

Physiology

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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION DERIVED FROM UNITY-ORIENTED PSYCHOLOGY ON THE STRESS REDUCTION OF MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS



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Nasiri Hanis, Ghaffar

Ph.D. student of psychology, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran.

Zadehmohammadi, Ali

Associate Professor of Family Research Institute, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Kariminejad, Kolsoum*Ph.D. student of family counseling, counseling department, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran. *Corresponding Author
kolsoumkariminejad@gmail.com**Mirdrikvand, Fazl Allah**

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran

Shahidi, Shahriar

Professor of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Mehdiaraghi, Maryam

Assistance professor of psychology, Payame-Nor University, Tehran, Iran

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**ABSTRACT:**

Unity-oriented psychology is a new and culturally based psychology approach in Iran. This approach is based on the philosophy of unity of existence, psychological achievement consistent with this philosophy approach, and Islamic values. The study was set up to investigate the effectiveness of psycho-education program on the stress reduction of mothers with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders.

Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders (n=16) were randomized to an eight sessions of psycho-education intervention group (n=8) or control group (n=8). The main outcome was Perceived Stress Scale of Cohen, Kamarch, & Mermelstein in 1983.

The stress reduction was greater in psycho-educational intervention than in that control group on the Perceived Stress Scale after the main treatment and also two months follow-up.

Psycho-educational intervention derived from unity-oriented psychology showed effectiveness in reduction of stress in mothers with diagnosed children with autism spectrum disorders. Therefore, it can be successfully disseminated into routine clinical settings in Iran.

1. INTRODUCTION

Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) suggests that one in 68 children is affected. With convincing evidence that parenting a child with ASD is associated with elevated distress and mental health problems (Da Paz & Wallander, 2017) and led to depression, anxiety, stress, embarrassment and shame for their parents (Hobart, 2008). The vague nature of autism spectrum disorders, the behavioral characteristics of children with this disorder, concerns about the continuation of the situation, low acceptance by the community and other members of the family about the behaviors of these children, and the lack of definitive and effective therapies and the poorly prognosis of autism spectrum disorders are from the causes that led to that the stress of these parents became greater than the stress of the parents of normal children (Khorramabadi, Pouretamad, Tahmasian & Chimeh, 2009; Gebauer, Foster, Vuust & Hyde, 2015). Compared with other parents, mothers of children with

autism spectrum disorder or other neurodevelopmental disabilities experience more stress, illness, and psychiatric problems (Dyken, Fisher, Taylor, Lambert & Miodrag, 2014). So these evidence suggests the need for serious planning for reducing the problems of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders, as well as the effects of their mothers' mental problems on their children (Bagherian Khosroshahi, Pouretamad, Khooshabi, 2010). It is necessary that health care providers to initiate early intervention strategies such as peer support and education that can prevent parenting stress and reduce the risk of potential incidence of depression (Almogbel, Goyal & Sansgiry, 2017). The stress of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders is significantly more than the stress of their fathers. They endure many problems. Weakness in communication, limited social life, economic deficits and burnout to coping with the children's behavioral problems are some of the examples of the difficulty of their role. (Opera & Stan, 2012). Rippentrop, Altmaier, Chen, Found, Keffala (2005) in their study found that the mothers of children with mental and physical disabilities think the world has ended; and they negatively look at themselves, the child, and the world. They may even abandon their beliefs or experience increased tension and stress due to illogical thoughts. They express their dissatisfaction with the status of their child and consider it as irrecoverable. They see no hope and sometimes they get isolated. It seems that the loss of faith and negative religious coping as well as anger towards God (because of the feelings of abandonment by God), as poor coping strategies, are associated with the low mental health and the experience of severe pain in the families (Faramarzi, 2017). Fortunately the mothers of the children with autism spectrum disorder have a high potential for utilizing religious-spiritual interventions; Religious beliefs, religious activities, and spirituality are coping resources used by many mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (Ekas, Whitman & Shivers, 2009).

1.1- Stress of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders

Evidences suggests that early intervention routes targeting either child behavior problems or parental mental health (Langley, Totsika & Hastings, 2017). Researchers have begun to investigate treatments that directly target parents' psychological well-being. Following a range of search strategies, a total of 13 studies, 7

randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and 6 pre-posttest designs were found that these treatments produced medium to large effect sizes with improvements in parenting stress and general health, and reductions in depression and anxiety. Interventions that appeared promising included stress management and relaxation techniques, expressive writing, mindfulness based stress reduction, and acceptance and commitment therapy (Da Paz & Wallander, 2017). Many attempts have been made in Iran to improve the mental health of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders. The results of the researches indicate that the sessions of parenting education and skills training program (PESTP) will reduce the stress of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders (Sarabi Jamab, Hassanabadi, Mashhadi & asgharinekah, 2012). In addition, participating in the sessions of training of Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) is effective in reducing the stress of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders and increasing self-efficacy and family functioning (Mohtashami, Aliakbari Dehkordi, Alipour & Ofoghi, 2012). Improvement in the functioning and efficacy of parental functioning accounted for the benefits of mothers participating in the Interventions focused on child mental health (Regev, Kedem & Guttman, 2012).

