

# UNDERSTANDING PERCEIVED STRESS IN MOTHERS OF INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED CHILDREN: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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**Abstract-** Perceived stress refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of stress experienced in response to life's challenges. Mothers of children with intellectual disabilities (ID) face a unique caregiving context marked by emotional, financial, and social stressors, often leading to heightened levels of perceived stress. Intellectual disability, characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, necessitates lifelong support, further amplifying the caregiver's burden. This review synthesizes existing literature on perceived stress in this demographic, examining stressors, coping mechanisms, and the psychological toll of caregiving. Findings reveal key contributors to stress, such as economic disadvantage, social isolation, and emotional strain, while highlighting adaptive coping strategies like acceptance, social support, and religious coping. This paper concludes with recommendations for interventions to support maternal well-being and alleviate caregiving stress.

**Index Terms-** Perceived stress, intellectual disabilities, disabled children, social isolation, emotional strain psychological distress

## I. INTRODUCTION

A child who has intellectual disabilities (ID) places an additional burden on the caregivers, including the mother, because raising a child with such a disability is never an easy task. Intellectual disability, as defined by the According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Intellectual Disability AAIDD is a developmental disease characterized by substantial limits in learning, reasoning, comprehension, and problem-solving abilities, along with challenges in performing everyday living tasks. These limitations begin during developmental ages, and the persons affected still need assistance throughout their lives (Schalock et al., 2010).

Mothers, often the primary caregivers, are more likely than fathers to assume the responsibilities of managing the child's daily needs, therapies, education,

and emotional well-being. These responsibilities backed by cultural beliefs make them to experience high level of stress and psychological pressures. Previous studies reveals that the caregiving demands placed on mothers of children with ID are much higher than those for mothers of children who do not have the condition, which increases the likelihood of their developing these mental health problems. (Hastings et al., 2005; Blacher et al., 2015).

The term perceived stress refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their stress levels based on their appraisal of life events and their ability to manage those challenges. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping emphasize that stress is not merely an external factor but is heavily influenced by the individual's perception and coping mechanisms. Under this perspective, the mothers of children with ID may feel that caregiving tasks are portraying a 'burden' because of a lack of resources, assistances and stigmatization.

## II. BACKGROUND

The caregiving journey for mothers of children with ID is uniquely challenging, with stressors that extend beyond typical parenting experiences. Intellectual disabilities, often with comorbidities like autism or epilepsy, demand specialist care that places demand on the emotional, financial and physical resources of individuals (Blacher et al., 2015). These mothers have repeatedly been found to experience higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression than normally developing children (Singer, 2006).

Perceived stress in this demographic is influenced by multiple factors, including:

- Economic Strain: The steep costs of medical care, therapy sessions, and specialized

education frequently result in financial hardships.

- **Social Isolation:** Societal stigma and limited understanding from others often leave these mothers feeling excluded and unsupported.
- **Emotional Exhaustion:** Constant caregiving demands and uncertainty about the child's future result in chronic worry and emotional fatigue.

Despite these challenges, some mothers demonstrate resilience through adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support, practicing mindfulness, and engaging in religious activities (Hastings et al., 2002). Exploring how these coping mechanisms interact with stressors is key to designing effective interventions that enhance maternal well-being.

### III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the primary stressors contributing to perceived stress in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities.
2. To explore adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms employed by these mothers.
3. To assess the psychological and social impacts of caregiving stress on maternal well-being.

### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding perceived stress among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities to enhance the development of effective assistance systems and strategies. Various research consistently affirms that mothers of these children face notably higher stress levels compared to mothers of typically developing children. This increased stress is linked to multiple factors, including the responsibilities of caregiving, societal judgment, and the emotional weight of nurturing a child with disabilities.

