

Psychological Well-Being of Parents Raising Children with Autism

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review critically examines research published between 2014 and 2024 concerning the psychological well-being of parents raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The findings reveal that these parents consistently experience higher levels of psychological distress—especially stress, anxiety, and depression—compared to parents of typically developing children. The review analyzes how caregiving demands, behavioral challenges, social stigma, and lack of systemic support contribute to this mental health burden. It also identifies coping mechanisms, such as mindfulness practices, problem-solving approaches, emotional regulation strategies, and participation in peer support groups, that foster resilience and personal growth. Additionally, the review highlights the impact of socio-demographic variables, including income level, educational background, marital status, and cultural context, on psychological outcomes. Recent studies introducing neurobiological data—such as cortisol biomarkers and brain imaging—shed light on the physiological toll of chronic caregiving stress. Intervention programs, including mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), parent training workshops, and culturally tailored counseling services, have demonstrated significant improvements in parental mental health. By comparing emerging themes with earlier findings, this review outlines evolving trends and calls for holistic, personalized, and culturally responsive support systems that acknowledge both the vulnerabilities and strengths of parents caring for children with autism. These insights have critical implications for future research, public policy, and mental health services.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Psychological Well-Being; Parental Mental Health; Caregiver Stress and Burnout; Anxiety and Depression in Parents; Coping Strategies; Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR); Emotional Resilience; Parent Training Programs; Family-Centered Interventions; Neurobiological Effects of Caregiving; Cortisol and Brain Function; Socio-Demographic Risk Factors; Cultural Attitudes Toward Autism; Social Support Systems; Quality of Life; Adaptive Parenting; Psychosocial Interventions; Systematic Review Methodology; Longitudinal Studies in Autism; Indian Autism Research Context; Parental Growth and Adaptation; Behavioral and Emotional Burden*

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, behavior, and social interaction. Recent estimates by the World Health Organization suggest that approximately 1 in every 270 children is diagnosed with autism worldwide. Over the past decade, improved awareness, enhanced screening techniques, and evolving diagnostic criteria have contributed to an increase in reported prevalence rates. This upward trend highlights the growing need for robust support systems and a deeper understanding of the impact of autism on families (World Health Organization, 2024; Lai et al., 2015).

Parents raising children with autism face unique mental health challenges. Research consistently shows that these parents experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to parents of typically developing children. For instance, studies have reported that mothers of children with autism may exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety at rates nearly double those of other parent groups. Similar findings have also been observed in the Indian context, where research by Tripathi (2015) underscores the significant stress levels among parents raising children with autism (Alghamdi et al., 2022; Tripathi, 2015).

Given these challenges, this review aims to synthesize research from the past ten years on the psychological well-being of parents raising children with autism. By examining recent studies, we seek to provide an updated understanding of both the mental health challenges these parents face and the coping strategies they employ to foster resilience and personal growth. This balanced perspective is intended to guide future interventions and policy developments that better support these families (Curley et al., 2023; Kotera et al., 2022).

Objective

- Provide a comprehensive synthesis of research published between 2014 and 2024 on the psychological well-being of parents raising children with autism, with a focus on key mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression.
- Analyze the coping strategies and resilience factors that these parents develop over time, highlighting how adaptive approaches help them manage daily challenges.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions—such as mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, parent support groups, and culturally tailored counseling—in supporting parental mental health.
- Present a balanced view that covers both the negative aspects (e.g., high levels of stress, anxiety, depression) and the positive aspects (e.g., personal growth, resilience) of parenting a child with autism.
- Compare research findings from the past decade with earlier studies to identify which challenges have persisted, what new trends have emerged, and how intervention strategies have evolved over time.

METHODS

A systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines to ensure a transparent and replicable process. A comprehensive search was performed across three major electronic databases—PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science—using a combination of search terms such as “psychological well-being,” “mental health,” “parents,” “autism,” and “raising children with autism.” The search was restricted to articles published in English between 2014 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals, ensuring that the review captured the

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most current and high-quality secondary data on the topic (Page et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2015).

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to select studies most relevant to the research question. Articles were included if they specifically focused on the psychological well-being of parents raising children with autism, with outcomes measured in terms of stress, anxiety, depression, resilience, or coping strategies. Studies were excluded if they did not directly address parental mental health, focused solely on child outcomes without linking to parental experiences, were published outside the designated 10-year period, or were not peer-reviewed. This rigorous filtering process ensured that only studies with robust evidence and high relevance were included (Tripathi, 2015; Alghamdi et al., 2022).

After the initial search, a PRISMA flow chart was employed to document the process of screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. The flowchart recorded the total number of articles retrieved, the number of duplicates removed, and the number of articles screened based on titles and abstracts. Full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility, and a final set of studies was included in the review. This step-by-step documentation provided a clear audit trail of the selection process and reinforced the transparency of the review (Page et al., 2021).

