

# The Impact of Therapeutic Intervention on the Psychological Health of Parents with Children Having Autism

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**Abstract:**The experience of parenting and raising a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has significant challenges which impact the emotional and psychological well-being of the parents. The current study aims to systematically examine the literature and review on factors influencing depression and anxiety in the parents of autistic children. This study reviews 20 studies and synthesizes its findings to examine the psychological impact of parenting children with ASD. It suggests that the parents and caregivers of children with ASD often experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Factors that greatly impact the mental health of these parents are severity of autism symptoms in the child, parental self-efficacy, lack of family or social support, comorbid health and behavioural difficulties as well as demographic and socio-economic factors like family income and parental education. The review emphasizes the importance of early diagnosis and employing tailored interventions aimed at addressing these challenges.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder in children that have garnered a lot of attention in recent years amongst the psychology community. In comparison to the parents of typically developing children, the parents with ASD children face higher levels of depression and anxiety (Nevill and colleagues, 2018). These elevated mental health risks are often caused due to the lack of understanding and societal support combined with the daily challenges of managing the child's behavioral and developmental difficulties (Davis & Carter, 2008). With the help of therapeutic interventions, these challenges can be reduced by providing coping strategies and support to the children. The improvements in the child's behavior and their responsiveness towards the parents often lead to reduced levels of stress and anxiety among parents. Parents of the autistic children engaging in behavioural interventions have been found to have lower levels of anxiety and depression thus suggesting that the effective therapy not only benefits

the children but also provides significant psychological relief to the parent (Keen et al., 2014).

However, various factors such as the severity of the autism symptoms, child's age, and the quality of therapeutic methods influence the outcome observed in the parents. If there are continued challenges with child behaviour or lack of societal/ family support, the psychological strain on the parents might persist even after interventions (Hartley et al., 2012). Therefore, this review underscores the importance of incorporating mental health support for the parents in the intervention programs for autistic children, addressing the needs of both the child and their parents.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Annette Estes et al. (2019), investigated the effects that early autism intervention had on parents and family adaptive functioning. The study was conducted with the intention of examining research evidence related to the impact that child focus Autism intervention had on the parents of young autistic children. The intervention approaches that are considered to be most efficient when it comes to improving young children with ASD are Therapist-delivered, comprehensive, high-intensity EIBIs. The key findings of this study suggested that there is a relationship between the well-being of parents and the intervention outcomes of the autistic children. It was found that the parents who are highly stressed overland or under resource were less likely to initiate intervention services for their children or were less able to engage fully in the learning process that are the requirements for the early ASD intervention. While parents who are well supported, resourced and are ready to learn and adapt seems to produce best outcomes in their children.

Gerald Mahoney (2019), found that the mothers of young autistic children who were focusing on improving the quality of mother-child relationship skills rather than teaching them development skills, showed drastic improvements in levels of parenting stress and depression. The study was conducted to understand how the high stress and depression levels in mothers were positively impacted by the level of responsiveness received from their autistic children in daily lives. At the beginning of this study conducted in Saudi Arabia, the sample used were the mothers of children with ASD, all of whom were reported to have clinical levels of stress and depression. Through the study, as the parents started to receive responsiveness from their children the stress levels dropped to 30% while depression levels dropped from 70% to 15%. No such improvements are reported in the parents of the control group where responsive training was not provided. It was also observed that there were significant improvements in the development skills of the autistic children in various areas like social skills, improved language development and enhanced motor skills as compared to the children in the control group. So, it is recommended that the ASD interventions be based on building parental relationships with the size which can encourage the children to improve their developmental skills.

Rabea Begum et al (2019), studied the impact of having children with Autism Spectrum Disorder on the family. In order to find out the impact autistic children had on their family, a narrative review was done to conduct this study. The key finding suggested that autism has a very strong impact on the family, economic status, sibling and considerably affects the lifestyle of each member of the family. Thus, it is observed that the entire family and its members are affected by the condition of the child with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The intention behind this study was to explore the experiences of such families better and understand how to improve the approach of Autism services in order to empower them and provide educational support which might also be of great help for the professionals.

