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DEPRESSION, BURNOUT AND MARITAL CONFLICT AMONG PARENTS OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN: BURNOUT AS PREDICTOR OF DEPRESSION AND MARITAL CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Parenting is commonly seen as a positive experience but simultaneously it can bring various challenges and risks for the parents. This study focused on the prevalence of depression, burnout and marital conflict and explores the role of parental burnout in the exacerbation of depression and marital conflicts among parents having autistic children. The study also identifies the differences in burnout, marital conflicts and depression level among mothers and fathers of autistic children. A sample of N=70 autistic children's parents were approached from public and private autism centers located in Peshawar district. The sample responded on three self report inventories i.e., marital conflict scale, Beck depression inventory, and parental burnout assessment. Findings of the study confirmed that parents having autistic children experience mild to extreme level of depression, burnout and marital conflicts. Regression analyses showed that parental burnout serves as a significant predictor for depression and marital conflict. The study also revealed significant differences among parents where mothers score higher on each of the three variables i.e., burnout, depression and marital conflict. These findings suggested that early warning signs of parental depression and burnout should be monitored closely so that affected parents could get the prompt preventative and intervention measures.

Keywords: *Depression, burnout, marital conflict.*

1.INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological condition that begins in early childhood and is characterized by impaired social interaction, limited interests, repetitive behaviors and communication difficulties (american psychiatric association, 2013). Individuals diagnosed with autism require varying degrees of lifelong support, contingent upon the severity of their symptoms pertaining to social relationships, interactions, and conduct. In this regard, family members, particularly parents, play a crucial role, as they contribute significantly. (lord et al., 2018). Taking care for autistic child can be emotionally, mentally and physically challenging, and it often involves handling various stressors which might put the caregivers at risk of developing various psychological problems (tathgur & kang, 2021). Studies indicated that well-being and coping skills of parents with autism spectrum disorder (asd) children severely restrict their ability to contribute to the well-being of their children due to challenges and stress involved in caring of autistic

child (picardi et al., 2018). Similarly, burnout and depression are significant concerns for parents of autistic children because of continuous care and monitoring, behavioral challenges, financial stress and limited social support in handling their child along with their other responsibilities. Amirian et al., (2017) demonstrated that almost 43.3% of parents with autistic children suffered from moderate and severe depression. Cohrs and leslie (2017) also noted that autistic children's parents are more likely to have clinical depression as compared to parents of normal children. Moreover, their findings confirmed that depression level increases with child age and number of autistic children in the family. Al-farsi et al. (2016) indicated that parents of autistic children report higher indices of anxiety, stress and depression in contrast to parents of normally developing offspring.

Parents experience a wide range of repercussions from raising a child with ASD. Various factors connected with autism affects parents' psychological wellbeing e.g., along with child behavior, sleep quantity of parents and autistic child, lack of perceived friends' support and unmet needs of social acceptance among parents of autistic children are some of the significant predictors of parental depressive symptoms, stress and anxiety (Alibekova et al., 2022; Meltzer, 2011). Parents having children with complex care needs encounter distinct challenges, including managing the ambiguity around their child's illness, executing intricate caregiving duties at home, and adjusting their daily schedule to accommodate the child's requirements (Power et al., 2019). On average, burnout scores among parents of children with complex care needs were found to be higher than those of parents having children developing normally (Patty et al., 2021). Burnout is a condition of extreme emotional tiredness associated with one's position as a parent, which involves emotional detachment from one's children and self-doubt about one's ability to fulfill their responsibilities as a parent (Roskam et al., 2017). Parental burnout is characterized by a feeling of exhaustion as a result of prolonged emotional stress and a lack of adequate coping mechanisms (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Hubert and Aujoulat (2018) in their study identified the key theme of fear that was fundamental to all aspects of the mothers' narratives of their experiences, this theme pervaded every aspect, from the fear of failing as a mother to the apprehension of giving up control and encountering a loss of self-identity. The parent's burnout level varied based on their autistic child's age, the number of children they have and their personal history of psychiatric condition such as studies showed that high level of anxiety among parents is associated with high degree of parental burnout (Ulu & Karacasu, 2022). Further the parental burnout level differed across their children's abnormalities, Alrahili (2023) studied parental burnout and other psychological problems such as anxiety, stress and depression in a sample of 425 parents of healthy children and parents of children having various neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) and reported that parents of children with NDD had more burnout and psychological sufferings in comparison to the parents of children with typical development. Kütük et al. (2021) study reported the similar findings where parents of autistic children scored considerably higher on burnout and depression as compared to a control group and maternal depression was significantly linked with fathers' depression and absence of speech in the children.

