



Optimism and benefit finding in parents of children with developmental disabilities: The role of positive reappraisal and social support

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ABSTRACT

Background: Researchers have consistently documented the relationship between optimism and benefit finding; however, there is a dearth of research on the psychological mechanisms mediating their association.

Aim: This cross-sectional study sought to elucidate the mediating role of positive reappraisal and social support in the optimism-benefit finding relationship in parents caring for children with developmental disabilities by testing a parallel multiple mediation model.

Method: One hundred and forty-six parents caring for children with developmental disabilities completed an online survey assessing optimism, positive reappraisal, social support and benefit finding.

Results: Optimism was not directly related to benefit finding but rather influenced it indirectly through positive reappraisal and social support. Specifically, higher levels of optimism predicted greater positive reappraisal and social support, which in turn led to greater benefit finding in parents.

Conclusion: These results underscore the importance of targeting parents' perceptions of benefits through both positive reappraisal and social support in order to help them cope with the demands of the caregiving context.

What this paper adds?

Benefit finding has been identified as possible means to reduce or undo the negative toll of caregiving on parents of children with developmental disabilities. However, there is a paucity of research on the conditions under which these parents are most likely to engage in benefit finding. How do parents caring for children with developmental disabilities derive benefit from their caregiving role? For many years, optimism has been regarded as an important personological characteristic for the perception of benefits in the face of stressful events or circumstances. Despite this, little is known about the psychological mechanisms mediating the optimism-benefit finding relationship. In the current study, we found that optimism did not directly influence benefit finding in parents of children with developmental disabilities but rather influenced it indirectly via two mediators, positive reappraisal and social support. Specifically, we found that higher levels of optimism predicted greater positive reappraisal and social support, which in turn led to greater benefit finding. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to elucidate the psychological mechanisms through which

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optimism influences benefit finding, and offers a foundation for understanding how practitioners might facilitate benefit finding in parents caring for children with developmental disabilities in order to improve their overall quality of life.

1. Introduction

Caring for a child with a developmental disability (DD; e.g., Autism, Down syndrome and Fragile X) is often a stressful experience. Yet, some parents cope very well and derive great benefit from their caregiving role (i.e., they engage in *benefit finding*; Hastings & Taunt, 2002). Benefit finding encompasses cognitive (e.g., perceiving personal growth), social (e.g., enhanced relationships) and spiritual dimensions (e.g., increased sense of purpose; Cheng et al., 2012). In the caregiving literature, the positive adaptational outcomes of benefit finding have been well supported (Rini et al., 2004). For example, benefit finding in caregivers has been associated with higher quality of life (Brand, Barry, & Gallagher, 2014), less depression (Cheng, Lau, Mak, Ng, & Lam, 2014) and more positive wellbeing (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006). Therefore, benefit finding may represent an important resource for parents of children with DD that helps them to cope with the extraordinary challenges associated with the caregiving context.

For over two decades, researchers have consistently documented the relationship between optimism and benefit finding (Affleck, Tennen, & Rowe, 1991; Gardner et al., 2015; Rini et al., 2004). Despite this, there is a paucity of research that proposes and examines psychological mechanisms mediating their association. How does optimism influence benefit finding? Potential mediators converge on the idea that optimistic individuals extract benefits from stressful events because they are active, flexible copers who, because of their adaptive coping strategies, have an edge in dealing with stressful events (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009; Tennen & Affleck, 1999). In this study, we identify two possible mediators of the optimism-benefit finding relationship, positive reappraisal and social support. Positive reappraisal was selected as mediator for its theoretical links to benefit finding. Many theorists (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) postulate that positive reappraisal, over and above other cognitive coping strategies, is essential for successful adaptation to traumatic life events and constitutes a prerequisite for benefit finding. Subsequently, we test a parallel multiple mediation model that examines the hypothesised relations.

1.1. Raising a child with a DD as a stressful experience

Parents of children with DD face day-to-day challenges over and above those experienced by parents of typically developing children, including managing their child's challenging behaviours (Brown, McIntyre, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2011); learning about and accessing services (Villeneuve et al., 2013); and lack of social support (Ludlow, Skelly, & Rohleder, 2012). All of this adversely influences parents' psychophysiological functioning (Lovell & Wetherell, 2011). Indeed, compared to parents of typically developing children, parents of children with DD have been shown to experience greater depression (Gallagher & Hannigan, 2014), anxiety (Gallagher, Phillips, Oliver, & Carroll, 2008) and stress (Cantwell, Muldoon, & Gallagher, 2014), as well as disturbances in physiological processes (e.g., Gallagher et al., 2009).

1.2. Benefit finding

However, alongside the stressful day-to-day tasks, parents of children with DD also report descriptions of perceived benefits (Hastings & Taunt, 2002). In its simplest definition, the term benefit finding refers to benefit-related cognitions that are adaptive beliefs about the consequences of an adverse event or circumstance (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). However, benefit finding research is plagued by a lack of consistency in terminology and measurement (Lechner et al., 2003). Other terminology that is often used interchangeably to represent benefit finding in parents of children with DD includes positive impact (Blacher & Baker, 2007), transformations (Scorgie, Wilgosh, Sobsey, & McDonald, 2001), positive contributions (Hastings, Beck, & Hill, 2005), positive perceptions (Baker, Blacher, & Olsson, 2005), gratifications (Valentine, McDermott, & Anderson, 1998), positive aspects (Kenny & McGiloway, 2007) and post-traumatic growth (Konrad, 2006). Although these terms represent similar constructs, they vary in terms of their conceptualisation of perceived benefits, which has ultimately led to a fragmented understanding of benefit finding in this population.

For parents caring for a child with a DD, perceived benefits may take many forms (for review, see Hastings & Taunt, 2002). For example, parents often report enhanced relationships with family members and others around them, insights about personal strength, personal growth (e.g., more compassionate, less selfish and more patient) and priorities in life, and a new or increased sense of purpose in life (Scorgie & Sobsey, 2000). Yet the perception of benefits in the face of stressful events is highly idiosyncratic, and variability in the prevalence of benefit finding clearly exists (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). In the current literature that focuses on benefit finding in parents of children with DD, child problem behaviours have been identified as a key factor that affects parents' perception of benefits. Studies are consistent in linking child problem behaviours with lower benefit finding in these parents (for review, see Horsley & Oliver, 2015). However, identifying the other conditions under which parents are most likely to engage in benefit finding requires additional investigation.

These positive perceptions have implications for caregivers' psychological and physical health. Researchers have found relationships between benefit finding and higher levels of quality of life (Brand et al., 2014), lower levels of depression (Cheng et al., 2014) and more positive wellbeing (Helgeson et al., 2006). In addition, benefit finding is associated with more objective measures of physical health including immune, neuroendocrine and neurobiological parameters (Bower, Low, Moskowitz, Sepah, & Epel, 2008). Recently, researchers have attempted to influence caregivers' perceptions of benefits in order to help them cope with the sometimes-unpleasant nature of caregiving. While some benefit finding interventions have proved successful (Cheng

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