

## **MAJOR DEPRESSION AND FAMILY LIFE**

### **- The family's way of living with a long-term illness**

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#### **Abstract:**

The overall aim was to explore the family's experiences of major depression and the meaning of the illness for family life, for the ill person, the partner and the children.

This thesis has a life-world perspective and is a qualitative explorative study using narrative interviews with families with parents who were identified as having major depression MD (Paper I-IV). A case study with a single family (n=3) was performed with a focus on describing what happens and how to manage the illness in a family (I). Group interviews with 7 families (n=18) were conducted to describe the ways of living with MD in families (II). Further, parents (n=8), who were identified as suffering from major depression, representing 8 families were interviewed to elucidate the meaning of depression in family life from the viewpoint of the ill parent (III). Interviews were also conducted with children and young adults (n=8), aged from 6 to 26 years, representing 6 families to elucidate the meaning of a parent's major depression in family life from the children's perspective (IV). The interview texts were analysed using qualitative methods; thematic content analysis (I-II) and phenomenological hermeneutic analysis (III-IV).

The thesis shows that family members had different views and ways of interpreting and managing the family's situation when the mother was suffering from major depression (I). The families faced demanding conditions in the presence of illness which they tried to manage together. The families' situation (fatigue, loss of energy and being burdened with guilt) seemed to bring these families into stressful life situations (II). Depressed parents' suffering and dignity were revealed as being simultaneously present and complicating family life. Dignity has to be repeatedly restored for oneself and the family, and the family's dignity has to be restored in front of other outside the family circle (III). Children's sense of responsibility and loneliness were elucidated. The children's responsibility includes their striving for reciprocity, and in their loneliness is the children's yearning for reciprocity. Children compensate with a sense of responsibility for an ill parent in family life and for their lack of health. Children's family life shifts between responsibility and loneliness as they wait for reciprocity in family life to return to normal (IV).

This thesis shows how a study using qualitative methods makes it possible for family members together and individually to talk about major depression as illness that is an intruder in their family life. The thesis elucidates how the depression complicates and involves the family member's life as well as the ill person's family life. All family members have their own life-world and try to balance everyday life from an individual perspective, which overshadows that managing the illness is a concern for the whole family.

**Keywords:** children, content analysis, everyday life-world, family, family life, phenomenological hermeneutics, major depression, parents

**ISBN 978-91-628-7668-5**

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Akademisk avhandling

som för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen vid Sahlgrenska akademien  
vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras i Hörsal 2118, Arvid Wallgrens  
backe, Göteborg, torsdagen den 26 februari 2009 kl 13.00

av

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This thesis is based on the following papers:

- I. Hedman Ahlström, B. Skärsäter, I. & Danielson, E. (2007). Major depression in a family: What happens and how to manage - A case study. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 28(7):691-706.
- II. Hedman Ahlström, B. Skärsäter, I. & Danielson, E. (2009). Living with major depression: Experiences from families' perspectives. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*. (In Press)
- III. Hedman Ahlström, B. Skärsäter, I. & Danielson, E. (2009). The meaning of major depression in family life: The viewpoint of the ill parent. (Re-submitted)
- IV. Hedman Ahlström, B. Skärsäter, I. & Danielson, E. Children's view of a parent's major depression in the family. (Submitted)

Göteborg 2009



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