Parenting a child with ASD puts parents—especially mothers—into a very difficult situation where the quality of their marriage may be affected. For instance, spousal relationships may be adversely influenced by harsh, as well as rigorous, childcare demands extended parental exhaustion and stress, which have all been shown to be more prevalent among mothers of children with ASD compared to mothers of children with other types of impairments (Sawyer, 2010; Smith, 2010). Parenting autistic children causes higher level of parental stress and coparenting difficulties, which further leads to higher level of marital conflict and reduced marital love among such parents (Chan & Leung, 2020). Research has demonstrated a notable increase in divorce rates among parents of children with autism, in comparison to parents of typically developing children. Furthermore, their likelihood of divorce remains elevated throughout the child's infancy to

adolescence and early adulthood period (Hartley et al., 2010). Various factors associated with autistic children such as fluctuations in the behavior problems and closeness in the mother–child relationship significantly predict mothers' marital satisfaction (Hartley et al., 2012).

Mikolajczak et al., (2020) compared burnout and depressive symptoms among parents and reported specific consequences for parental burnout such as parental neglect and violence that are not accounted for by their depressive symptoms. These findings suggested that parental burnout possess serious consequences for their children. To best of our knowledge limited literature is available regarding the role of parental burnout in predicting depressive symptoms among parents although some studies found the significant positive relationship between parents' depressive symptoms and their burnout level (Huang et al., 2023). Abshir et al. (2023) suggested that there is a strong relation between parental burnout and depression, as well as perceived social support. Specifically, higher levels of depression are positively associated with higher degrees of parental burnout. Burnout is a prevalent condition that may impact all areas of an individual's functioning, including their interpersonal and familial relations, and may result in a pessimistic perspective on life (Iacovides, 2003). Studies cited that burnout effects an average of 0.2 to 20% of parents and, if left untreated, can result in negative effects on marital relationships, job dynamics, child violence and neglect (Paula et al., 2022).

Previous studies showed that mothers are at greater risk of developing psychological disturbances as compared to fathers. Foody et al. (2015) examined anxiety, parenting responsibility, depression, and cortisol levels in nineteen pairs of fathers and mothers having autistic children. The findings revealed that in comparison to fathers, mothers reported greater levels of parental depression, anxiety and distress. Similarly, Al-Farsi et al. (2016) noted that mothers suffer more from psychological morbidities than the fathers more specifically depression ratio was 3.4 times higher in mothers as compared to the fathers while controlling the other demographic variable such as parents' age, job, education, number of children.

Besides depression previous findings also confirmed that mothers experienced much higher degrees of burnout than fathers and the high level of maternal burnout is instigated by the functional speech of the autistic child (Kütük et al., 2021). In a study Gau et al., (2012) examined the marital relationship, psychological abnormalities, and family function in a group of 151 parents with children diagnosed with autism disorder, in comparison to a control group of parents. Parents of children with autism exhibited higher levels of psychopathology and lower levels of dyadic consensus compared to parents of typically developing children. Furthermore, research findings revealed that mothers of children with autism were less satisfied in their marital relation, expression of emotions and family adjustment compared to mothers of control group. Study findings also confirmed that mothers possessed higher degree of psychopathology and experienced greater difficulties in their marital relationships as compared to the fathers (Gau et al., 2012).

