

Predicting anxiety in parents of adolescents and young adults with autism

Mirko Uljarević^{1,2}, Ru Ying Cai^{1,2}, Amanda Richdale^{1,2}

¹Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, Australia

²Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Autism CRC), Long Pocket, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Background

Parents of children with autism report higher levels of stress and anxiety than both parents of typically developing and children with other neurodevelopmental, psychiatric and somatic conditions (Bolton et al., 1998; Mazefsky, Folstein, & Lainhart, 2008; Kuusikko-Gauffin et al., 2013).

However, it is important to emphasize marked individual differences in terms of parental psychological outcomes, as significant portion of parents report that although caring for a child with autism is challenging,

these challenges are not only possible to overcome but that the experience of having a child with a disability may strengthen families and lead to increased personal growth (King, Zwaigenbaum, Bates, Baxter, & Rosenbaum, 2012).

Therefore, outcomes for parents are likely to be influenced by their individual characteristics and the environmental characteristics. However, these characteristics are currently under-researched and not well understood.

Objective

To investigate the contribution of parental individual characteristics (Broader Autism Phenotype [BAP] and intolerance of uncertainty [IU]), coping styles and levels of social support in predicting anxiety levels in parents of children with autism.

Methods

This study forms part of the Australian Autism CRC longitudinal study of school leavers.

Fifty one parents of adolescents and young adults with ASD (mean age of parents = 50.19 years, SD = 5.78; 47 females) have completed the following measures:

- DSM-5 Dimensional Anxiety Scales (DSM-5 Cross-D; Beesdo-Baum et al., 2012),
- Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-12 (IU-12; Carleton et al., 2007),
- Social Support Questionnaire-6 (SSQ-6; Sarranson et al., 1989),
- Brief COPE (Carver et al., 1997), and
- Autism Quotient (AQ; Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, & Clubley, 2001)

All scales had internal consistency of $\geq .79$.

Results

Anxiety was significantly correlated with: AQ ($r = .32, p = .02$), IU-12 ($r = .71, p = .000$), SSQ-6 ($r = -.48, p = .000$) and Coping (Self-Distraction ($r = .49, p = .000$), Denial ($r = .52, p = .000$), Behavioural Disengagement ($r = .67, p = .000$), Self-Blame ($r = .64, p = .000$)). Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to evaluate contribution of these variables in predicting anxiety levels.

		R ²	Adjusted R ²	R ² change	Beta	t	Sig.
Step 1	AQ	.51	.49	.51	.103	.83	.413
	IU-12				.654	5.23	.000
Step 2	AQ	.73	.69	.22	.076	.74	.463
	IU-12				.309	2.62	.012
	Self-Distraction				.178	1.88	.067
	Denial				.203	2.15	.037
	Behavioural-Disengagement				.198	1.93	.060
	Self-Blame				.277	2.64	.012
Step 3	AQ	.74	.69	.008	.061	.59	.555
	IU-12				.311	2.64	.012
	Self-Distraction				.164	1.72	.092
	Denial				.233	2.37	.023
	Behavioural-Disengagement				.139	1.19	.240
					Self-Blame	.244	2.23
	SSQ-6				.120	1.07	.293

Conclusions

Increased levels of intolerance of uncertainty, use of denial and self-blame coping strategies significantly predicted anxiety levels in parents of adolescents and young adults with autism.

Identifying factors associated with reduced well-being in parents of individuals with autism has the potential to inform the development of evidence-based supports for parents and families.

For More Information

Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre | Mirko Uljarević | Phone: +61 3 9479 6762 | Email: M.Uljarevic@latrobe.edu.au



Australian Government
Department of Industry and Science

Business
Cooperative Research
Centres Programme