According to the recent studies, mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, parenting stress, which is defined as the apprehension and tension associated with familial roles and interactions, is significantly increased. For example, a study carried out in Erode, Tamil Nadu, revealed that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities reported heightened stress levels in comparison to those with typically developing children, underscoring the distinctive hurdles encountered by this group (Sasikala et al., 2020). Furthermore, the psychological burden of caregiving was underscored by the substantially increased anxiety levels of mothers of disabled children in comparison to those of non-disabled children (Koca et al., 2019). Ray (2018) also found that the burden of care was notably prevalent

among mothers of children with moderate to severe disabilities, suggesting that the severity of the child's condition is correlated with the mother's stress level.

The communication skills of children with intellectual impairments can influence parental stress levels. Akmeşe and Kayhan found that children's poor communication abilities might heighten maternal anxiety, since these constraints hinder effective engagement and comprehension between mother and child (Akmeşe & Kayhan, 2016). (Kishore, 2011) also found that the cumulative effects of a child's disabilities have a significant impact on the mother's mental health and social interactions, resulting in increased stress.

Additionally, it is imperative to recognize the financial and health obstacles that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities have to contend with. These women often face health and socioeconomic inequalities relative to their peers, exacerbating their stress levels (Powell et al., 2017). The stress experienced by these mothers is further exacerbated by the economic distress associated with caregiving, particularly in contexts with limited resources (Raliphaswa et al., 2022).

Coping strategies also play a critical role in how mothers navigate stress. Studies indicate that mothers utilizing problem-focused coping strategies generally experience lower stress levels over time (Peer & Hillman, 2012). Nevertheless, the efficacy of these strategies may vary, with many mothers expressing feelings of isolation and inadequate support, which can impede their coping abilities (Oymak & Arslan, 2020).

High levels of perceived stress are prevalent among mothers, with studies reporting mean scores indicating significant distress (Kumari et al., 2024) (Quang et al., 2023). Chronic stressors, such as social isolation and limited coping resources, exacerbate emotional well-being (Shankarbhay & Chamanlal, 2024).

Effective coping strategies, including problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches, can mitigate stress and enhance mental well-being (Pachița & Gherguț, 2023). Informal social support plays a crucial role in helping mothers navigate their challenges, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Lakhani et al., 2024).

Factors like family income, socioeconomic status, and the duration of the child's disability significantly correlate with stress levels (Kumari et al., 2024) (Quang et al., 2023). Mothers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds report higher stress levels, underscoring the necessity for targeted supportive interventions (Lakhani et al., 2024).

Mothers frequently experience emotional distress, including feelings of isolation and anxiety due

to societal stigma and the demands of caregiving (Mundakir et al., 2024) (Lakhani et al., 2024). The emotional burden can lead to compromised mental health, necessitating the development of coping mechanisms to manage stress (Lakhani et al., 2024).

Many mothers struggle to balance work and caregiving, often facing inflexible workplace policies and a lack of understanding from employers (Al-Oraini, 2024). The absence of supportive organizational legislation exacerbates their difficulties, making it challenging to maintain employment while caring for their child (Al-Oraini, 2024).

## V. METHODOLOGY

### Research Design:

For this present study, a systematic literature review approach was employed to explore the perceived stress in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities and also explore the primary stressors, adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms and the psychological and social impacts of these mothers. This method allows for a comprehensive review of existing research findings, analyze trends, and identify patterns and along with qualitative and quantitative studies were included to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

### Data Collection:

The data collection process involves systematic searches of electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using predefined search terms “perceived stress,” “mothers of children with intellectual disabilities,” and “caregiving stress.” Relevant peer-reviewed articles, empirical studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses published within a specified timeframe were included in the analysis.

### Inclusion and Exclusion criteria:

- i. Published in peer reviewed journals or reputed conference proceedings.
- ii. Journals/articles published between 2000 and 2024, focusing on stressors, coping mechanisms, and psychological outcomes related to the topic.
- iii. Available in English language.

## VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Key Stressors

- **Economic Disadvantage:** The financial burden of caregiving, including therapy and educational expenses, is a significant contributor to perceived stress. A multitude of moms indicate diminished earning potential as a result of caring obligations. Additional

research suggests that single mothers or those in low-income groups have heightened stress owing to the absence of dual income or financial safety nets.

- **Social Isolation:** Stigma and societal misconceptions about intellectual disabilities lead to exclusion and reduced social support. Isolation intensifies emotional distress and limits access to resources. Support networks, such as peer groups or parent associations, have been found to mitigate isolation, yet accessibility remains a challenge in rural or underdeveloped areas.
- **Emotional Distress:** Chronic worry about the child’s health, future, and social integration exacerbates psychological strain. Emotional exhaustion is prevalent among mothers who lack adequate coping resources. Cultural attitudes often exacerbate this distress, as caregivers feel pressured to meet societal expectations while advocating for their child’s rights and needs.

### 2. Coping Mechanisms

#### Adaptive Coping Strategies:

- **Acceptance:** Acknowledging and embracing the caregiving role helps reduce stress and foster resilience. Several studies shows that mothers practicing mindfulness and self-compassion report better mental health outcomes.
- **Seeking Social Support:** Building connections with family, friends, and support groups provides emotional and practical assistance. Peer-to-peer mentorship programs have been shown to enhance coping by sharing experiences and solutions.
- **Religious Coping:** Faith-based practices offer solace and strengthen psychological resilience. Mothers engaged in community religious activities often report a greater sense of belonging and purpose.

#### Maladaptive Coping Strategies:

- **Avoidance:** Behavioural disengagement and denial often lead to increased stress and reduced caregiving effectiveness. Prolonged avoidance behaviors may escalate into chronic anxiety or depressive symptoms.
- **Substance Use:** Although less frequent, some mothers resort to substances as an escape mechanism, exacerbating stress.

### 3. Psychological Impacts

Perceived stress has significant implications for maternal mental health, such as increased risks of

burnout, depression, and anxiety. The persistent nature of caregiving stress adversely impacts physical health, leading to ailments such as hypertension and exhaustion.

- **Mental Health Challenges:** Anxiety and depression are common among mothers, with research showing rates considerably above those of the general population. A state of physical and emotional exhaustion known as burnout frequently arises as a consequence of extended caregiving without sufficient support or respite.
- **Physical Health Issues:** Chronic stress leads to physical health complications, including hypertension, sleep disorders, and compromised immunological function. Insufficient time for self-care intensifies these problems, perpetuating a cycle of deteriorating health and caring ability.
- **Quality of Life:** The cumulative effects of stress diminish overall life satisfaction and impede mothers' capacity to participate in leisure activities or achieve personal objectives. Research underscores the need for organized interventions to improve caregivers' quality of life, stressing the significance of equilibrium between caring and self-care.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Mothers of children with intellectual disabilities face unique caregiving challenges that result in elevated levels of perceived stress. This review highlights the multifaceted nature of their stressors, including economic, social, and emotional factors. Adaptive coping strategies, such as acceptance and seeking social support, play a crucial role in mitigating stress and fostering resilience. Mothers of children with intellectual disabilities face unique challenges that significantly impact their lives, including emotional, social, and economic dimensions. These challenges often stem from the dual responsibilities of caregiving and maintaining employment, leading to stress and a need for effective coping strategies. The following sections outline key aspects of their experiences.

Informal social support networks play a crucial role in helping mothers navigate their challenges, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Mothers often adapt their parenting styles and seek knowledge to better care for their children, reflecting a significant shift in their perspectives and responsibilities.

The stress experienced by these mothers is substantial, many demonstrate remarkable resilience and strength, often finding ways to adapt and cope effectively

with their circumstances. This resilience highlights the potential for developing supportive interventions that empower these families. While the challenges faced by mothers of children with intellectual disabilities are profound, it is essential to recognize the resilience and adaptability they demonstrate. Their experiences highlight the need for systemic changes in workplace policies and increased societal support to enhance their quality of life.

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