1.2- Unity-oriented psychology approach

Various approaches of the counselling and psychotherapy which are applied to solve the problems and treatment of disorders of Iranian clients, are often shaped relied on Western philosophical systems and are coordinated with non-native thoughts and culture in other countries. In comparison, the Unity-oriented psychology approach, whose principles and framework was explained by Zadeh Mohammadi (2011a; 2011b; 2015) in Iran in 2010, consisted of a new therapeutic approach which as much as possible has been adapted with Iranian-Islamic thought and philosophy. The Unity-oriented psychology by considering human belief in immortality, the uniqueness of every human being, and by focusing on the creation of a united presence, promoting the enjoyment of intuitive brain power in counseling and treatment sessions, paves the way for problem solving and treatment. The concept of unity in the history of Islamic philosophy, literature, and mysticism has a very strong root. Eastern philosophers, such as Ibn Arabi, Mulla Sadra, and mystics such as Rumi, Hafez, as well as a large number of Western philosophers, especially Hegel and Spinoza, have expressed broad theories on unity. Investigating the reliability of the theoretical foundations the unity-oriented psychology approach in the history of thought and mysticism of eastern and western, is a demonstrative of historical richness and wide acceptance among eastern philosophers and theists especially in Iran (Nasiri Hanis, 2015; Dehnavi, Zadeh Mohammadi, Monirpour & Najafi, 2014).

Most psychological theories designed based on the worldview and the underlying philosophy of their concepts, such as the humanistic approach that influenced by two philosophical movements of phenomenology and existentialism, which had a great impact on humanities, especially psychology. Psychological tendencies that based on liberalism and existentialism tend to individualism and expanding humanistic morals. In contrast to the bases of unity-oriented psychology is on the philosophy and wisdom of "unity", a unity that is rooted in the nature and essence of mankind. The unity-oriented psychology of the east discovers the meaning of life from the reality of the events and life events of the clients, and identifies a positive understanding of it. In contrast to the meaning-oriented and individualist of psychologist of the West, by changing his or her view made a new meaning. In other word, He sees it in another way (Zadeh Mohammadi, 2015). The cognition of the unity-oriented helps to take a holistic view about the life events that this holistic insight leads to the positive bond of the mind with the human and the world and one sees his destiny in a unified, coherent, and purposeful totality. By adopting the unity-oriented view, any event bonded from different angles in a continuous and meaningful context and becomes relaxed and discovering the meaning of life events helps adjustment and tolerance with life's difficulty (Rahimian Zade Mohammadi & Pakdaman, 2015).

Regarding the effectiveness of the training of this Iranian approach that originate from the East and the Middle East philosophy, so far, there have been a few experimental and experienced studies. For example, in a study applying this approach led to increasing the psychological well-being, human values, patience, empathy, self-actualization, and presence with an integrative life style in the mother of children with autism spectrum disorders (Nasiri Hanis, Zadeh Mohammadi, Shahidi & Yousefi, 2017). In another study, training this approach has had a positive effect on self-companionate and the resiliency of women with breast cancer (Karami, 2016) and in another study, the Unity-Oriented attitude in Mowlavi's Poetry improved the communication patterns, psychological well-being and hope of female students of single parent family that lives with mothers (Khaleghi, 2016). In addition, the studies of Dehnavi et al. (2014) and Rahimian et al. (2015) emphasize on the effectiveness of this approach in working with the Iranian clients.

1.3-Aim of the study

According to the study report, attempts have been made to mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders by changing their negative attitudes with unity-viewing of the events, give over blaming themselves and others due to the difficult situation they are in and see their life integrative and distance themselves from one-dimensional and threatening thoughts and make sense of the existence of their children. The aim of current study was to determine the effectiveness of psycho-educational intervention derived from unity-oriented psychology on reducing the stress of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders is study.

2-Method

2.1-participants

This study was a quasi-experimental with the pretest and posttest design with a control group. 16 mothers that referred to the Rehabilitation-education Center of "Beh-Aara" for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Tehran in 2014, were assigned randomly into two groups with 8 subjects of experimental (under intervention) and 8 subjects of control (waiting for intervention).

