

life," explains Nanja Holland Hansen and continues: "There is definitely a shortage of offers for these relatives. They're often told that they should remember to take care of themselves, but they haven't learned how to. We found that those who were involved in the study received the tools for precisely this," says Nanja Holland Hansen.

"Our suffering is maintained inside of us when we don't work with it. To avoid feeling pain, we may resort to behavior such as working too much or buying things that we don't need. It's therefore in all these everyday actions that our compassion training becomes important and can be used to help alleviate what is difficult," she says.

No one escapes

The purpose of training in compassion is thus more than just feeling empathy or worrying about another person.

"Not a single person can completely avoid experiencing painful things in their life. In this way we're all the same. But what isn't the same for everyone is our ability to deal with the pain and suffering we experience. Training programs in compassion have been developed because the research shows that we can train and strengthen our mental health. With systematic [training](#) of compassion, we generate more attention—and understanding of—our own thoughts, feelings and behavior. And this helps us to develop the tools and skills to engage in healthier relations with ourselves and others," she explains.

A total of 161 relatives of people with mental illness participated in the study. This makes the study one of the largest of its kind in the world, and also the first scientific randomized clinical trial carried out with relatives in Denmark. The relatives were between 18 and 75 of age and were family members to people with various psychiatric disorders such as e.g. ADHD, schizophrenia and depression.

Meditation as homework

The relatives met once a week in groups of twenty participants over an eight-week period. Each session lasted two hours and was structured with small group exercises, large group discussions, instruction in the theme of the week and meditation. The homework consisted of twenty minutes of daily meditation.

The results have just been published in the scientific journal *JAMA*.

"My hope is that local authorities and regions can offer this type of intervention for relatives. It should be an option and could easily be incorporated into our healthcare system. Economically and socially, a healthy person going on [sick leave](#) solely because he or she is a relative is a huge loss," says the researcher.

[Billedtekst:]: "Up to fifty percent of relatives of people with [mental illness](#) risk becoming ill themselves. That's why it's important that we also keep them and their well-being in mind," says Nanja Holland Hansen.

More information: Nanja Holland Hansen et al, Effect of a Compassion Cultivation Training Program for Caregivers of People With Mental Illness in Denmark, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.1020](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.1020)

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