Rationale

Research indicates that parental burnout is highly linked to parental neglect and violent behavior towards children and can even cause suicidal ideations in children (Griffith, 2022; Mikolajczak et al., 2019). Therefore, early identification of the signs of burnout and related psychological issues and providing timely support can help parents of autistic children as well as their children to better manage the challenges they face and reduce the risk of long-term parental burnout and associated mental health issues. Keeping in view this perspective this study aims to investigate the level of burnout, depression and marital conflict among parents having children with autism and to identify the significant role of burnout in depression and marital conflict. By exploring the association between parental burnout and parental depressive symptoms among autistic children's parents the study could provide evidence for developing burnout-targeted programs for parental depression, which might benefit both parents and children. Additionally, in our society mothers are more engaged in parenting than fathers this study intended to explore the significant differences in burnout,

depression and marital conflict between fathers and mothers of children with ASD.

Hypotheses

Keeping in view the above objectives following hypotheses are formulated:

1. Parents of autistics children will experience high degree of depression, burnout and marital conflict.
2. Burnout will significantly predict depression and marital conflict among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder.
3. Mothers will score higher on burnout, depression and marital conflict as compared to fathers of autistic children.

Methodology

Sample

A total sample of 70 was used in this study with equal number of mothers (n= 35) and fathers (n= 35). The sample was based on the parents of children who have clinical diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. The purposive sampling strategy was utilized for selecting the participants. The criterion was that the parents have a child diagnosed with ASD and they are willing to participate in the study. The data was collected from the major autism's centers located in Peshawar district.

Instruments

Instruments that were used for data collection are as below.

1. Demographic information sheet

Information regarding parents' age, their education, socioeconomic status, years spent in marital relationship, number of children, autistic child's age, family monthly income and mothers' working status were asked on demographic sheet.

2. Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI)

Beck depression inventory II was utilized for the assessment of depression in parents of autistic children. The BDI-II is a 21-item self-report questionnaire which was updated in 1996, to better align with the DSM-IV criteria for depression (Beck et al., 1996). For instance, instead of using the one-week timeframe seen on the BDI, respondents are asked to answer each item based on a two-week period. The BDI-II is frequently used to evaluate the severity of depression in adults and adolescents. The scale's internal consistency is 0.92 (Beck et al., 1996).

3. Parental Burnout Assessment scale (PBA)

Parental burnout was assessed using parental burnout assessment (Roskam et al., 2018), it is based on a 23-items designed to measure the four main symptoms of parental burnout rated on a seven-point frequency scale. The four subscales consist of loss of pleasure in one's parental role (5 items), emotional exhaustion (9 items), emotional distancing from one's children (3 items) and contrast with previous parental self (6 items). The validity and alpha value of the scale as reported in the original study is high α= 0.97 (Roskam et al., 2018).

4. Marital Conflict Scale

Marital conflict scale aims to evaluate the level of explicit behavioural conflict and expression of negative emotions within the marital relationship (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). It consists of five items rated on 5-point Likert scale to assess the level of conflict and negativity in participants' relationships. The scale demonstrates a high level of internal consistency, with a coefficient alpha α= 0.81.

Procedure

The sample comprising parents of ASD were approached from different autism centers of district Peshawar with the prior permission from administration of the concerned centers. After briefly explaining the purpose of research and taking inform consent from participants, the demographic information sheet along with three scales mentioned above were distributed among participants and proper instructions were given to them to fill the questionnaires. After the completion of data collection, the quantitative analyses were done on the collected data.

Results

To analyze the data SPSS 22 was applied. Descriptive statistics, regression analysis, t-test and

other appropriate statistical techniques were applied for the analysis of data.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristics	*n*	%
Age (Years)		
25-40	32	45.7
41-55	38	54.3
Gender		
Male	35	50
Female	35	50
Parental Qualification		
Bachelor and below	15	21.4
Above Bachelor	55	78.6
Employment status		
Employed	44	62.9
Not employed	26	37.1
Time spent in marital relationship (Years)		
Less than 5 years	29	41.4
More than 5 years	41	58.6
Number of children		
2 or less than 2 children	32	45.7
More than 2 children	38	54.3
Child age with ASD		
Less than 3 years	31	44.3
More than 3 years	39	55.7

Note. N= 70; n= number of participants.

