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Giving thanks: Findings from a gratitude intervention with mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gratitude is a character strength related to greater well-being in the general population; however, it has not been studied extensively in mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Therefore, an online, writing-based gratitude intervention was conducted with mothers of children with ASD.

Method: Various areas of well-being were assessed immediately prior to and after the intervention and at a one-month follow-up for 64 mothers of children with ASD. The study participants were divided into two intervention groups and a control group. Participants in each group were asked to complete a weekly writing activity for eight weeks and were included in the study if they completed assessments at all three major time points.

Results: Across all conditions, including the life events control group, mothers improved in well-being, parenting self-efficacy, positive maternal characteristics, and relationship quality. Group differences were found only for parenting satisfaction. Changes in reported child behavior problems were non-significant.

Conclusions: Findings suggest improvement in several areas of well-being following the gratitude intervention with mothers of children with ASD. However, positive changes were seen in the control group, as well. Therefore, it is possible that some other aspect of the intervention, such as written personal disclosure is driving improvements in well-being. Implications for positive psychology intervention research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Approximately 1 in 68 school-aged children exhibit autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a developmental disorder characterized by social deficits and the presence of repetitive behaviors (APA, 2013; CDC, 2016). Previous research found that mothers of children with ASD experienced decreased well-being, including increased parenting stress and rates of psychopathology, compared to that in mothers of typically-developing (TD) children and mothers of children with developmental delay (DD) without ASD (Estes et al., 2013; Weiss, 2002). Therefore, it is essential to examine ways to boost the well-being of these mothers. Furthermore, negative outcomes in one area of well-being may spill over and impact other domains of maternal functioning, such as the romantic relationship and parenting, areas impaired for mothers of children with ASD (Brobst, Clopton, & Hendrick, 2009; Meirsschaut, Roeyers, & Warreyn, 2010). Hence, the purpose of the current study was to examine the effectiveness of a gratitude-focused intervention at improving well-being for mothers of children with ASD.

Given the increased stress associated with parenting a child with ASD (Estes et al., 2013), it is possible that other domains of the

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parent's functioning (e.g., parenting, romantic relationship quality, etc.) may also be impacted. Parenting, which includes parenting cognitions, is one specific domain of well-being potentially impacted by the child. Parenting cognitions include feelings of self-efficacy and satisfaction as a parent, as well as other thoughts about the child. Parenting cognitions may be adversely impacted by raising a child with ASD (e.g., Meirsschaut et al., 2010; Rodrigue, Morgan, & Geffken, 1990). For example, previous research suggested mothers of children with ASD had lower levels of parental competence and felt less knowledgeable than mothers of children with Down syndrome and mothers of TD children (Rodrigue et al., 1990). Mothers of children with ASD also had lower parental satisfaction, compared to mothers of TD children (Conti, 2015).

Raising a child with ASD may also contribute to decreased quality of the parents' romantic relationship. In previous research, parents of children with ASD reported lower relationship satisfaction compared to parents of children without developmental disorders (Brobst et al., 2009). Moreover, Hartley, Barker, Baker, Seltzer, and Greenberg (2012) found that levels of relationship satisfaction decreased over a seven-year period for parents of children with ASD. Furthermore, mothers of children with ASD may have diminished levels of traits that are associated with positive adaptation. Compared to raising a child without DD, raising a child with DD was associated with lower levels of positive maternal characteristics, such as optimism (Baker, Blacher, & Olsson, 2005). This may also be the case for mothers of children with ASD, given that their children also demonstrate DDs and the behavior problems common to both groups. However, for mothers of children with ASD, greater optimism was associated with decreased depression, increased positive affect, and greater life satisfaction (Ekas, Lickenbrock, & Whitman, 2010; Willis et al., 2016). Other characteristics, such as benefit finding were also related to positive outcomes, such as increased relationship satisfaction for parents of children with ASD (Ekas, Timmons, Pruitt, Ghilain, & Alessandri, 2015). Given their association with positive outcomes, it may be beneficial to cultivate these characteristics among mothers of children with ASD.

Finally, the severity of children's behavior problems were reported to negatively impact maternal mental health, as well as other areas of functioning for mothers of children with ASD. For example, mothers of children with more behavioral symptoms also exhibited poorer psychological well-being, as evidenced by higher levels of depressive symptoms and increased anxiety (Hastings & Brown, 2002). Hence, one possible goal for maternal interventions is to change perceptions of children's behaviors.

While there are documented impacts of raising a child with ASD on various areas of mothers' well-being, these areas also tend to be interrelated. Indeed, increased marital quality was related to greater feelings of parenting self-efficacy and decreased depressed mood (Benson & Kersh, 2011). Additionally, the child's severity of behavior problems was the greatest contributing factor to the decline in marital satisfaction for parents of children with ASD across time (Hartley et al., 2012). Therefore, improving functioning in any of these domains may positively affect others.

1.1. Character strengths and interventions

There are many elements influencing well-being for mothers of children with ASD, but a potential protective factor may be character strengths, universal individual positive traits which allow an individual to thrive in their existence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths are distinguished from other types of individual traits (e.g., personality) because of several criteria, including that character strengths transcend cultural boundaries and are morally valued (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). In parents of children with ASD, greater levels of the character strength of hope have been associated with decreased depressive symptoms, decreased levels of worry, and increased life satisfaction (Ekas, Pruitt, & McKay, 2016; Faso, Neal-Beavers, & Carlson, 2013; Ogston, Mackintosh, & Myers, 2011). While character strengths are infrequently studied among parents of children with ASD, there is growing research in the general population showing that they are important for improved well-being (e.g., Park et al., 2004).

Gratitude is a character strength defined as the tendency or act of being thankful for something or someone in one's life (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). In the general population, more grateful people had higher levels of life satisfaction and experienced a greater number of positive emotions more frequently than those who were less grateful (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Studies also found that gratitude was positively related to marital satisfaction (Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011). Finally, gratitude is also positively related to several other desirable individual characteristics. For instance, individuals with greater levels of gratitude were also high in optimism, and, in breast cancer patients, benefit finding (McCullough et al., 2002; Ruini & Vescovelli, 2013). Benefit finding is the act of identifying positive changes resulting from a major life event (Tomich & Helgeson, 2004). Given these associations between gratitude and positive outcomes for the general population, similar associations may exist for parents of children with ASD. However, given the lack of existing research, the examination of associations between gratitude and positive outcomes for parents of children with ASD are exploratory in nature.

Since gratitude as a trait has been related to well-being, it is plausible that interventions which incorporate practices of gratitude (e.g., counting blessings) can improve well-being. Indeed, results from a weekly diary gratitude intervention with undergraduate participants showed that those who were asked to make gratitude lists were significantly more optimistic about the following week and happier with their lives overall, when compared to those asked to list weekly hassles or neutral weekly events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Participating in a letter-writing activity to express gratitude was related to participants' increased life satisfaction and subjective happiness, as well as decreased levels of depressive symptoms (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012). An intervention in which participants expressed gratitude resulted in improved happiness and well-being as long as six months later (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011). Despite all the previous gratitude intervention research in the general population, there has been no research examining gratitude among mothers of children with ASD or mothers of children with other disabilities.

Although studies have not previously implemented gratitude interventions with mothers of children with ASD, there is evidence to suggest that parent-focused interventions are feasible in this population and effective in this population. For example, parents of children with ASD showed increased positive coping and improved quality of life following a positive psychology mindfulness-based

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