Zhou, Wensu et al (2019), tried to understand the correlation between the emotional problems that mothers of autistic children experience with their socioeconomic status and the child's core symptoms. In order to understand what roles the social economic status of the mothers and the core symptoms of the

autistic children played in the depressive and anxiety symptoms experienced by the mothers, a cross sectional survey was conducted in the Chang Sha city of China. A total of 180 mothers of children with ASD were asked to complete the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) and the 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) that were used to assess the anxiety and depressive symptoms of the mothers. The social economic status of the mothers were assessed based on the factors like educational level occupation and annual family income. general information questionnaire was also included along with the Autism Behaviour Checklist (ABC) and Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) were used to evaluate the core symptoms of the children. This investigation suggests that the emotional troubles like anxiety and depression faced by the mothers of children with ASD has no relationship with their socio economic status but was rather highly impacted by the core symptoms of their autistic children. With better interventions and improvement in the core symptoms of the ASD child, there will be improvements in the emotional problems faced by the mother and the reduction in depression and anxiety experienced by them.

Dr Partha Malakar et al (2018), compared the levels of stress anxiety and depression between the parents of children with autism and ADHD. A total of 50 males and females were taken as a sample for this study belonging from Bengali families in Kolkata, who had children of not more than 10 years while the parents' age ranged from 35 to 45 years. In order to get the data as accurate as possible, the other possibilities leading to stress, anxiety and depression like chronic physical and mental disturbance as well as separation were excluded from the criteria of the sample serving this study. With the use of average, standard deviation and t-test of independent samples, it was concluded that there were significant differences between the stress, anxiety and depression experienced by the parents of autistic children and that of children with ADHD. In previous literature, it is suggested that the stress, anxiety and depression faced by the parents of children with ADHD is likely higher than those experienced by the parents of autistic children.

Ruquayyah. M Bilal et al. (2018), conducted a cohort study on 100 mothers of children diagnosed with autism and 100 mothers of healthy children. The study aims to investigate whether the mothers of autistic children experience more stress, anxiety,

depression and other psychiatric problems more than those of children with other disabilities. The group of mothers of autistic children are compared with that of the control group of healthy children based on the Arabic version of Depression, Anxiety and Stress scale (DASS- 42). It suggests that psychological disorders like stress, anxiety and depression are very common among mothers of autistic children so these mothers should get sufficient psychological care and social support in order to deal with the stress of parenting and take better care of their mental health.

Bonis et al (2016), reviewed various articles to synthesize the factors that impact the experience of parents with a child having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and identify the factors that impact parental stress and their decision making to use autism services or not. Through a search conducted using CINAHL and Medline, 132 articles were summarized which had specific criterias like those published in English, available in full text, and focused on autistic children and parent's experience of caring for a child with ASD. The study discusses the challenging aspects of the child's diagnosis and care as well as the factors that impact parental shares and decision making to use Autism services. The key findings conclude that further research and practice are required to develop interventions for early diagnosis, providing the access to care and helping parents to decide to use Autism services and stress management for their better mental health.

Atefeh Soltanifar et al. (2015), evaluated the parenting stress among fathers and mothers of children with ASD and examined the correlation between severity of the disorder in children and the level of parental stress. This study was conducted on 42 couples who have autistic children aged between 2 and 12 diagnosed based on Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) criteria. The data was collected in a way where the demographic details were recorded using a questionnaire and the severity of autism in children was determined based on Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) while the stress of parents was measured using Parenting Stress Index (PSI). Using SPSS, the collected data was evaluated which suggested that the father of the children with higher severity of the disorder experienced higher levels of stress while generally the mothers of children with ASD, exhibited significantly more stress than the father. The findings in this study conducted in Iran, helps us understand the various and different

emotional need that parent for children with ASD have which requires to be considered while planning the effective treatment strategies for their children.