Key information was systematically extracted from each study. The data extraction process involved recording details such as the study design, sample size and characteristics, outcome measures, statistical methods, and main findings. The extracted data were organized into tables and then synthesized to identify common themes, trends, and differences across studies. This thematic synthesis allowed for a comprehensive overview of the mental health challenges and coping mechanisms observed among parents raising children with autism (Curley et al., 2023; Kotera et al., 2022).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, each included study was critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. This quality assessment evaluated the methodological rigor of the studies, including aspects such as the appropriateness of the study design, the clarity of the research question, and the robustness of data analysis. By verifying that the conclusions drawn were based on high-quality evidence, the review's overall reliability was enhanced (CASP, 2024; Page et al., 2021).

Data from the selected studies were then synthesized through a narrative approach. The synthesis involved grouping the findings into themes related to the psychological well-being of parents, such as stress levels, coping strategies, resilience, and the role of social support. This process not only highlighted areas of consensus and divergence in the literature but also identified gaps that could inform future research and interventions. The systematic and thorough approach to data synthesis ensured that the review provided a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the subject (Curley et al., 2023; Kotera et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past ten years, a growing body of research has focused on the psychological well-being of parents raising children with autism. Numerous studies have consistently reported that these parents experience significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to parents of typically developing children. For instance, research conducted by Lai et al. (2015) demonstrated that mothers of children with autism often report severe symptoms of depression and anxiety. These elevated mental health challenges are attributed

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to the continuous caregiving demands, behavioral challenges exhibited by children with autism, and the financial and social pressures of managing a special needs environment (Lai et al., 2015).

In addition to high stress levels, studies have also examined how these mental health challenges affect daily life and overall well-being. Many researchers have found that the burden of constant worry and the feeling of isolation contribute to poorer mental health outcomes among these parents. For example, a study in Saudi Arabia highlighted that a substantial number of parents not only experience higher stress but also face significant difficulties in maintaining positive mental health over time. The research suggested that these difficulties are compounded by the lack of adequate support systems, which makes everyday challenges even more overwhelming (Alghamdi et al., 2022).

Another key area of research has been the identification and evaluation of coping strategies that parents adopt to manage their psychological well-being. A number of studies have reported that while many parents struggle with mental health issues, they also develop remarkable resilience. Various coping strategies such as problem-focused coping, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and seeking social support have been identified as effective ways to mitigate stress and enhance psychological well-being. For instance, research conducted in India revealed that parents who actively engaged in support groups and counseling sessions reported improved mental health outcomes and a better ability to cope with the daily stresses of caregiving (Tripathi, 2015). Such findings underscore the potential benefits of interventions designed to strengthen adaptive coping skills among these parents (Curley et al., 2023).

Social support has emerged as one of the most critical factors influencing the mental health of parents raising children with autism. Multiple studies have emphasized that both formal support (through healthcare services and structured interventions) and informal support (from family and friends) play a vital role in alleviating psychological distress. Research in diverse cultural settings, including China and parts of Europe, shows that a robust support network can significantly buffer the negative effects of chronic stress. Parents who report higher levels of social support tend to display greater resilience and lower levels of anxiety and depression. This trend suggests that initiatives aimed at strengthening community ties and ensuring access to professional help can have a profound impact on improving parental well-being (Kotera et al., 2022).

Cultural factors also play an important role in shaping the psychological outcomes of these parents. Some studies have pointed out that cultural expectations and societal attitudes toward disability can influence the stress levels experienced by parents. For example, research conducted in India and the Middle East found that cultural stigma and limited public awareness about autism can intensify the psychological burden on parents, leading to higher rates of mental health issues. Conversely, in cultures where there is greater acceptance and understanding of neurodiversity, parents are more likely to receive the emotional and practical support they need, which in turn helps reduce stress and improve overall well-being (Tripathi, 2015; Alghamdi et al., 2022).

Intervention studies over the past decade have provided valuable insights into how targeted support programs can improve the psychological well-being of these parents. Interventions such as structured parent training programs, mindfulness and stress management workshops, and family-centered therapeutic approaches have been evaluated with promising results.

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These interventions not only help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression but also promote positive mental health by encouraging self-compassion and resilience. For instance, several randomized controlled trials have shown that parents participating in mindfulness-based stress reduction programs report significant improvements in their mental health and overall quality of life, indicating that such programs are effective tools for managing chronic caregiving stress (Curley et al., 2023).

Overall, the literature from the last ten years presents a comprehensive view of the psychological challenges and coping mechanisms among parents raising children with autism. While the evidence consistently points to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in these parents, it also reveals their capacity for resilience through effective coping strategies and robust social support. The research highlights the need for ongoing intervention and support, tailored not only to the unique challenges of caring for a child with autism but also to the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which these families live. This balanced understanding of both the challenges and the strengths of these parents provides a valuable framework for future research and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing their psychological well-being (Lai et al., 2015; Alghamdi et al., 2022; Tripathi, 2015; Curley et al., 2023; Kotera et al., 2022).

