

Effect of Group Therapy on Mothers' Stress in Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Background: As regards, the vast troubles of children with autism, their families and specifically their mothers become vulnerable to stress.

Objectives: This study aimed to evaluate the effect of group therapy on the stress of mothers of children with autism.

Methods & Participants: The sample of this research consisted of fifteen mothers of children with autism. We used the Parenting Stress questionnaire pre and post ten sessions of group therapy.

Results: The findings indicated significant statistical differences between pretest and posttest considering parenting stress.

Conclusions: Group therapy could be considered a reliable way to relieve the parenting stress of mothers of children with autism.

Keywords: Group Therapy, Mothers' Stress, Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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Article History:

Received: 11-08-2021, Revised: 06-09-2021, Accepted: 30-09-2021

Access this article online

Website: www.ijmrp.com	Quick Response code 
DOI: 10.21276/ijmrp.2021.7.5.001	

INTRODUCTION

Individuals with ASD present with a range of social and communication problems over the lifespan and exhibits a broad array of restricted and repetitive behaviors.¹

The effects of having a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) on parents are multifaceted and pervasive. While ample evidence has been provided that these families are under severe stress, there are still several knowledge gaps and unresolved questions.² Furthermore, the children's behavioral and emotional problems according to their symptoms, this children group was being responsible by their parents to help them to live in society happily based on their potentiality. The parents of children with Autism had to face with the feeling of their children as being self-centered. The huge impact of having a child with ASD is apparent in both the severity and breadth of parent domains that seem to be influenced. Consequently, the parents are anxious what kind of persons their children would be when they were grown up in the future, whether they would live in society.^{3,4}

AS stress is a normally unavoidable part of everyone's life living in this world. It portrays a negative impact on one's mental and physical well-being, so Parents of children with ASD are more stressed, which may lead to depression, less parenting competence, less marital satisfaction, and less family

adaptability.⁵ Previous researchers noticed that the more severe the child's symptoms, the greater the degree of parental stress. Parents often choose isolation over the frustrations of taking their child out in public.⁶ They also experience multiple, persistent, and disabling physical symptoms that cannot be explained by a well-defined medical or surgical condition.

Group therapy is an effective method of counselling, not a modern counselling concept but is more time and cost-effective than individual therapy, its success attributed to the biological necessity of persons to communicate with one another.⁷ Creating a supportive environment in a group setting, provided with a variety of personality traits, may associated with feelings of safety in individuals that does not actually feel safe in social situations.⁸

Group therapy is a form of psychotherapy that provides the group members with the utilization of one's emerging and evolving thoughts, feelings, and fantasies, along with the group. This quote describes how sharing can help: "Some of the most comforting words in the universe are 'me too.' That moment when you find out that your struggle is also someone else's struggle, that you're not alone, and that others have been down the same road." – Anonymous. This is the core concept upon which group therapy was developed. Empirical research supports the effectiveness of

this method of treatment in cases with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, social phobias, post-traumatic-stress-disorders, and schizophrenia.⁹

Several studies found that parents of children with autism experience components of stress, such as decreased family cohesion, burnout and somatic complaints, more than parents of normal children or parents of children with other disabilities such as mental retardation or other developmental disabilities.¹⁰

One research assumed that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder experience higher levels of parenting stress than parents of children with Down syndrome or normal development.¹¹ Other research showed that parenting stress reduces the effectiveness of early teaching interventions for autistic spectrum disorders.¹²

Considering the above-mentioned views, it is drastically necessary to expand families (especially mothers) with appropriate interventions for improving their coping abilities towards stress. Group therapy is an effective evidence-based psychological intervention for the improvement of some psychological and psychiatric problems.¹³ The present study aimed at using group therapy in improving the understanding of the interplay between parental stress, child's features, and parents' coping resources and strategies. And so evaluate the effect of group therapy on this parental stress. Trying to relieve the negative effect of stress and change it to a positive trigger.