Table 2a. One Sample t-test of Parental Depression score

Measure	Test value= 20 (N= 70)		*t* (69)	*P*	*95% CI*	
	M	*SD*			*LL*	*UL*
BDI	34.07	17.66	6.66	.000	9.86	18.28

Note. BDI= Beck Depression Inventory; p<.001

In table 2a result of one sample t-test showed that the mean depression score of the parents having autistic children (M = 34.07, SD= 17.66) is statistically significant at .05 level of significance (t=6.66, df =69, p<.001). Indicating that parents of autistic children differed (Mean difference= 14.07) in their level of depression from the hypothesized population.

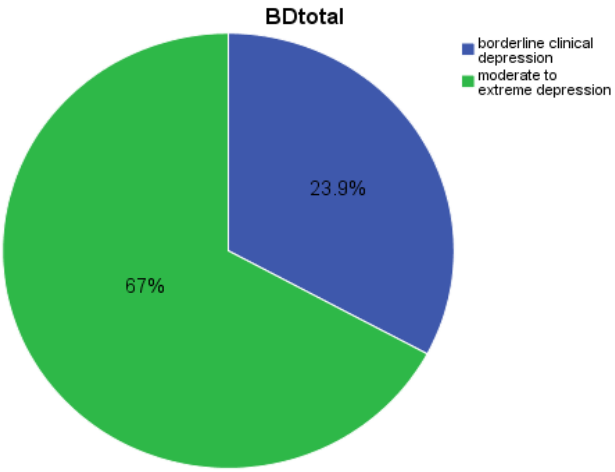


Figure 1.

Pie chart depicts the proportion of parents of autistic children having various degree of depression. Of the studied parents, 67% had moderate to extreme level of depression and 23.9% had borderline clinical depression.

Table 2b. One Sample t-test of Parental Burnout score

Measure	Test value= 69 (N= 70)		*t* (69)	*P*	*95% CI*	
	M	*SD*			*LL*	*UL*
PBA	83.47	41.85	2.89	.005	4.49	24.45

Note. PBA= Parental Burnout Assessment; p<.05

Table 2b depicts one sample t-test showing that the mean of parental burnout score (M = 83.47, SD= 41.85) is statistically significant at .05 level of significance (t=2.89 df =69, p<.05). Suggesting that parents of autistic children differed in burnout level (Mean difference= 14.47) from the hypothesized population.

Table 2c. One Sample t-test of Marital Conflict score of Autistic Childrens' Parents

Measure	Test value= 12 (N= 70)		*t* (69)	*P*	*95% CI*	
	M	*SD*			*LL*	*UL*
MCS	15.18	6.43	4.14	.000	1.65	4.72

Note. MCS= Marital Conflict Scale; p<.001

Table 2c shows that the mean of parents' marital conflict score (M = 15.18, SD= 6.43) is statistically significant at .05 level of significance (t= 4.14, df =69, p<.001). Indicating that parents of autistic children differed in marital conflict (Mean difference= 3.18) from the hypothesized population mean. To test our second hypothesis, we performed Pearson correlation and regression analyses.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and Correlation Coefficients of the study variables

	Variable	M	*SD*	1	2	3
1.	Depression	34.07	17.66	-		
2.	Parental burnout	83.47	41.85	.90**	-	
3.	Marital conflict	15.18	6.43	.88**	.94**	-

Note. *N*= 70; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; **p<.001

Table 3 illustrates that there is significant positive correlation among depression, parental burnout and marital conflict score of parents having autistic children.

Table 4a. Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Parents' Depression from Parental Burnout

	Depression		
Variables	B	β	SE
Constant	2.08		1.99
Parental Burnout	.38	.90**	.021
R^2		.82	

Note. SE= Standard Error; CI=95%; **p<.001

Table 4a represents the linear regression analysis with parental burnout significantly predicting depression of parents with autistic children. The results show that parental burnout explained 82% of the variance in depression, F (1, 68) = 320.14, p <.001.