Findings

- 1. Socio-Demographic Factors Influencing Parental Mental Health:** Recent studies indicate that socio-demographic factors significantly affect the mental health of parents raising children with autism. Lower income, limited education, unstable employment, and single parenthood are linked to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Research shows that parents with fewer financial resources and reduced access to supportive services experience greater psychological distress. For example, studies in various regions, including India, reveal that financial hardships and social stigma further intensify mental health challenges. These findings underscore the importance of addressing socio-demographic disparities when designing targeted support programs to improve the well-being of these parents. (Tripathi, 2015; Alghamdi et al., 2022)
- 2. Autism and Neurological Aspects:** Recent research has begun to explore the neurological effects of long-term caregiving stress on parents of children with autism. While earlier studies primarily used self-report measures, newer studies incorporate neuroimaging and biomarker analyses to assess stress hormone levels and brain changes. Findings suggest that chronic stress may alter cortisol secretion and affect brain regions involved in emotional regulation, such as the prefrontal cortex and amygdala. These neurobiological insights provide a deeper understanding of how sustained caregiving stress not only causes psychological symptoms but may also lead to measurable changes in brain function, marking an important advancement in the field. (Lai et al., 2015; Kotera et al., 2022)
- 3. Coping Strategies:** Recent literature highlights a range of coping strategies that parents use to manage the challenges of raising a child with autism. Many parents employ problem-focused approaches, such as organizing daily routines and seeking specialized services, while also using emotion-focused strategies like mindfulness, self-compassion, and cognitive reframing. Participation in peer support groups further helps by providing emotional validation and shared experiences, reducing isolation. These adaptive mechanisms have been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression and to enhanced resilience and personal growth, enabling parents to

better handle the demanding nature of caregiving. (Curley et al., 2023; Tripathi, 2015)

4. **Interventions:** Intervention research in the past decade has focused on programs aimed at improving the mental health of parents raising children with autism. Structured interventions, including mindfulness-based stress reduction workshops, parent training sessions, and culturally tailored counseling, have shown promising results. Randomized controlled trials and pilot studies report significant reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression among parents who participate in these programs. Family-centered approaches that integrate both emotional support and practical assistance have also proven effective, highlighting the need for interventions tailored to the diverse socio-demographic profiles and cultural contexts of these parents. (Alghamdi et al., 2022; Curley et al., 2023)
5. **Comparing Before and After (10 Years Research):** Earlier research mainly documented high stress and psychological distress among parents, emphasizing the negative aspects of caregiving. In contrast, studies from the past decade now offer a more balanced view by also highlighting resilience and effective coping strategies. The introduction of new methodologies, such as neuroimaging and biomarker assessments, has enriched the understanding of caregiving stress. (Tripathi, 2015; Curley et al., 2023)
6. **What Has Happened Over the Past 10 Years:** Over the last decade, research has expanded from solely highlighting the negative outcomes of caregiving to also emphasizing adaptive coping and resilience. Innovations in measurement methods—like objective neurological assessments—and a stronger focus on socio-demographic influences have deepened our understanding. Additionally, the development and evaluation of targeted interventions have led to improved support for parental mental health. (Kotera et al., 2022; Curley et al., 2023)
7. **What's New and Future Research:** Recent studies have introduced innovative methods, including neuroimaging and hormonal assessments, to better understand the effects of chronic caregiving stress. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to monitor changes over time and develop personalized interventions that consider socio-demographic and cultural factors. Emphasizing both challenges and adaptive strategies will lead to more comprehensive support programs and improved mental health outcomes for parents. (Curley et al., 2023; Kotera et al., 2022)

CONCLUSION

The review of research conducted over the past ten years highlights that parents raising children with autism face significant mental health challenges influenced by various socio-demographic factors. Lower income, limited education, and single parenthood are consistently associated with higher stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, the evolving use of neuroimaging and biomarker assessments has begun to reveal that chronic caregiving stress may even lead to measurable neurological changes, further deepening our understanding of how long-term stress affects these parents. Moreover, the literature shows that many parents adopt effective coping strategies—such as problem-solving, mindfulness, and participation in support groups—that not only help mitigate negative mental health outcomes but also promote personal growth and resilience ([Tripathi, 2015]; [Alghamdi et al., 2022]; [Kotera et al., 2022]).

Recent intervention studies have demonstrated promising results, with structured programs like mindfulness-based stress reduction and parent training workshops significantly reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. This progress marks a clear shift from earlier

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research that mainly focused on documenting high levels of distress. Instead, current studies offer a more balanced perspective by highlighting both the challenges and the adaptive strategies that enable these parents to thrive. Looking ahead, future research should concentrate on longitudinal studies to track changes over time, integrate neurobiological assessments to better understand the physical impacts of chronic stress, and develop personalized, culturally sensitive interventions. Such research efforts will be critical in informing policies and support programs designed to improve the overall well-being of parents raising children with autism (Curley et al., 2023); [Kotera et al., 2022).

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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