Maria Valicenti-McDermott et al.(2015), studied the amount of parental stress experienced by the families who have children with Autism and Other developmental disabilities. The aim of the study was to understand the association between the stress faced by the parents or family of an autistic child or a child with developmental disability with the comorbidity of the symptoms. This cross-sectional study used structured interviews to gather data from families of children with autism (n=50) and families of children with other developmental disabilities (n=50), who were of the same age and gender. The interview was conducted to understand the impact of different variables on parental stress and to assess them, "Parenting Stress Index-Short Form", "Gastrointestinal Questionnaire", "Child Sleep Habits Questionnaire", and "Aberrant Behavior Checklist" were used. The key findings suggest the parental stress in the family of autistic children is higher than that of other developmental disabilities. There was also an association found between higher levels of parental stress in autistic children with gastrointestinal problems and that of sleeping difficulties in the group of children with developmental disabilities. Thus, we can conclude that there is a direct association with the levels of irritability in the children with parental stress. So, a better regulation of the child's mood can help in reducing the stress in parents of children with ASD or developmental disabilities.

Allyson Davis (2015), explored the study on Parental Stress and Child Behavior Problems in Families of Children with Autism and realized that these studies showed that the parents of children with ASD had higher levels of stress than those children who had development disabilities or were typically developing. After reviewing similar literature, it was found that there were studies that claimed the behavior problems in autistic children to be the cause of higher levels of parental stress in the case of these children. But the intention behind this study was to understand which specific (common) behavior problems in a child with autism were associated with the parental stress levels and how these behaviors were affecting. In this study, the data was collected from a sample of 39 parents of children with ASD who were a part of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) intervention. While examining

the relationship between parenting stress and child behavior problems, it was concluded that the most common behavior problems in autistic children were attention problems, language problems, and externalizing behavior problems. The parents faced significantly higher stress in two specific behavior problems where the autistic children do not talk when people talk to them and in instances where they would throw temper tantrums or exhibit hot temper. It was concluded that these two behavior problems caused higher levels of stress in the parents of ASD children and with interventions tailored to these needs, the clinicians can help the parents of autistic children to cope with the parental stress.

Wed Al Towairqi et al (2015), evaluated the depression among mothers of children with ASD. The study compared 60 mothers of autistic children with 60 mothers of normally developing children in order to identify the associated factors with the presence of depression. With the help of a self-reported questionnaire, data regarding demographic data, psychiatric history of parents, having other cases of autism in family, history of parent consanguinity, age of autism diagnosis, age of parents at time of child delivery, whether or not the mother is linked to support group, do parents take any governmental financial support, knowledge of mother about autism disorder, and the source of her knowledge were taken. The Arabic version of the short Beck Depression Inventory was employed to assess the extent and severity of depressive symptoms in the mothers of both cases. The results revealed that the mean age and the female sex of the autistic child has a significant impact on maternal depression. It was also confident that the social and financial support played an important role in significantly impacting the depression in mothers of autistic children. So, with more support and understanding towards the mothers of children with ASD, the depressive symptoms can be reduced.

Blerina Aliaj (2013), has compared the level of stress, anxiety and depression in Albanian mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (n=30), with Down Syndrome (n=30) and those typically developing (n=30). A total of 90 mothers participated in this study, where they were asked to complete a self report questionnaire of a total of 42 questions, "Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (Lovibond, 1995)", as it measures the emotional state (depression, anxiety and stress) of these individuals. With the further help of SPSS, the statistical analysis

revealed that the mothers from Albania who have children with Down Syndrome showed higher levels of depression / anxiety and stress compared to those who have autistic children while the mothers of the typical children seemed to have normal levels of depression / anxiety and stress. Thus, it can be concluded that the type of the child's condition, i.e., if they are autistic, typical or have Down syndrome, is directly associated with heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression in their mothers.

