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Peer-Led Interventions Can Help Reduce Stress in Mothers of Children With Autism and With Other Developmental Disabilities

What is this research about?

Mothers of children with developmental disabilities (DD), including those with Intellectual Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorders, often experience high levels of stress and poor health. Services though are usually focused on their children's needs. Past research has shown that mental health interventions can help reduce stress in mothers of children with DD, but these treatments are often costly and may not be available and/or easily accessible. This study examined the effects of two brief community-based peer-led interventions aimed at addressing the mental health needs of mothers of children with DD.

What did the researchers do?

243 mothers of children with DD (65% with Autism Spectrum Disorder and 35% with other DD) attended either a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction or a Positive Adult Development group. Participants in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction group were taught breathing, meditation, and movement techniques focused on being calm and focused in the present moment; participants in the Positive Adult Development group were taught concepts of Positive Psychology, such as maximizing personal strengths, abilities, and optimism. Peer mentors included well-trained mothers of children with disabilities, led both groups in 1.5 hour weekly

What you need to know:

Mothers of children with Developmental Disabilities often experience high levels of stress, however mental health services are often costly and/or unavailable. This study showed mindfulness and positive psychology-based interventions led by well-trained peer mentors, rather than by traditional therapists, can improve mental health and well-being in mothers of children with Developmental Disabilities.

sessions for 6 weeks. Mothers were asked to complete questionnaires concerning their life satisfaction, stress, sleep problems and symptoms of depression and anxiety before the treatment groups began, during the middle of treatment, at the end of treatment, and again 1, 3 and 6-months after the treatment groups ended.

What did the researchers find?

Mothers in both treatment groups demonstrated reductions in stress, depression, and anxiety and improved sleep and ratings of life satisfaction; these changes were maintained 6 months after the groups ended. Participants in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction group showed greater improvement in depression, anxiety, sleep and life satisfaction, as compared to participants in the Positive Adult Development group. Mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder had less

improvement in anxiety symptoms immediately after the groups ended, but showed significant improvement over time.

How can you use this research?

Peer-led Mindfulness and Positive Psychology based interventions may be helpful for mothers of children with DD. The curriculum for both groups used in this study will soon be available at the Vanderbilt Center for Technology Transfer and Commercialization Web site (www.vanderbilt.edu/cttc/). Accessible treatment options are important for supporting the mental health needs of parents of children with DD and further research in this area is needed.

About the Researchers

Drs. Dykens, Fisher, Lounds Taylor and Lambert are researchers at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Miodrag is a researcher at California State University Northridge.

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Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Disabilities, Mothers, Children, Stress

This research summary was written by Ami Tint for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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