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Parental Guilt and stress in families with autism: Implications for psychotherapy

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Raising a child with special needs increases the mental burden on the parents and causes tensions in the family and marital system. Studies have found that parents of children with ASD experience higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety than parents of neurotypical children. Although autism is a congenital condition and parents do not influence its development, clinical experience shows that parents' self-blame is a central preoccupation and provokes negative thoughts. Research findings show that Parents of children with ASD feel more negative feelings towards themselves and a feeling that they are not good caregivers. Parents of children with ASD often experience guilt for not doing enough for their child and a sense of neglect regarding their other neurotypical children due to the special care requirements of a child with ASD. Among mothers of children in the general population, higher levels of guilt explained higher levels of exhaustion, stress, and distress.

The current study examined 28 mothers of children with ASD compared to 33 mothers of neurotypical children in measures of depression, anxiety, parental stress, and guilt regarding parenting. In all measures, the parents of children with ASD showed high levels of distress and guilt. The analysis of the relationships between the indices explains the central role of guilt in autism parenting.

The lecture will discuss the implications of the findings for psychotherapy with parents. Examples will be given from clinical case presentations for processing guilt in family work with parents of children with ASD, with an emphasis on psychoeducation on the topic of the causes of autism, parental self-compassion, and changing the parental narrative from self-blame to finding meaning and a sense of achievement and pride. These evidence-based techniques

They have been found to decrease parental stress and are presented with specific accommodations for the challenges of parents of children with ASD.

Biography

Sharon Ostfeld Etzion has expertise in research and treatment of families with children with ASD. She is a lecturer in the Developmental Psychology Department, School of Psychology in the Academic College of Law and Business in Israel. She is a clinical psychologist and supervisor of a clinical psychology internship in the Israeli Association for Autism and works in private clinics. She has dedicated her work to understanding parent-child relationships and interaction with children with Autism through analysis of emotion regulation challenges in the parent-child dyad. The latest work focuses on adapting therapeutic techniques for working with families with ASD.

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