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who had attended the Autism Center of northwestern armed forces Hospital (NWAFFH) in Saudi Arabia, affiliated to Prince Mohammed Ben Salman Program for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders have received regular group therapy sessions. mothers of ASD children aged 3–6 years old who diagnosed clinically by child psychiatrist using DSM-5 before referral to the autism center and the severity was rated by Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) which consists of 14 domains assessing behaviors associated with autism, with a 15th domain rating general impressions of autism Total scores can range from a low of 15 to a high of 60; scores below 30 indicate that the individual is in the non-autistic range, scores between 30 and 36.5 indicate mild to moderate autism, and scores from 37 to 60 indicate severe autism.^{14,15}

Twenty-five mothers were invited to participate in this study who agreed happily to attend the sessions, twenty of them met the inclusion criteria and received information about the aims of this research. Five participants were excluded because of their absence of more than two sessions, and statistical analysis was done on 15 mothers. The study was conducted starting from 29 October 2018 for 15 weeks.

Inclusion criteria included age less than 50 years old, level of education of high school graduation or higher, no evidence of major psychiatric disorder, and commitment of guidelines of group therapy and filling the informed consent. The exclusion criteria included having chronic medical illness and being absent for more than two sessions without urgent reason. The psychological appraisal was done by a child and adolescent psychiatrist; a double-check appraisal was conducted by three clinical psychologists. The mothers participated in fifteen sessions of 90-minute group therapy, every week. The Parenting Stress-Short

Form scale was derived from the study of Soha Nasr¹⁶ and Alhewiti Mana¹⁷ this is a 40-item questionnaire, which includes physiological, cognitive, emotional and social approaches, was fulfilled by mothers pre and post sessions of group therapy. The intervention program was held at the Autism Center of NWAFFH, by a team consisting of one psychiatrist, three clinical psychologists and one educationalist.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical committee of NWAFFH approved the study proposal. After explaining the aim and procedure of the research, mothers signed informed consent. The participants completed the stress questionnaire at the pretest and posttest stages.

Sessions of Group Therapy

Specifically, the designed protocol has been addressed the tendencies to experience negative emotions and to interpret such emotional experiences as harmful. The treatment is comprised of 15 modules, targeting the following:

1. Motivational enhancement.
2. Relaxation training, anger management, and mindfulness;
3. Psychoeducation and understanding emotions.
4. Emotional awareness training.
5. Cognitive reappraisal; recognition of automatic thoughts
6. Attenuation of emotional and behavioral avoidance.
7. Awareness and tolerance of physical sensations.
8. Interceptive and situational exposure; and finally,
9. Relapse prevention.

By the first session, the group leader introduced the mothers to each other, informed them about the attendance policy and their responsibilities. Also, they signed the guidelines for group therapy. Also, the leader explained the subjects about their child's disorder and its effect on their family. Throughout sessions, the group leader applied the goals of the therapy, so it helped to alleviate the subject's distress through psychoeducation. For example, a discussion about feelings was commenced and the mothers were asked to differentiate different emotions and analyze the cost benefits of normal feelings and abnormal feelings.

Study Design and Statistical Analysis

This study was uncontrolled open longitudinal study. Data were summarized as frequencies and percentages or as medians and IQRs depending on the nature of the variables. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests ($P= 0.05$) for paired data were applied to verify if there were significant differences between stress pre and post group therapy. Simple linear regression was used to study the association between demographic data (age of mother, education, occupation, family history of mental illness, marital status and rank of the child) and stress symptoms severity. For all analyses, a P -value, 0.05 was considered as statistically significant. All statistical analyses were carried out with SPSS 24 for windows.

RESULTS

Regarding the stress severity degrees, we found a statistically significant difference in the participants' stress pre- and post-intervention ($P=0.005$), as shown in Table 2, which means a significant improvement, a reduction in the severity of symptoms that also appreciated from the mothers' comments before and after each session.

The mediating effect of Demographic Features on mothers' Stress is shown in table3, which indicates a statistically significant difference because the p -value for the t -test is less than 0.05.

