Kletthagen.

She considers it important for healthcare professionals to be active and explore why a patient may choose not to involve family. They need to impress on the patient how important family support is.

“It’s even more important to think holistically now, especially since institutional placements are being scaled back and more people are receiving treatment where they live,” says Kletthagen.

 [Almost half the population will experience depression in their lifetime. \(Illustrative photo: Colourbox.\)](#) [5]

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 [Hege Kletthagen. \(Photo: NTNU\)](#) [6]

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[Skundberg-Kletthagen, H., Hall-Lord, M. L., Hedelin, B., & Wangensteen, S. \(2016\). Relatives of Inpatients Suffering from Severe Depression: Their Burden and Encounters with the Psychiatric Health Services. Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 1-6.](#)

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