Table 4b. Regression Coefficients of Parental Burnout Regressed on Marital Conflict

	Depression		
Variables	B	β	SE
Constant	3.02		.555
Parental Burnout	.15	.95**	.006
R^2		.89	

Note. SE= Standard Error; CI=95%; **p<.001

Table 4b denotes the linear regression analysis predicting marital conflict by parental burnout. As shown in table parental burnout is a significant predictor of marital conflict explaining 89% of the variance in marital conflict, F (1, 68) = 600.10, p <.001.

To confirm the differences among mothers and fathers of autistic children regarding depression, burnout and marital conflict level following t-test were performed.

Table 5. Comparison of Mothers and Fathers on Depression, Burnout and Marital conflict scales

Measures	Mothers N=35		Fathers N= 35		*df*	*t*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
	M	*SD*	M	*SD*				

BDI	50.71	3.13	17.42	7.27	46	24.86	.000	5.94
PBA	123.88	8.98	43.05	10.56	68	34.48	.000	8.24
MCS	21.25	1.63	9.11	2.34	68	25.11	.000	6.02

Note. BDI= Beck Depression Inventory; PBA= Parental Burnout Assessment; MCS= Marital Conflict Scale; $p < .001$.

Table5 shows the difference on Beck depression inventory, parental burnout assessment and marital conflict scale between mothers and fathers having autistic children. Results demonstrate that there are statistically significant differences on all of the measures at $p < .001$ and the mean difference shows that mothers score high (M=50.71) on depression than fathers (M=17.42). On parental burnout mean differences indicate high scores for mothers (M= 123.88) as compared to fathers (M= 43.05). Similarly, mothers showed high level of marital conflict (M= 21.25) in comparison to fathers (M= 9.11).

Discussion

The present study attempted to highlight the psychosocial aspect of parenting while raising children with autism spectrum disorder. The study intended to explore the degree of depression, burnout and marital conflicts and to identify the significant relationship among these three variables among parents of autistic children. In the first hypothesis it was predicted that parents of autistic children will possess high degree of depression, burnout and marital conflicts because of the various challenges and difficulties they face in caring for their autistic children. Findings of the study confirmed the hypothesis (see tables 2a, 2b, 2c, and figure 1) and the results are consistent with previous studies. Alshahrani and Algashmari (2021) have demonstrated that when a child is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder it is often accompanied by a significant occurrence of severe depression among the parents. Hou et al. (2018) also confirmed that mothers of young children with autism possess more parental stress and depression than those with other developmental delays. High level of maternal depression and stress might be due to autistic children's behavioural issues.

Kuhlthau et al. (2014) used a combination of mixed approaches to examine the health-related quality of life (HRQoL), caregiving pressure, and depression among autistic children's parents. The results of the study demonstrated that, in terms of stress and mental health, parents of children with ASDs scored somewhat worse on the HRQoL than parents of normative populations, and almost 40% of parents reported symptoms of severe depression. Parental mental health problems might be caused due to lack of socio-economic support and symptoms severity of the child having autism spectrum disorder (Falk et al., 2014). Chan et al. (2018) compared the children' ASD symptoms with parents' psychological problems and identified strong correlation between the symptoms of autism in children and the symptoms of depression and anxiety in their parents. The association between these symptoms is influenced by concerns about the future, stress linked to parenting, disagreements within the marriage, and financial strain on the family. Studies also confirmed that parents of children having autism spectrum disorder report burnout and other psychological problems more commonly as compared to the parents of healthy children (Kütük et al., 2021; Alrahili, 2023). The primary determinants associated with mother burnout include having a child that is seen as challenging, a history of postnatal depression, anxiety, stress from parenthood and the satisfaction of achieving a balance between career and personal life (Séjourné et al., 2018).