Table 1: Frequencies of the Participants' Demographic Features

Feature	Frequency (%)
Marital status	
Married	12(80)
Not married (divorced or widow)	3(20)
Rank of child	
1ST	3(20)
Not 1ST	12(80)
Level of education	
Secondary	8(53.33)
Bachelor	5(33.33)
Diploma	2(13.33)
OCCUPATION	
Not Working	13(86.67)
Working	2(13.33)
Family history of Mental illness	
Yes	6(40)
No	9(60)
Age	
Less than 35 years	8(53.3)
More than 35 years	7(46.7)

Table 2: The difference between stress before and after group therapy

Mothers' Stress before and after group therapy	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig. (p-value)
Negative Ranks	8 ^a	4.50	36	2.83	0.005
Positive Ranks	0 ^b	0	0		
Ties	7 ^c				
Total	15				

a. After < Before; b. After > Before; c. After = Before

Table 3: Regression analysis to test the mediating effect of Demographic Features on Stress

Feature			t	F	p-values	
					t	F
Regression of Marital status on stress	0.124	0.121	3.27	0.404	0.006	0.54
Regression of Rank of the child on stress	2.14	0.146	7.316	1.535	0.000	0.237
Regression of Level of education on stress	1.79	-0.103	3.279	0.143	0.006	0.711
Regression of occupation on stress.	0.828	0.164	3.359	1.768	0.005	0.207
Regression of Family history of Mental illness on stress	1.793	-0.103	4.793	0.306	0.000	0.59
Regression of Age on stress	1.45	-0.26	3.83	0.019	0.002	0.89

DISCUSSION

The modern interest in group therapy can be attributed to recent and history of its effectiveness, group work has evolved and changed, like every other area of psychotherapy, a group therapy circumference resembles real-world interpersonal dynamics. Therefore, change of behavior transfers to a client's real life.¹⁸

The current study assessed group therapy efficacy upon stress experienced by mother of ASD children. According to the observed responses and statistic, there was significant difference between parenting stress levels before and after group therapy. Hence, results suggest a reasonable cause for concern. Moreover, these results are comparable with the study of Keen^{19,20} used two types of parent-focused interventions (a workshop and ten home visits or a self-directed video-based intervention) for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to decrease parenting stress and increase parenting competence. The professionally supported intervention resulted in reduced

child-related parenting stress and increased parenting self-efficacy when compared to the self-directed intervention. The findings of our study support the importance of providing individualized information and group support for mothers who have a child with ASD. Moreover, in our study, the regression analysis suggests that marital status, age, employment, education, the rank of the child and family history of mental illness were associated with the level of stress expression. These findings are harmonious with previous studies^{21,22} when interactions were considered, the relationship between stress, physiological and emotional impact and other personal factors was most evident in parents of autistic children.

As our study was uncontrolled, open study, the results of such studies may be subject to self-selection bias and this makes the derived evidence even weaker, nevertheless, the differential effectiveness of group psychotherapy was estimated in a meta-analysis of 111 experimental and quasi-experimental studies

published over the past 20 years indicating that active group work results in reliable improvement when compared with wait-list controls. In addition, members in homogeneous groups attained more improvement than members in heterogeneous groups.²³ This current study was similar to many empirical studies which suggest that group therapy is effective for a variety of patients particularly for anxiety and social-phobic illness.²⁴ Moreover, this study had some limitations. Since the participants were limited number and were mothers, the conclusion could not be generalized to fathers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the social and economic consequences of parent stress are significant, and group therapy may have the potential to significantly improve function, quality of life and symptoms, prevent a social decline, and reduce societal costs. Finally, our study has not addressed the extent to which clinical outcomes in group therapy occur. However, we tried to change the harmful effect of stress on a positive trigger. The stress of only having an autistic child has been taken into account. Some extra stressors in the life of mothers of autistic children should be taken into consideration for further study

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Source of Support: Nil. **Conflict of Interest:** None Declared.

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Cite this article as: Rihab Taman, Menahi Alsobie, Atteya Alzahrani, Fatema Mohamed Alatawi, Manal Abdallah Alhewitti, Mashael Mansour Kambija, Aesha Alhewiti. Effect of Group Therapy on Mothers' Stress in Autism Spectrum Disorder. Int J Med Res Prof. 2021 Sept; 7(5): 001-04. DOI:10.21276/ijmrp.2021.7.5.001