INTRODUCTION: Family-based interventions have shown to be effective in the treatment of major depression. In a recent RCT, systemic family groups led to significantly higher rates of treatment responders and higher rates of patients no longer using antidepressant medication at 15 months follow-up compared to standard care.

OBJECTIVES: In order to better understand the underlying mechanisms of change, helpful treatment experiences of depressive patients and their partners in the family groups were explored.

METHODS: 34 depressive patients and their partners were asked to fill out an open-ended questionnaire investigating helpful experiences during treatment at the end of a 6 bi-weekly group session cycle. Responses were analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) by three different researchers.

RESULTS: Ten recurring themes were reported as helpful by both the depressed patients and their partners:

1. Presence,
2. Cohesion,
3. Support,
4. Openness,
5. Discussion,
6. Self revelation,
7. Insight,
8. Progress,
9. Observational experiences and

CONCLUSIONS: The results of this study help to get insights in the therapeutic factors, which should be emphasized in family groups.