2.2-Measure

Both groups received and completed the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) in three stages of before, after and two months after the intervention. This instrument is a self-reported questionnaire with 14-item (PSS-14) that was developed in English by Cohen, Kamarch, & Mermelstein in 1983 and it was designed to measure "the degree to which individuals appraise situations in their lives as stressful during the previous month (Smith et al., 2017). It evaluates the degree to which individuals believe their life has been unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded. The assessed items are general in nature rather than focusing on specific events or experiences. It has 7 positive items and 7 negative items rated on a 5-point Likert scales from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) and is one of the more popular tools for measuring psychological stress. Cohen et al. (1983) reported Cronbach's α between 0.84-0.86 for the PSS. Test-retest reliability for the PSS was 0.85. Correlation of the PSS to other measures of similar symptoms ranges between 0.52-0.76 (Lee, 2012). In Iran, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained from this questionnaire was 0.89 in the study of Salehi Fadri and 0.81 in the study of the Bastani, Mohammadi Yeganeh and Rahmatnejad. In addition, the content validity of the Persian translation of this questionnaire was confirmed by ten professors of the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences (Peymannia & Hashemi, 2013). In this study, the reliability of the scale by calculating the Cronbach's alpha with 16 mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders were obtained 0.78.

2.2-procedure

Intervention at the appropriate place at the rehabilitation-education Center of "Beh-Aara" carried out along with the members of the experimental group, and homework assignments, except for

the kindly touching and stroking of the child were done by the mother and without the participation of other members of the family. The control group did not receive any intervention during the study, but after the study carried out at the rehabilitation-education Center of "Beh-Aara" for the Autistics Children they received similar interventions. The freedom to choose whether to enter into or remain in a counseling relationship and need adequate information about the counseling process and the counselor., to coordinate the time with their leisure time and keeping their secrets in the written assignments were some of the examples of professional ethics.

Session 1: Acquire historical information; describe the problem from the perspective of the clients, preliminary assessment of issues and problems.

Session 2: Understanding how to connect human beings with the universe and understanding the unity of all phenomena in the universe by mention the examples, doing mental meditative practices to strengthen the integrative and unified presence.

Session 3: Review the events and problems of personal life and identify their linkage by creating a booklet of life events and identifying meaningfulness and integration of life events through the description of events.

Session 4: Review of the meaningful memories of Mothers' Life

Session 5: Identify and discover the meaning of events and life problems as a positive force for development of self-awareness.

Sessions 6 & 7: Training the concept of immortality feeling by understanding the connection with unity with the universe. Within

Table 2: Comparison of stress in experimental and control groups based on the Mann-Whitney U test regarding the difference between pretest-post test scores

variable	group	Difference scores Of Pretest-posttest		Sum of Ratings	Mean of ratings	Mann-Whitney U	Z value	Sig.
		mean	Standard deviation					
experimental	2	5	stress	74	9	26	0/001	0/001
control	1	7		62	7			

The contents of the table (2), indicate the significant and positive effect of the psycho-educational intervention derived from unity-oriented psychology on the stress; The observed Z score from the comparison of the stress scores of the two groups in the pre-test and post-test based on the Mann-Whitney U-test is significant.

Table 3: Comparison of stress in experimental and control groups based on the Mann-Whitney U test regarding the difference between pre-test and follow-up scores

variable	group	Difference scores Of Pretest-posttest		Sum of Ratings	Mean of ratings	Mann-Whitney U	Z value	Sig.
		Standard deviation	mean					
stress	experimental	3	3	77	9	22	-1	0/001
	control	10	2	58	7			

Also, the table (3), is demonstrative the significant and stable effect of the psycho-educational intervention derived from unity-oriented psychology on the stress; the observed Z from the comparison of the stress scores of the two groups in the pre-test and the follow-up test based on the Mann-Whitney U-test is significant

4- DISCUSSION

Over the recent two centuries and with expansion of topics related to the psychology of religion and spirituality in mental health, the attention of many psychologists has focused on this domain. Unity-oriented psychology as a native spiritual method by targeting the individual's attitude will affect his positive cognitive assessments in the coping process and help the individual to see negative events in meaningful and positive ways., and beside that keep calm, the unity-oriented attitude increases the positive emotions and feelings that which lead to increases the acceptability and value of all the ups and downs the individual's real life. In the psycho-educational intervention based on unity-oriented psychology, the problems of

20 minutes, members in the group put themselves in an embryonic state and, regardless of any engagement, discussed the embryonic life, living in the earth's life and its continuation in another world.

Session 8: Report of each member of the sum of the exercises, feedback and analysis, and attitudes of individuals from the process of the sessions, summarize the process of the training sessions.

3- RESULTS

The age of 16 mothers was between 20 and 44 years old. The 34-30 years old had the highest frequency of 56% and the 24-20 year olds had the lowest frequency of nearly 6%. 15 people mean 94% were housekeepers and 6% were employees. 88% of subjects had a diploma to a bachelor's degree and their children's age ranged from 7 to 13 years old. Due to the low sample size, a non-parametric of the statistical method of Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyze the data.

