



# Parental coping with adolescent developmental disabilities in terms of stress, sense of coherence and hope within the Druze community of Israel



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Many studies have examined the coping resources of parents of children with disabilities but most have involved Western families and only a few refer to unique and traditional cultures.

**Aim:** This study sought to compare Druze parents of adolescents with and without developmental disabilities (DD) in the context of Druze traditions and beliefs and whether they may lead to better coping by parents of a child with DD. The study used the measures of stress; sense of coherence (SOC) – an orientation towards the world which reflects an ongoing confidence that things fall into place in a logical and meaningful way; and hope.

**Methods and procedures:** The sample group consisted of 99 Druze parents of adolescents with and without DD enrolled in regular and special schools in Israel. The parents were asked to complete four questionnaires on demography, stress, SOC (Sense of coherence) and hope.

**Outcomes and results:** The research findings indicate a higher sense of parental stress and a lower overall SOC, particularly meaningfulness, and hope among parents of adolescents with DD. There was no difference between the two groups of parents with respect to marital, economic and overall stress or in the other two components of SOC.

**Conclusions and implications:** The results of the study partly contradict the assumption in the limited literature about Druze that they may cope better with life stressors as a result of their traditions and beliefs. The results also indicate the need for further research and culturally-based intervention programs.

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## What this paper adds

This is the first study to compare parental coping of adolescents with and without developmental disabilities (DD) in the Druze community. It increases our understanding of how Druze parents of adolescents with DD cope with stress in terms of stress levels (marital, parental and financial) and the positive indicators of SOC and hope. The findings of this study are the first to show that Druze parents of adolescents with DD have higher parental stress and lower SOC, meaningfulness and hope compared to parents of adolescents without DD. Importantly, they indicate the need for culturally-based intervention programs and the direction that future research should take. The study contributes to the limited literature on non-Western

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families of children with DD by using a culturally sensitive approach. Lastly, it is one of the few studies that have used the hope measure to research families of children with disabilities.

## 1. The Druze community in Israel

Many studies have examined the coping resources of parents of children with disabilities (Hassall & Rose, 2005; Hastings, 2002) but most have involved Western families and only a few refer to unique and traditional cultures (Crabtree, 2007; Samadi, McConkey, & Bunting, 2014). This study examines stress, SOC and hope among parents of adolescents with DD in the Druze community in Israel. The Druze is a religious community that arose from the Ismailiyah movement in Islam in the 9th and 10th centuries AD (Halabi, 2013). Our research builds upon the few studies that have discussed the Druze in Israel (Karni-Vizer and Reiter, 2013; Reiter, Sami, & Rosenberg, 1986) emphasizing the unique characteristics of the Druze religion and culture which may affect parental coping with children who have DD.

Culturally sensitive research has become increasingly important in recent years (Neely-Barnes & Dia, 2008). The present study adopted this approach and expands on previous work that focused on the Druze, albeit in the areas of perceived health among elderly women (Yehya & Dutta, 2010), the belief in reincarnation as a therapeutic resource (Littlewood, 2001) and bereaved parents of fallen soldiers (Somer, Klein-Sela, & Or-Chen, 2011).

The salient features of the traditional Druze community can be summarized as follows. The Druze are a conservative religious-ethnic minority in Israel located in rural areas throughout the country. The extended family is the most important unit and loyalty to the extended family is of supreme value (Dana, 2000). The family structure is patriarchal and age-based (Falah, 2000). Family cohesiveness is strengthened because marriage outside the community is prohibited (Dwairy, 2006).

The culture of the Druze is significantly related to their religion which unites them and constitutes an essential aspect of their everyday life (Nisan, 2002). Beliefs in reincarnation, destiny and divine justice are important elements of Druze theology. In the Druze religion, the essence of reincarnation is the passing of the soul of the deceased into the body of a newborn Druze. Over time each soul thus experiences all aspects of life: wealth and poverty, high and low social status, health and illness, etc. (Makarim, 1974). These beliefs strengthen the Druze family and social cohesiveness (Dana, 2000) and although some argue that this can increase their ability to cope with raising a child with disabilities (Kandel, Morad, Vardi, Press, & Merrick, 2004; Karni-Vizer & Reiter, 2013) this, to the best of our knowledge, has yet to be examined thoroughly.

Druze are expected to follow seven religious instructions. The relevant ones in terms of coping with challenges and stressful life events include protecting and helping community members when required and accepting God's will (Makarim, 1974). Adherence to these instructions combined with the belief in reincarnation may serve as the basis for a positive and empathetic attitude towards people with disabilities (Natour & Hasson, 2001).

## 2. Parenting a child with DD in the Druze community

Parenting is a demanding task that increases when children reach adolescence and are undergoing hormonal, psychological, cognitive and social changes that affect their relationships with their parents and peers (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Parenting adolescents with disabilities presents even greater challenges as parents need to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to cope with these increased pressures and demands (Manor-Binyamini, 2012; Rowbotham, Carroll, & Cuskelly, 2011).

This study sought to understand how Druze parents of adolescents with DD cope with stress by comparing them to Druze parents of adolescents without DD in terms of stress levels (marital, parental and financial) and on the positive indicators of SOC and hope.

With respect to stress, studies indicate that parents of children with DD experience higher levels compared to parents of children without disabilities (Hassall & Rose, 2005; Hastings, 2002). Stress is a multidimensional concept which includes physical, psychological, social and economic aspects. Lazarus (1966) defines stress as a state of imbalance between the individual and the environment which constitutes a threat to the individual's general sense of well-being and to the perception of one's quality of life. Furthermore, the cognitive-interactive approach emphasizes the subjective perception of internal and external stimuli and stressors. Individuals choose their coping strategies according to their own assessment of both the stressful event and the coping resources at their disposal that can be utilized in times of need (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The ability to cope with stress is also affected by one's SOC which Antonovsky (1996) defined as an orientation towards the world which reflects an ongoing confidence that things fall into place in a logical and meaningful way. He suggested factors such as personality constructs, familial and social support as well as cultural and religious beliefs shape a person's overall subjective sense (Antonovsky, 1987). This sense, which he called a *sense of coherence*, enables one to understand that life events constitute an ongoing process, to view them as a challenge, and to choose the most appropriate way of coping with them. SOC has three main components: *comprehensibility*—the perception of reality as orderly and logical; *manageability*—the perception of one's ability to cope with reality; and *meaningfulness*—one's perception that his or her life is valuable which makes coping with reality worthwhile.

Stressors exist and are perceived differently in all cultures (Antonovsky, 1987). On the one hand, culture itself can be a source of stress (Benz, Bull, Mittelmark, & Vaandrager, 2014). Stressors can include belonging to a minority, rapid cultural changes and difficulties in adapting to new values. The Druze are a minority in Israel who are facing significant changes in their social framework due to the influence of Western norms and values (Dana, 2009). On the other hand, culture can also

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