Pegah Athari et al (2013), compared the relationship between the mothers' depression and stress with severity of autism in children and investigated the effect of family income on the relationship of the first two variables. Through a purposive sampling, the data was collected from 250 mothers of autistic children ranging in age from 6 - 8 years and 250 of their teachers. In order to measure the levels of depression and stress among the mother, the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale of 42 items with 14 statements for each (DASS-42) was employed. The severity of autism among children was assessed by Autism Behavior Checklist (ABC) (Krung, Arick, & Almond, 1980) which consists of 57 statements, according to children's teachers reports and the family income was recorded based on mothers' report. The Sobel study (Sobel, 1982) was used to measure the effect of income had on the relationship between the level of depression and stress among mothers (as independent variable) and the severity of autism among children (as dependent variables). The key findings in this study explain that the different incomes of mothers have a significant effect on the level of depression and stress among mothers and the severity of autism. The results further suggest that severity of autism in children changes with different family income and mothers' depression and stress-severity.

Mohammed A. Almansour, Mohammed A. Alafeeq, et al. (2012), tried to evaluate depression and anxiety in parents or caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder while trying to identify other associated factors. The current study that was carried out in the academic year of 2011, the subjects recruited were 50 parents/ caregivers with at least one child diagnosed with ASD. A control group was also established with the 50 parents/ caregivers or normally developed child. With the help of self-reported questionnaires which had questions on demographic data as well as hospital anxiety and

depression scale, the data was recorded. The results suggest that daily life often gets disrupted due to the special needs a child with ASD has. This is associated with burden and stress for the parents/ caregivers thus leading to anxiety and depression among them. As the quality of life of the parents gets affected by an autistic child, it is important that they have access to healthy coping resources like wider community, spouse and family's support.

Nicholas Falk (2012), examined the factors that could help predict stress, anxiety and depression in the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. A cohort study was conducted on 250 mothers and 229 fathers of one or more autistic children whose ages ranged from 4 to 17 years 11 months. The subjects were asked to complete an online questionnaire measuring social and economic support, autism symptom severity and child externalizing behaviors. According to the findings, having a child with autism is a differentiating factor but it is not the primary predictor of stress, anxiety and depression among the parents. The investigation reveals that the role played by parental cognitions and socioeconomic support is far more significant predictors of parental mental health problems.

Silva L M T et al (2012), conducted a study that measures the levels of stress in the parents who have children with ASD by using the Autism Parenting Stress Index. The ASPI is unique as it measures the core and comorbid symptoms of autism. It was designed for the clinicians to identify areas where parents need support with parenting skills, and to assess the effect of intervention on parenting stress. With a reliability measure of 0.827 Cronbach's Alpha value, the study was validated by the data taken from 274 children aged under six years. The results suggest that the average stress experienced by the parents of children with ASD is twice the amount of stress faced by that of children with other developmental delay and four times that of the typical group. A factor analysis reveals that three factors are mainly impacting parental stress - one relating to core deficits, one to comorbid behavioral symptoms, and one to comorbid physical symptoms. Thus, interventions focused on exploring and improving these aspects in the child's behaviour and help reduce the stress experienced by the parents.

Debra L. Rezendes (2011), et al studied the associations between parental anxiety/depression and child behavior problems related to Autism Spectrum

Disorders: the roles of parenting stress and parenting self-efficacy. After reviewing existing literature on the relationship of child behavior problems and parental anxiety/depression, the current study aims to explore how parenting stress and parenting self-efficacy can affect child behavior problems and parental anxiety/depression. With the help of a sample of 134 mothers children between the ages of 3 and 16 diagnosed with ASD, the hypothesis was supported. The key findings suggested that the parenting stress somehow increased the behavior problems in the child and decreased parenting self-efficacy. This decreased parenting self-efficacy was in turn partially responsible for further increased parenting stress and the higher levels of depression/anxiety amongst the parents. So, in order to lower depression/ anxiety and stress in the parents, it is important to boost parental self-efficacy.

Patricia A. Rao et al. (2009), investigated the impact that the children ranging in age from 8 to 14 years with high-functioning autism (HFA) have on parental stress, sibling adjustment, and family functioning. The parents and siblings of 15 male children with HFA and that of 15 male children with no disorder (control group) were required to complete questionnaires measuring the dependent variables. The study indicates that parents of children with HFA experience significantly more parenting stress than parents of children with no psychological disorder, which was found to be directly related to characteristics of the children. Thus, the investigation shows that despite having a child with HFA with higher intellectual functioning, the parents still experience the stress associated with parenting children with autism spectrum disorders.