Table 1: Descriptive scores of two groups in pretest, post-test and follow up (8 subjects in each group)

variable	stages	group	mean	Standard deviation
stress	pretest	experimental	28	8
		control	31	6
	post-test	experimental	26	7
		control	29	4
	follow up	experimental	25	10
		control	28	8

The table (1) show that the changes made in post-test and follow-up tests is consistent with a positive effect on stress size.

the clients are interpreted as an inevitable reality, a kind of spiritual test and the stage of the evolution focuses on the realization of their abilities; each problem contains a constructive purpose, aim and meaning, which is like an opportunity to realize the unified presence in the events and promoting the resiliency and positive attitude in life, an attitude that reduces the negative burden of non-unifying and focusing on the contradiction and difference in problems and complicated events, and their energy is being retrieved in the direction of adjustment, coping, and sense of integrity with the surrounding world and others. Participants in the process of counseling and intervention by the unity-oriented approach learn and experience their unified presence in the surrounding world and in association with other members of the group, and they learn that their unique life, despite the difficulties, has the meaning and purpose, and sees itself in connect with the surrounding world and others. The power of love arising from the perception of unity and the connection with the world and others allows one to perceive intimate communication with oneself and others, and facilitates the

acceptance of the reality of life and gives transcendental meaning to life. Thus, it can say that through intervention derived from the unity-oriented psychology, the suffering of individuals in their perceptions changes into an empowering and supportive resource (Zadeh Mohammadi, 2011a; Zadeh Mohammadi, 2015). From the point of view of health psychologists, such changes is familiar and is consistent with the emotion-focused style of individuals when they try to cope with stress; the style in which a person instead of trying to change the stressful situation, changes the way of thinking about it (Sanderson, 2013).

According to this study's report, the psycho-educational intervention derived from the unity-oriented psychology could reduce the sense of loneliness and stress of these mothers by developing awareness based on new knowledge of the world and a meaningful acceptance of their lives. Mothers have learned how to link their world, children and life with unity, purpose and wisdom, and to imagine the existence of their children with autism spectrum disorders as a purpose-oriented reality and a necessity for the unity of the world. Understanding and accepting the meaningfulness of the existence such a child in their life and being valuable of their difficulties and efforts reduced their stress. This meaningful acceptance of their life, child, and efforts led to reduce the stress and contradiction in their existence. The results of this study are consistent with studies that show the effectiveness of spiritual-religious treatments in coping with stress (Richards and Bergin, 2005). The focus on spirituality as a key component of interventions for disabled children is useful. Many practitioners in the field of disability see spirituality as an instrument to help parents of disabled children to cope and build resilience against disability. Positive religious coping in families with children with autism spectrum disorders was associated with better religious outcome (e.g., changes in closeness to God and spiritual growth) and greater stress-related growth. In addition, religiosity can buffer the effects of stressors on well-being and provide support and peace of mind (Pandya, 2017; Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001; White, 2009).

4.1- CONCLUSION

Recent research examining the potential efficacy of culturally adapted interventions for various mental disorders illustrates increasing interest in the integration of cultural perspectives into mental health systems. Despite recent evidence demonstrating that culturally adapted interventions may be more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach, few psychosocial treatments for mental health consider cultural factors that may enhance their efficacy with diverse populations (Maura & Weisman, 2017). Perhaps, due to the coherence of the psycho-educational intervention derived from unity-oriented psychology with the cultural perspective and the beliefs of mothers, this intervention has made it easy and satisfactory to accept having autistic children as a gift and meaningful event, and mothers find a more comfortable connection with their lives and they accepted their autistic child as if they were the child to be born in their lives. Because these mothers had a greater understanding of the latent meaning, or from the Iranian perspective of divine wisdom, of having such a child. This high level of acceptance and the sense of discovery of the meaning and wisdom of having an autistic child decreased the contradictions and intellectual disorientations of self-blamed and increased their tranquility and adaptability.

4.2- Limitation and future directions

The findings of the current study should be considered within the context of the study's limitations. First, our study recruited individuals with ASD in our local community, resulting in a sample that was not extremely diverse ethnically nor in terms of economic diversity. A second limitation is the related to the nature of our ASD sample; Using the convenient sampling method due to the impossibility of coordinating the participation of mothers referring to different clinics and the low number of subjects and therefore compelled to use the nonparametric tests were from the research limitations. It will be important for future research to eliminate these limitations; research should be carried out at centers that have a

high number of clients, so that the use of randomly sampling method and parametric analysis test can be provided. Another important future direction will be the implementation of this intervention in other countries with considerable population of Muslim people and in countries where the culture and values of their people or their minorities are consistent with the viewpoint of unity of existence and pantheism.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to the publication of this article.

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