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The Relationship Between Parent Anxiety Severity and Response to Anxiety Treatment in Adolescents With Autism Spectrum Disorders

What is this research about?

Parents of children with ASD are more likely to have affective disorders (including anxiety disorders) when compared to the general population. Their anxiety often begins before the birth of the child with ASD; which suggests that anxiety is not solely related to the stress of raising a child with ASD. A child's anxiety is influenced by both the parent's genes and the parenting environment. Furthermore, a parent's anxiety may affect their reporting and treatment of their child's anxiety. Anxiety symptoms are common in people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) but little is known about the effect of parent anxiety on these individuals. This study explored the relationship between parental anxiety symptoms and adolescent anxiety severity. The authors asked if (1) parent's anxiety would affect their adolescent's anxiety severity, (2) parents who reported high levels of anxiety would over estimate their adolescent's levels of anxiety, and (3) treatment would be less effective for adolescents with more anxious parents than adolescents of parents who are not as anxious.

What did the researchers do?

Participants had to be between the ages of 12-17 years, have an ASD diagnosis, and have at least one of four anxiety disorders (social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobia, or separation anxiety disorder). The participants were enrolled in a Multimodal Anxiety and Social Skills

What you need to know:

Little is known about how parental anxiety affects the anxiety levels of their children with ASD and their child's response to treatment. The current study of adolescents with ASD found that parental state (situational) anxiety is related to child's anxiety, that more anxious parents often report exaggerated levels of anxiety in their children, and that parents whose adolescents responded well to treatment, also had lower anxiety themselves (even though the treatment was not aimed at them).

intervention randomized controlled trial. It includes several parts, such as individual therapy, group therapy, and parent education and coaching.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that higher parental state anxiety levels (situational and temporary), rather than trait (long term and persistent) anxiety was related to higher adolescent anxiety. In relation to parent perception, more anxious parents tended to report more severe symptoms and exaggerated levels of anxiety in their adolescents. This is important to understand as it may affect the results of future studies where parents are asked to report their children's anxiety. When children responded well to anxiety treatment, their parents actually decreased their own anxiety. This is an interesting finding because the treatment did not target the



parent's anxiety specifically. The current study was limited by its small sample size and treatment-seeking nature (families who sought the anxiety treatment for their children may be different from those who did not).

How can you use this research?

These results emphasize the importance of using multiple, blind observers for assessments because parents can unwittingly exaggerate their answers. These results can also be used to inform the education of parents about the possible familial effects of anxiety and how their current anxiety can impact their perception of their children's behaviour.

About the Researchers

Conner, Maddox, and White are researchers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Citation

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Keywords

Anxiety, parent, autism spectrum disorder, treatment, state, trait

This research summary was written by Jordan Cleland 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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