

## No root cause: What if mental health symptoms are the actual disease?

“In the prevailing understanding of mental disorders, the premise is that an underlying cause exists,” says Sverre Urnes Johnson, associate professor at UiO’s Department of Psychology and a senior researcher and psychology specialist at the Modum Bad Psychiatric Center.

The idea is that symptoms like sadness, insomnia, social isolation and constant brooding are just different manifestations of a hidden root cause.

The symptoms aren’t the real problem, in other words. The actual problem can be found in a person’s genes, biochemical disruptions or unconscious internal conflicts.

The prevailing principle above has been taken from medicine, says Johnson.

An example is when an underlying bacterial infection gives you a fever and sore throat. Even if you take painkillers and fever-reducing medication, it doesn’t address the real cause of the problem.

“But this approach doesn’t make sense in psychology. Here, the symptoms have value in themselves. They are the patient’s experienced problems, and we know that these problems affect each other. One problem – or symptom, as it’s called in the medical model – can trigger or reinforce another,” Johnson says.

“Focusing on finding underlying causes can come at the expense of the chance to help someone,” says Johnson.

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