

FROM DEPRESSION TO LIFE SATISFACTION IN MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Abstract: *Autism represent a feared diagnostic that produce anxiety and emotional disturbance each time a parent encounters a prospective problem in the child's life (McConnell Savage, & Breitzkreuz, 2014; Davis & Carter 2008). 106 mothers (aged 20-49 years) half with typical children, half with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were questioned using life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, parental stress and life orientation scales. Information about time passed from when the diagnostic was certain was also collected. Anxiety, depression and parental stress is significant higher in mothers with children with autism, but life satisfaction and life orientation do not differ from those of mothers of typical children. Also, life satisfaction and optimism increase as time passes since the child was first diagnosed and depression decrease. The results are in line with scientific literature and help specialist to understand and offer better support to mothers in need.*

Key words: *autism, life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, parental stress.*

1. Introduction

Autism is considered a pervasive developmental disorder of neurobiological origins, implying altered interaction abilities, altered communication skills, diminished and repetitive interests and actions (Marcelli, 2003). The general term - autism spectrum disorders (ASD) underlie heterogeneous manifestations from nonverbal children with highly deteriorated behavior until prodigies and scientist who exhibit mannerism or narrow and ritual behaviors (Leaf, McEachin, Dayharsh, & Boehm, 2010; Predescu, 2011). A particular manifestation encounter by ASD persons is that people, animals and objects are frequently treated the same as instruments, in order to gain satisfaction, and rarely as gratifying companionship (Dover & Couteur, 2007).

Raising a child with development problems is stressful for different reasons: the disorder is a life time condition that requires short and long-term handling, the cognitive abilities of the child are unequal developed, he/she may demonstrate disruptive behavior, lack of adaptive actions, unbalanced sensorial input needed to interact with

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the environment. Parents tend to interpret their life situation as unique and to pull off from friends and relatives (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2004; McConnell, Savage, & Breitzkreuz, 2014). Frequently, specialized support is limited or resources to have access to specialized intervention is lacking, situation that only add to the stress of parents. Society often reject or marginalize people and families with special conditions, social support being scarce (Gray & Holden, 1992; Konstantareas & Homatidis, 1989). The pile of concerns for parents of children with ASD is high, and there are studies confirming that these parents experience more stress than parents of children with mental disorder (Donovan, 1988) or cystic fibrosis (Bouma & Schweitzer, 1990) and similar with those of children with heart failure (Fărcaş & Năstasă, 2014).

Studies revealed not only differences in stress of parents depending on the disease, but also between the parent (mother or father) and how they cope. Mothers, as a group, reported a higher level of anxiety compared with fathers, finding that can be related with the amount of care they provide, often dedicating all their time to their children and giving up profession and social life. As a consequence, mothers deprive themselves of the support that contact with other people can offer (Freeman, Perry, & Factor, 1991; Gray & Holden, 1992; Koegel et al., 1992). Olsson and Hwang (2001) studied mental health issues in parents of children with intellectual disorders and found that mothers of children who had intellectual disability and autism combined disclosed higher levels of depression compared with those of children who didn't associate autism and the last ones had higher level in depression compared with control group. The results reproduced earlier findings (Breslau, Staruch, & Mortimer, 1982).

2. Objectives

The present study aims to investigate the differences between mothers of typical children and those of the children with ASD in following characteristics: anxiety, depression, stress, life satisfaction and positive vs. negative orientation toward life. A second interest is in how these components relate with the length of time since the child was first diagnosed. It is expected that mothers of children with ASD exhibit higher anxiety, depression and stress, while the comparison group will be more optimistic and more satisfied with life. Also, it is expected that as time passes, anxiety, stress and depression will decrease while optimism and life satisfaction may rise.

3. Material and Methods

ASQ (Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1982) measures anxiety, with cognitive, somatic and behavioural dimensions, using an eight points scale. The instrument demonstrates high internal consistency for each of the dimension (alpha Cronbach ranging from .88 to .94)

Parental stress questionnaire (Berry & Jones, 1995) is an eighteen items scale with answers in five points, reflecting benefits and satisfaction from being in a parent role as well as responsibilities, limited resources or restriction imposed by being a parent. Alpha Cronbach for the present research group equals a value of .88.

Zung depression scale (1965) is a twenty items scale used in mental health setting to measure depression through affective, somatic and cognitive indicators. Answers range on a

four points scale and Alpha Cronbach for the entire questionnaire equals a value of .84.

Life satisfaction scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a five items scale with answers in 7 points, measuring the cognitive perception of life rather than the affective perception. The scale presents a high homogeneity (alpha Cronbach = .90).

Life orientation test - revised (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) is a ten items scale measuring optimism and pessimism disposition toward life, with answers ranging from zero points to three points. High scores indicate optimism. The homogeneity of the scale reached a value of .70.

All questionnaires were posted on-line and members of Facebook groups on themes regarding autism and autism intervention were invited to answer. Similarly, members of Facebook groups on parenting and children development were also invited. In the first night after the questionnaires were uploaded, 186 answers were received. The questionnaires remained online for a week.

