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Thankful thinking: A thematic analysis of gratitude letters by mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder



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ABSTRACT

Background: Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) commonly report elevated levels of stress and psychopathology compared to mothers of typically developing children. However, there is an expanding area of research which focuses on factors that promote positive adaptation among mothers of children with ASD. Gratitude is one factor associated with positive outcomes in the general population and may therefore, also be associated with positive outcomes for mothers of children with ASD.

Method: In this qualitative study, mothers of children with ASD were divided into two groups and instructed to write letters of gratitude to either someone besides their child (general gratitude) or their child (child gratitude). Coding and thematic analysis of their narratives was conducted using ATLAS.ti computer software.

Results: Prominent themes for mothers in the general gratitude group included sources of social support, characteristics of close personal relationships, inspirational others, and other positive attributes of individuals, such as being kind-hearted. Whereas, in the child gratitude group, emergent themes were the child with ASD making progress, the child's personality, inspiration, and shared experiences.

Conclusions: Findings from this study suggest that mothers are able to identify and express gratitude for beneficial aspects of their lives. These findings have important implications for the understanding of the experience of parenting a child with ASD and may also serve to inform development of interventions to promote well-being in families of children with ASD.

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1. Introduction

Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are likely faced with unique challenges and stresses associated specifically with the disorder. Previous research suggests that parents of children with ASD experience increased parenting stress, depression, and anxiety compared to parents of typically developing children (Estes et al., 2013; Weiss, 2002). Although some parents of children with ASD exhibit such negative outcomes, research indicates that others are more resilient, potentially due to positive attributes, such as acceptance, optimism, and a sense of coherence (Bekhet, Johnson, & Zauszniewski, 2012; Ekas, Lickenbrock, & Whitman, 2010; Ekas, Timmons, Pruitt, Ghilain, & Alessandri, 2015). Another such quality, which has yet to be investigated with parents of children with ASD, is gratitude. Therefore, this study sought to qualitatively examine gratitude themes from letters written by mothers of children with ASD.

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1.1. Parenting and autism spectrum disorder

Although parenting may be generally stressful and life-changing for some, raising a child with a developmental disability may be even more so. Mothers of children with ASD exhibited poorer well-being than mothers of typically developing children, as indicated by a higher level of depressive symptoms (Olsson & Hwang, 2001). Additionally, parents of children with ASD reported higher stress levels and greater levels of depressive symptoms compared to parents of children with other developmental disabilities, including Down syndrome (Abbeduto et al., 2004; Hayes & Watson, 2013). Indeed, approximately 25% of parents exhibited clinical levels of depressive symptoms in one study of parents of young children with ASD (Davis & Carter, 2008).

Parents' feelings of competence and efficacy related to their parenting (i.e., parent-related well-being) may also be negatively impacted by raising a child with ASD. For example, mothers of children with ASD reported lower levels of parental competence and knowledge compared to mothers of typically developing children and mothers of children with Down syndrome (Rodrigue, Morgan, & Geffken, 1990). Indeed, for mothers of children with ASD, greater parenting stress was a significant predictor of lower maternal self-efficacy (Kuhn & Carter, 2006). That is, mothers under more stress felt less competent at being a mother. Given the aforementioned studies showing decreased well-being of mothers of children with ASD, it is especially imperative to examine factors that promote positive adaptation.

1.2. Gratitude

While some parents of children with ASD experience negative outcomes, many report positive changes after their child's diagnosis, such as adopting a more positive outlook on life and feeling stronger as an individual (Bayat, 2007; Taylor & Warren, 2012). Indeed, some parents of children with ASD specifically expressed that the child made positive contributions to their life, such as being kind and loving or a source of happiness (e.g., Hastings et al., 2005; Kayfitz, Gragg, & Orr, 2010). More recently, research has begun to shift focus from examination of detrimental factors to factors that influence maternal well-being positively, such as optimism (Ekas et al., 2010). These positive psychological factors, such as optimism and hope, are considered personal strengths of character. Character strengths are positive traits which may offer protective benefits to an individual (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). One strength, yet to be examined with parents of children with ASD, is gratitude. Gratitude has been defined in various ways, typically as a positive emotion, practice, or dispositional tendency of being thankful for something or someone in one's life (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003).

Previous research found connections between dispositional gratitude (i.e., a tendency toward showing gratitude) and overall well-being of individuals (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Watkins et al., 2003). More grateful people reported experiencing higher levels of life satisfaction and a greater number of positive emotions than comparatively less grateful people (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude has also been shown to buffer against negative effects on well-being in special populations, such as female breast cancer patients, for whom having high levels of gratitude predicted greater post-traumatic growth, as well as lower levels of depression and anxiety compared to those with little gratitude (Ruini & Vescovelli, 2013). Furthermore, gratitude affects other domains of well-being, beyond psychological well-being. For instance, partners' greater expressed and felt gratitude towards their spouses were both associated with increased marital satisfaction (Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011).

Gratitude served as a mechanism to increase well-being in previous intervention research. Typically, these interventions involved having an individual write about things they are grateful for, either in a list format or in letters to others across varying periods of time. In the general population, participation in these writing activities predicted increased well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). A weekly diary gratitude intervention with undergraduate students showed that those who wrote gratitude lists experienced significantly greater subjective happiness compared to those who listed weekly hassles or neutral weekly events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Furthermore, those who wrote letters of gratitude showed increased life satisfaction, greater subjective happiness, and decreased levels of depressive symptoms (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012). Gratitude interventions had positive effects on well-being as many as six months later (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011). Finally, in a special population of chronically stressed health practitioners, a weekly diary gratitude intervention led to decreased levels of stress and depressive symptoms compared to both a control and daily hassles group (Cheng, Tsui, & Lam, 2014). While previously examined in some special populations, gratitude has not yet been studied in parents of children with ASD. Moreover, research with gratitude in other populations focused primarily on young, unmarried individuals such as college students, rather than parents (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Toepfer et al., 2012).

Although the benefits of grateful thinking are well established, only two previous studies have examined the content of open-ended gratitude responses for prevalent themes, to the knowledge of the researcher. One of those studies focused exclusively on gratitude to God and perceptions of God among the elderly (Krause, Evans, Powers, & Hayward, 2012). The findings revealed four primary themes: (1) the experience of stressful life events and whether or not stress makes individuals less grateful to God; (2) whether or not it is necessary to express feelings of gratitude to God and in what way; (3) beliefs about the way God responds to expressed gratitude; and (4) possible benefits of expressing gratitude to God (Krause et al., 2012). The second study focused on adults with congenital heart failure who listed things for which they were grateful (Krause et al., 2012). Findings from that study included themes of social support, life appreciation (e.g., each day is a gift), participation in leisurely activities, religious and faith-based resources, medical resources, financial security, and current health or physical abilities (Sacco, Park, Suresh, & Bliss, 2014). Further, results from that study indicated that greater

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