Parenting a child with autism spectrum disorder serves as a difficult challenge for couples, placing significant strain on their relationship and

demanding significant adjustments (Hock et al., 2012). It was predicted in the first hypothesis that parents of autistic children will experience high level of marital conflict and the study findings accepted the prediction and supported by the previous studies as well. Hartley et al. (2017) from their study findings reported that the parents who has children with autism disorder experience marital issues that were more frequent, intense, and unresolved compared to the group being compared. They exhibited less involved, equitable, and collaborative conflicts with their partners, but had positive emotions and sensitivity towards each other, compared to parents of normally developing children. Studies showed that the majority of couples reported the accumulation of daily stressors as the primary cause of divorce (Bodenmann et al., 2007). Parents of autistic children face stressors and challenges almost on daily basis because of the complex childcare needs due to which it can be expected that they will experience marital dissatisfaction in their relationship (Chan & Leung, 2020).

In the second hypothesis it was assumed that burnout will significantly predict the variations in parents' depression level and marital conflict. Findings of the study proved the hypothesized connection between the study variables. Previous studies showed that there is a strong and positive correlation between depression and anxiety and parental burnout (Lebert-Charron, 2021). But there are mixed findings available regarding the direction of relationship. Some studies suggested that depressive symptoms indicate a subsequent rise in burnout, and it is also plausible that the inverse relation may occur (Toker and Biron, 2012) with the increase in burnout level causes significant rise in depression. While other studies directed towards the overlap of symptoms between burnout and depression (Bianchi et al., 2015). Reason behind the mixed findings might be the lack of agreed-upon diagnostic criteria for burnout and the insufficient attention given by burnout research to the diverse nature of depressive illnesses. These are the few significant barriers to addressing the problem at hand (Bianchi et al., 2015). The study findings also confirmed the significant role of burnout in the degree of marital conflicts among autistic children's parents and study findings are supported by the previous studies suggesting the adverse effects of burnout on almost every aspect of an individual's functioning, including the interpersonal and family relationship (Iacovides, 2003; Paula et al., 2022).

In many cultures caring of children is considered the responsibility of the mothers which might put the mothers at greater risk of developing psychological problems because of continuous fatigue and strain, keeping in view this issue it was predicted in the third hypothesis that mothers of autistic children will possess high level of burnout, depression and marital conflicts as compared to fathers of children with ASD. Findings of the study confirmed the hypothesis and the results showed that mothers of autistic children experience high level of burnout, depression and marital conflicts. These findings are consistent with other studies showing that the mothers who have children with autism spectrum disorders spent more time in childcare and performing chores and are also more likely to experience stress, exhaustion, and disputes (Smith et al., 2010) which might be responsible for their high level of burnout and depression among them. Sawyer et al., (2010) noted that there is a strong correlation between mothers' experiences with mental health issues and their level of time pressure. In particular, mothers who expressed greater pressure also reported higher psychological impairment symptoms. Kütük et al., (2021) showed that mothers due to functional speech of autistic children experience a higher degree of burnout as compared to fathers.

Implications and Recommendation

This study concluded that the parents of autistic children suffer from mild to severe depression along with burnout and marital conflict. This research can be carried further with investigation of psychological wellbeing of the parents having autistic children to understand the psychological, cultural, and environmental factors affecting parenting and coping mechanisms of parents having autistic children. The study also suggests that parents' burnout and marital conflict are the major areas of concern which needs to be addressed that can improve family relationships

with the help of family or group therapy, relationship education programs, and family-based awareness programs. The findings of this study showed that there is an increased exhaustion, fatigue and emotional instability in mothers which leads to increased marital problems that can be addressed by providing them with emotional support to help look after her family effectively.

Limitation

Beside several implication the study also has some limitations that can be covered by future research. First limitation is related to the sample which was based on only parents of autistic children lacking the comparative group of parents with typically developing children. The second limitation is about the data which was based on self-report measures in which parents might conceal how frequently they experience various symptoms inquired on the questionnaire due to social desirability factor. Future research can be carried out on the study variables using experimental study design.

Ethical Considerations

During entire research process participants' confidentiality was maintained and their willingness were given priority. Proper permission was taken for all of the questionnaires that were used in the data collection process.

Conflict of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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