4. Participants

240 participants have chosen to fill in the questionnaires. Out of this number, 56 were mothers of children with ASD, but three of them missed a number of answers, so, their responses were eliminated. In order to have equivalent groups, the age of the child (children) became a criterion to pair the groups, and only fifty-three mothers of typical children remained in the control group. The age of the mothers ranged from 20 to 49 years of age, 71 coming from urban area and 35 from rural areas.

5. Results

Comparison between the two categories of mothers revealed significant differences regarding negative affect such as depression, anxiety and stress with higher values in mothers of ASD children as compared to those of typical children, while no significant difference between the two groups was found in life satisfaction and orientation toward life (Table 1).

Table 1
Differences in anxiety, stress, depression, life satisfaction and optimism between mother of children with ASD and mothers of typical children

	Mother with	N	M	S D	t	p
Anxiety	ASD child	53	106.60	72.26	2.86	.005
	Typical child	53	72.05	49.17		
Parental stress	ASD child	53	41.75	13.00	3.80	.001
	Typical child	53	33.66	8.43		
Depression	ASD child	53	55.02	14.77	2.14	.034
	Typical child	53	49.38	12.17		
Life satisfaction	ASD child	53	21.96	6.69	-1.68	.095
	Typical child	53	24.37	8.00		
Life orientation	ASD child	53	12.84	5.52	-1.84	.068
	Typical child	53	14.77	5.16		

Results partially confirms the first hypothesis and duplicate many of the data from the literature.

A second interest was place on the relation between the recency of the diagnosis and the level of negative affect displayed by mothers. Correspondingly the association between the length of time since diagnostic and life satisfaction and optimism orientation was examined. The length of time from when the diagnostic was received was separated in four categories: less than six months, more than six months but less than one year, more than one year but less than three years, and more than three years.

Table 2

The relation between the recency of the diagnosis and affective states, life satisfaction and life orientation in mothers of ASD children

			Depression	Anxiety	Parental stress	Life satisfaction	Life orientation
Spearman's rho	Diagnosis' recency	rho	-.30*	-.13	-.13	.29**	.45**
		N	53	53	53	53	53

* Significant correlation 0.05 (2-tailed)

** Significant correlation 0.01 (2-tailed).

The results showed a significant negative association between depression and time spent since the diagnosis, meaning that time reduce the intensity of depression indicators. A significant and positive correlation between the length of time and life satisfaction and life orientation was also found (see Table 2), meaning that with time, optimism and satisfaction with life increase. No relation was found between time spent since diagnosis and anxiety and parental stress, results that may be understand as a sign of continuous worry and stress, no matter how long it took since the first encounter with the problem.

6. Discussion

The present study aimed to measure anxiety, depression, stress, life satisfaction and optimism in mother of children with ASD and mothers of typical children. The goal was to compare the results of the two groups and to verify if as time passes improvement in mothers' mental state can be noticed. Level of anxiety was more elevated in mothers of children with ASD then in the control group, replicating the results mentioned also by Bitska and Sharpley, (2004) and Riahi and Izadi-mazidi (2012).

A second consequence of taking care of children diagnosed with autism is parental stress, consequence stated by several other studies (Estes et al. 2009; Griffith, et al., 2010; Hamlyn-Wright, et al., 2007). Both, anxiety and parental stress do not seem to diminish with time, reflecting that constant attention and vigilance double by constant allocation of resources are necessary in caring for a child diagnosed with ASD.

Raised depression levels were found in mothers from the target group compared with control group, a result that is in line with literature (Almansour et al., 2013; Towairqi, Alosaimi, et al., 2015). Depression level decrease as time elapse, leaving mothers with resources to help their children.

Mothers of typical children are not more optimistic than mothers of ASD children nor more satisfied with life. Lai, Goh, Oei, and Sung (2015) explain that coping mechanism activated by parents that care for children with autism help them experience satisfaction due to the fact that they orient themselves on small progress, on little pleasurable things that contribute to the encounter of joy and fulfilment. The present study presents a positive association between time passing and optimism and life satisfaction, probably due to the same mechanism: as the shock and disruption introduced by learning the diagnosis diminish, the possibility to concentrate on positive things increase and become more important. Some limits of the present research should be also discussed. First of all, no data regarding social, financial or specialized support were collected, information that can be direction in analyzing the data in the future. Second, characteristics of the children (typical or not) were not asked. The degree autism manifest itself varies considerably and may contribute to the level of emotional distress in parents. Third, the respondents were active in Facebook groups seeking out autism information or parenting and children development subjects, which means that the participants represent a more informed group that distinguish itself from general population. Fourth, the on-line presentation of the questionnaire attracts some limitation by lacking the control of the respondents.

Nevertheless, the results impose value in respects to intervention programs aimed to offer support for parents of children with ASD, knowing that anxiety and stress stay elevated in time and that life satisfaction and optimism represent a useful reserve in dealing with difficulties entailed by looking after children in general and children with autism especially.

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