

Navigating Stress: Coping Mechanisms in Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Dr. Navya Shree D. S¹, Dr. Sharanabasappa A²

¹Junior Resident, Department of Psychiatry, Sapthagiri Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre, Bangalore, India

²Professor & HOD, Department of Psychiatry, Sapthagiri Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre, Bangalore, India

Abstract: ***Introduction:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that significantly impacts the emotional and psychological well-being of caregivers. Parents face multiple challenges including managing therapy, education, financial strain, and societal stigma, all of which contribute to chronic stress. **Aim:** To identify commonly used coping strategies among parents of children with ASD and to describe the distribution of adaptive and maladaptive coping styles. **Methods:** This cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted among 50 parents of children aged 3–12 years with confirmed ASD attending psychiatry and pediatric outpatient clinics of a tertiary care hospital. Sociodemographic data and coping styles were assessed using the Brief COPE Inventory (28 items). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS. **Results:** Adaptive coping strategies such as acceptance, active coping, planning, and religious coping were more prevalent, while maladaptive strategies like denial and self-blame were less frequent but notable among parents with high stress and limited social support. **Conclusion:** Parents of children with ASD predominantly use adaptive coping mechanisms, fostering resilience and better family functioning. However, targeted interventions are essential to reduce maladaptive styles and enhance overall caregiver well-being through early identification and supportive psychotherapies.*

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Coping Strategies, Caregivers, Stress, Adaptive Coping, Maladaptive Coping

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by deficits in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. Caring for a child with ASD is a lifelong responsibility that can impose emotional, social, and financial strain on parents, particularly in low-resource settings like India. Parents often juggle between the child's behavioral challenges, therapy sessions, and societal attitudes, resulting in high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. Coping strategies are the behavioral and cognitive efforts individuals employ to manage stress. These strategies are generally classified as adaptive (e.g., acceptance, emotional support, active coping) or maladaptive (e.g., denial, self-blame, substance use). Research indicates that coping style strongly influences caregiver well-being and family functioning. Despite extensive global research, Indian data on coping mechanisms among ASD caregivers remain limited, underscoring the need for region-specific studies to develop tailored psychosocial support interventions.

2. Review of Literature

Carver (1997) developed the Brief COPE Inventory, a standardized measure widely used to assess coping strategies. Studies by Altiere & von Kluge (2009) and Pisula & Porebowicz-Dörsmann (2017) emphasized that adaptive coping mechanisms like planning and emotional support correlate with better psychological outcomes and family functioning. Indian studies, such as those by Gupta & Singhal (2004) and Kumar & Sahu (2020), found that religious and emotion-focused coping are common, reflecting cultural influences. Chandran & Nair (2021) highlighted the need for structured support systems due to persistent maladaptive coping in caregivers. Meta-analyses by Hayes & Watson (2013) and Caron & Weiss (2021) confirmed higher stress levels among ASD caregivers than parents of neurotypical

children, emphasizing the protective role of adaptive coping in mitigating caregiver burden.

3. Methodology

Design: Cross-sectional observational study conducted over five months at a tertiary care hospital.

Sample: 50 parents (primary caregivers) of children aged 3–12 years with confirmed ASD, recruited through purposive sampling.

Inclusion Criteria: Parents of children aged 3–12 years with confirmed ASD who provided informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria: Caregivers with psychiatric illness or children with dual diagnoses (e.g., IDD, ADHD).

Tools: Sociodemographic proforma and the Brief COPE Inventory (28-item self-report tool) categorized into adaptive and maladaptive coping.

Ethical Consideration: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Analysis: Data analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, SD, frequencies, and percentages) with SPSS.

4. Results

Adaptive coping strategies such as acceptance (84%), active coping (78%), planning (74%), and religious coping (70%) were commonly reported among parents. Maladaptive coping mechanisms like denial (22%) and self-blame (18%) were relatively less frequent but higher among parents with limited social or family support. Mothers reported slightly higher usage of emotion-focused coping than fathers. Families with

better socioeconomic status demonstrated higher levels of adaptive coping.

5. Discussion

The findings align with previous studies indicating that caregivers of children with ASD rely heavily on adaptive coping mechanisms to manage chronic stress. However, the presence of maladaptive patterns such as denial and self-blame suggests an unmet need for psychological and community support. Cultural influences, including spirituality and religious coping, played a significant role in stress management, consistent with prior Indian studies. Integrating strength-based and family-centered interventions may promote resilience and reduce the negative psychological impact among caregivers.

6. Conclusion

Parents of children with ASD predominantly employ adaptive coping strategies that foster resilience, acceptance, and effective stress management. However, a subset still relies on maladaptive strategies, highlighting the importance of early identification and targeted psychotherapeutic support. Strength-based approaches can empower parents to transform challenges into opportunities for personal growth, improved mental health, and enhanced family cohesion.

References

- [1] Lazarus RS, Folkman S. Stress, appraisal, and coping. New York: Springer; 1984.
- [2] American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. 5th ed. Washington (DC): APA; 2013.
- [3] World Health Organization. International classification of diseases. 11th rev. Geneva: WHO; 2019.
- [4] Singhal N, Jain A. Social stigma and parenting stress in caregivers of children with autism in India. *Indian J Psychol Med.* 2018;40(6):513–8.
- [5] Desai M, Divan G. Supporting families of children with neurodevelopmental disorders in India: Policy, practice and future directions. *Indian Pediatr.* 2020;57(3):233–6.
- [6] Caron SL, Weiss JA. Parenting stress and autism spectrum disorder: An updated meta-analysis. *J Autism Dev Disord.* 2021;51(4):1490–503.
- [7] Altieri MJ, von Kluge S. Family functioning and coping behaviors in parents of children with autism. *J Child Fam Stud.* 2009;18(1):83–92.
- [8] Pisula E, Porebowicz-Dörsmann A. Family functioning, parenting stress, and quality of life in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Front Psychol.* 2017;8:703.
- [9] Gupta A, Singhal N. Positive perceptions in parents of children with disabilities. *Asia Pac Disabil Rehabil J.* 2004;15(1):22–35.
- [10] Hayes SA, Watson SL. The impact of parenting stress: A meta-analysis of ASD and typical parents. *J Autism Dev Disord.* 2013;43(3):629–42.