Vicki Bitsika (2004), tried to explore the stress, anxiety and depression among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. The current study was an attempt to replicate a previous study that concluded the incidence and contributing factors in anxiety, depression and stress in Victorian parents of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A total of 107 Gold Coast parents participated in the study and filled a questionnaire containing questions based on their demographic backgrounds while assessing anxiety, depression and few other aspects that may have a link to their wellbeing. According to the findings, over 90% of parents sometimes find it difficult to deal with the behavioral difficulties of the children, leading to almost half of the parents being

severely anxious while almost the-thirds are found to be clinically depressed. It is concluded that with better family support and strategies in managing the child's behavior can help lower levels of anxiety and depression experienced by the parents.

Amanda Hart (2003), conducted a study to assess the levels of stress, depression and anxiety that the parents of a child with ASD experiences and the degree of impact that it has on the family. This study was conducted on the parents of 71 children aged between 3 -10 years diagnosed with ASD as were parents of 40 children without ASD for control purposes. In this study, quantitative research methods were incorporated in the form of questionnaires which included "Parent Depression and Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS 42)", "Impact on Family Sale (IFS-24)" and the "Conners' Rating Scale", and qualitative in the form of focus groups. The statistical analysis suggests that the children with ASD exhibit significant learning and behavioral impairments which lead to the parents of ASD children having greater levels of stress, anxiety and depression than those of the control parents.

## METHODOLOGY

The objective(s) of the current study is:

1. To explore the depression, stress and anxiety in the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
2. To explore the factors affecting depression, stress and anxiety levels in the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
3. To explore the depression, stress and anxiety among those parents before and after therapeutic intervention.

The research design of the current study systematic review methodology was employed to analyze 20 previous studies. According to the objectives discussed above, the current study proposes the following conceptual framework which highlights the suggestive factors directly influencing depression, stress and anxiety in the parents of autistic children and the effects of therapeutic interventions on them. The aim is to provide a predictive outline of the proposed conceptual framework for further empirical investigations. Initially, the suggestive factors are derived as keywords such as "depression", "anxiety", "autism

spectrum disorder", "therapeutic intervention", "socio-economic status", "parental stress", "parental self-efficacy" and "behavioral therapy and mental health" were used to search for pertinent literature from the past decade. The severity of the child's autism, family income, the presence of additional disabilities, social and financial support, and parental coping mechanisms are the main factors examined in the studies. The selected studies employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including surveys, self-reported questionnaires (e.g., DASS-42, Parenting Stress Index), and interviews to assess parental stress, anxiety, and depression. Sample sizes varied, ranging from small cohorts (30-60 participants) to larger studies (up to 250 participants), and the children involved were aged between 2 and 17 years. The sources of these prior review papers included databases like Google Scholar, PubMed, Science Direct, SpringerLink, and ResearchGate. These papers, published between 2003 and 2019, were identified and collected. During the first phase of the review process, the specified keywords were utilized to locate relevant literature. The abstracts of these papers were then examined to determine their suitability for the study. In the second phase, papers deemed irrelevant were excluded. In the final phase, approximately 20 relevant studies were selected for detailed review and interpretation.

## DISCUSSION

Numerous literature highlight that the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often experience high levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Autistic children have the neurodevelopmental disorder called Autism Spectrum Disorder, where the symptoms could be exhibited in the form of behaviour difficulties, challenges in social interaction as well as language development. In the early stages, parents find it extremely difficult to find coping strategies for the challenges faced by the children and the difficulties the parents face while raising them. With increased severity of Autism symptoms, the mental health concerns in the parents seem to further increase. In a few studies, it has been found that the parents of ASD children have significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression when compared to the parents of children without disabilities. According to Hart (2003) and Bitsika (2004), parents often find it extremely overwhelming to deal with the challenges that come up while parent and artistic child due to

their behavioural issues, social impairments and learning difficulties. As Hart (2003) reported the parents of as the children had higher levels of psychological burden than those of children without ASD while Bitsika (2004) found that almost half of the parents in her study exhibited severe anxiety, and a third were clinically depressed, which was attributed to the difficulties in managing the behavioral aspects of ASD. Similarly, it was confirmed that the burden of parenting autistic children significantly impacted the mental health of these parents. Almansour et al. (2012) suggested that the daily disruptions caused by the special needs of children with ASD contributed to heightened levels of anxiety and depression in parents whereas Falk (2012) emphasizes that though the presence of an autistic child is a key contributing factor to the mental burden of the parents, other factors like socio-economic support and parental self-efficacy also play a significant role in predicting mental health outcomes.

The distress faced by the parents of children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder can be overwhelming. However, there are few significant factors which contribute further in elevating the symptoms of anxiety and depression in the parents thus negatively affecting the caregiving process of these autistic children. Studies show that one of the major factors responsible for the increased levels of parental stress is the severity of Autism symptoms in the child. We found in a research by Soltanifar (2015) that fathers of children who have more severe symptoms of autism have significantly higher stress levels, while mothers generally exhibited greater stress than fathers. Search and disparity can be attributed to different social expectations based on gender norms and the roles that mothers and fathers play in the caregiving process. This finding aligns with the study by Rezendes et al. (2011), where even the high-functioning autistic children cause parenting stress due to their behavioral issues, which directly correlates to higher levels of depression and anxiety among parents. In addition to this, economic factors as well as social and family support seem to be the other important factors influencing parental mental health. In the study conducted by Athari et al. (2013), it was concluded that lower family income was associated with higher levels of stress and depression among mothers, suggesting that financial support and resources can alleviate some of the burden of parenting a child with ASD. Moreover, Rao et al.

(2009) and Al Towairqi et al. (2015) found that parents with stronger emotional social and financial support tend to have lower levels of stress, anxiety and depression while the lack of such support further intensifies the mental health challenges faced by the parents.

Several studies have examined the impact of therapeutic interventions on children with HD and their parents which have shown potential to reduce the stress anxiety and depression experienced by these parents. Through the research on the relationship between child behaviour problems and parental stress, Davis (2015) concludes that targeting responsiveness or working on the parent child relationship can significantly reduce parental and increase the chances of better child outcomes in the development areas like language and communication. We have discussed earlier about self efficacy and parenting skills which strongly impact the caregiving process of the autistic children and mental health struggles faced by their parents. Rezendes et al. (2011) emphasized that the parents with higher self-efficacy feel more confident and have the better ability to manage their child's behavior, which can directly alleviate stress. Similarly, Silva et al. (2012) found that interventions addressing both the core symptoms and the comorbid conditions of autism (such as behavioral and physical symptoms) are effective in reducing stress among parents. Early diagnosis of autism and interventions like stress management can help the child improve their skills and provide the parents with effective coping strategies, have shown positive results in being able to reduce the emotional burden on parents (Bonis et al., 2016). Therapeutic interventions such as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), as explored by Allyson Davis (2015), have been found to help parents of children with ASD manage stress. These interventions focus on helping parents become more mindful of their emotional responses and develop healthier coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges of raising a child with ASD.

Therefore, to alleviate depression, stress, and anxiety among parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder it is important to address the factors significantly affecting the child's developmental progress as well as the parental mental health. It is essential that we acknowledge and address the unique challenges that the parents of autistic children face. By understanding the severity of the child's

condition, economic factors, social support, and parenting self-efficacy, a clarity can be achieved on what significant factors are affecting the mental health of the parents. Through therapeutic interventions tailored specifically for both the child and the parents, involving techniques focused on improving parenting skills, increasing self-efficacy, and providing emotional and social support, can contribute to reducing the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among the parents by helping them with their mental health struggles. With continued research and refinement of the intervention strategies, we can achieve a holistic approach that can ensure that parents of children with ASD receive the necessary support to manage their mental health effectively.

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